

Should The Prayer of The Woman Differ From That of The Man

By Abū Afnān Muḥammad 'Abdullah (حفظه الله)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الحمد لله والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله وعلى آهله وصحبه أجمعين

This is a small article intended to shed light on the issue of a woman's prayer being characteristically different to that of a man's and some of the narrations which are used to establish this incorrect 'principle'.

The doubt that is widely believed and practiced is that a female completes her prayer in a manner that is different to the male and that the movements in her prayer are fundamentally different to his. This is in relation to her raising her hands, bowing in rukū', making sajdah and other movements during the prayer.

However, upon objective investigation of the proofs in light of the science of ḥadīth and the principles of uṣūl al-fiqh, one finds that this is a weak position which is not validated with authentic evidence. And the so called 'proofs' to defend it do not stand up to the authenticity of the proofs which establish the general principle that the woman's prayer is the same as the man's, except in specific issues wherein there is explicit proof that the woman is commanded to do something different than the man as it relates to the prayer. For example, what is considered the 'awrah for her, where she stands in congregation if leading other women, which row is more preferable for her in the congregational prayer and so on.

The strongest 'proof' that those who say a woman's prayer is different from a man's is their reliance on the statements of some scholars of fiqh which do not and have never constituted legitimate legislative proof in the Sharī'ah. As the scholars of fiqh have

reiterated time and time again, **not every difference of opinion is deemed a legitimate difference of opinion which warrants being considered or examined.** As the poet once said, ‘**not every difference which exists is given consideration, except that which comprises what deems it to be examined (as proof).**’

To remind the reader, it is highly important to understand that in any issue wherein there is a difference of opinion, **Allāh** has commanded us to return the affair to Him and His Messenger (ﷺ). Returning the affair to **Allāh**, means referring it to His Book and returning the affair to the Prophet (ﷺ) means to return it to the Prophet (ﷺ) whilst he was living by seeking his judgement or referring back to his sunnah after his death regarding what was authentically narrated from what he said, physically performed or tacitly approved of.

Allāh mentions:

فَإِنْ تَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَالرَّسُولِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ
الْآخِرِ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

“And if you differ in anything amongst yourselves, refer to Allāh and His Messenger if you believe in Allāh and the Last Day. That is better and more suitable for final determination.”¹

It comes in an authentic ḥadīth that the Prophet (ﷺ) said, ‘Pray as you have seen me pray’.² Regarding this narration, the eminent scholar, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn Baz رحمه الله mentioned that the wording encompasses both men and women, and that the general principle for sharī‘ah legislation is that it comprises both men and women **unless** there is proof specific to the men or women.³

Likewise, the eminent scholar Shaykh al-Albānī رحمه الله mentions after describing the entire prayer of the Prophet (ﷺ), from the takbīr to the taslīm, that men and women are the same with regards to the prayer except in issues wherein specific proof has excluded women from certain rulings. Thus, the general understanding of the Prophet’s (ﷺ) statement,

¹ al-Nisā’: 59

² al-Bukhārī no. 631

³ Majmū’ al-Fatāwā, pg.80-81, v. 11

“Pray as you have seen me pray” encompasses women. This is also the statement of the tābi’ī, Ibrāhīm al-Nakha’ī who stated, “The woman does what the man does in the prayer.”⁴

The Permanent Committee for Fatāwá said:

“There is no difference between the prayer of a man and the prayer of the woman regarding the statements and actions performed in the prayer. However, it is compulsory for the woman to completely cover her entire body except her face if there are no non-maḥram men in her presence. The statement of the Prophet (ﷺ), “pray as you have seen me pray” is a general command for both men and women.”⁵

The fact that women are included in the general sharī’ah legislation addressed to men is in accordance with the principle in uṣūl al Fiqh, as mentioned by al-Khaṭābī who said, “with regards to the ordinances of sharī’ah, if the masculine noun is used, the command also applies to women except in specific circumstances wherein there is explicit proof that specifies or excludes women.”

This is derived from the meaning of the narration wherein the Prophet (ﷺ) said, “women are the counterparts to men.”⁶ This ḥadīth was held authentic by both Ibn Qaṭṭān⁷, Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibn Bāz⁸ and others.

As for some of the narrations used by those who claim that a woman’s prayer characteristically differs from a man’s prayer regarding her movements and that the general principle is that her prayer is different, the scholars of ḥadīth have deemed those narrations to be weak and not strong enough to be used as evidence in the Sharī’ah. Furthermore, those narrations are not strong enough to override the general understanding derived from the prophetic ḥadīth, “pray as you have seen me pray” and its general application to both men and women.

⁴ Ibn Abī Shayba, in Ṣifatu Ṣalāh an Nabī, pg. 189

⁵ Fatāwá no. 19478

⁶ Narrated in al-Musnad of Imām Aḥmad (5869), in Abū Dāwūd (204), in al-Tirmidhī (105) and in Al-Dārimī (764)

⁷ Kashf al Khafā, pg. 248, v.1

⁸ Majmū’ al Fatāwá wa Maqalāt, shaykh ibn Bāz, pg.372, v.25

From the proofs used to differentiate between the movements of a woman and a man in prayer are the following weak narrations:

Weak Ḥadīth 1:

The ḥadīth states that the woman brings her thighs close to her stomach whilst making sajda and that she is not like the man with regards to prostration.⁹ This narration was deemed as mursal (which is from the categories of weak aḥadīth).¹⁰

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymīn رحمه الله mentioned concerning this doubt:

“The woman does as the man does in prayer in relation to all of the actions of the prayer. She raises her hands, she widens her arms (in sajdah), she straightens her back in rukū’, she separates and raises her stomach from her thighs in prostration, she raises her thighs from her shins in prostration, she sits just as the man sits between the two prostrations, and sits in the first tashahhud. Finally, in the second tashahhud, for prayers that have three or four rak’āt she sits in at-tawwaruk. Consequently, the woman is not exempted from these movements in the prayer.”¹¹

Weak Ḥadīth 2:

Another weak ḥadīth used as proof to suggest a woman’s prayer is different to that of a man’s is what has been narrated from ibn ‘Umar where he would command his womenfolk to sit cross legged whilst in the sitting position in the prayer. This is unauthentic. The chain of narration¹² includes ‘Abdullāh ibn al ‘Amrī and he is a weak and unreliable narrator.

Weak Ḥadīth 3:

The Prophet (ﷺ) would command the men to widen their arms in prostration and command the women to bring them closer in their prostration. He also commanded the men to sit on their left foot whilst having the right foot in an upright position, but commanded

⁹ Narrated by Abū Dāwūd in Marāsil, 87/117

¹⁰ Ṣifāt as Ṣalāh, pg.189

¹¹ as Sharḥ al Mumtī, pgs. 303-304, v.3

¹² Narrated by al Imām Aḥmad in Masā’il ibnihi ‘Abdillāh pg.61

the women to sit crossed legged whilst in the sitting position. Regarding this ḥadīth, Al-Bayḥaqī mentioned that it is munkar (from the categories of weak ḥadīth) and that it is not suitable to use as evidence.¹³ There are also other scholars who deemed it as weak.

Weak Ḥadīth 4:

The ḥadīth that if a woman sits in the prayer, she places one thigh on the other and if she prostrates, she places her stomach upon her thighs as it is more of a concealment for her. Concerning this narration, al Bayḥaqī¹⁴ and others mention it is weak due to the narrator Abū Muṭī' al-Balkhī. Furthermore, Ibn Ḥajr mentioned that Ibn Ma'īn stated (regarding Abū Muṭī') "He is nothing" and that he is "weak." Similarly, al-Bukhārī said about him, 'he is weak, and a person of rhetorical opinions.' An Nisā'i also deemed him as being a weak narrator.¹⁵

This is only a brief glimpse of the scholastic criticism of the aḥadīth that the people who support this opinion use as proof. The narrations which they use as proof to claim that the prayer of a woman is inherently different than that of a man's are weak and thus simply rely on the statements of some scholars of fiqh. Additionally, what they claim as proof does not fit the criteria as defined by the scholars of ḥadīth and Uṣūl al-Fiqh as being deemed a valid legislative proof. The narrations they rely on are not strong enough to override the understanding derived from the authentic statement of the Prophet (ﷺ) "Pray as you have seen me pray" that the general meaning of this ḥadīth is applicable to both men and women except in certain issues wherein there is specific proof that a woman is excluded.

As previously mentioned, this is authentically established and understood by the Salaf, such as Ibrāhīm al-Nakhā'ī and Umm al-Dardā¹⁶. Imām Al-Bukhārī said about Umm al-Dardā al-Sughrā who was known for her knowledge, righteousness and asceticism¹⁷, "she would sit in her prayer in the same manner as a man and she was a scholar of fiqh."¹⁸

¹³ Sunan al Kubrā: 3104

¹⁴ Sunan al Kubrā: 2936

¹⁵ Lisān al-Mizān, pg. 334, v.2

¹⁶ Umm al-Dardā al-Sughrā from the tābī'īn

¹⁷ Siyar a'lām al-nubulā'

¹⁸ Fatḥ al Bārī of Ibn Rajab, n.793, pg.153, v.5

Furthermore, Ibn Rajab mentioned that this was also the opinion of Mālik, al-Awzā'ī, and al-Shāf'ī.

In conclusion, it is highly important for the Muslim to learn and understand what is and isn't considered proof in the religion. The scholars of ahl us-Sunnah are all in agreement that proof in the religion consists of verses from the Qur'ān, the authentic aḥādīth of the Prophet (ﷺ), consensus of the scholars, and legitimate qiyās which meets the conditions laid out for it. Subsequently, no person's opinion or statement is given precedence over the statement of the Prophet (ﷺ). It has been said by the scholars of fiqh such as Abū Ḥanīfa and others, "if the ḥadīth is authentic, then it is my madhab." Similarly, Imām Mālik mentioned, "every person's statement is either taken or rejected except the statement of the person in this grave" and then he pointed to the grave of the Prophet (ﷺ).

With that being said, a person simply narrating weak or dubious aḥādīth and the statements of some scholars of fiqh without relying upon authentic narrations from the Prophet (ﷺ) is not considered proof in the religion. Therefore, it is clear that the statement of the Prophet (ﷺ), "pray as you have seen me pray" generally applies to both men and women except in cases wherein there is authentic proof excluding women.

وصلى الله على نبينا محمد وعلى آله وصحبه وسلم