

How Many Rak'ats In Witr?

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Witr has been noted to be one of the most complex issues of prayer. There are approximately seventeen aspects concerning the witr prayer around which lie differences of opinion. However, we will focus mainly on the following three issues: 1) How many rak'ats is the witr prayer? 2) How many salams in the witr prayer? 3) Is performing one rak'ah sufficient for witr?

There are numerous hadiths which report the number of rak'ats to be performed in witr. However, due to many inconsistencies found in them, it becomes very difficult to formulate an opinion that is in complete agreement with the literal meaning of each narration. It is therefore necessary to interpret some of these narrations in order to harmonize their meaning with other similar narrations. Various narrations on the witr prayer will be analyzed in-depth in an attempt to establish those procedures of performing witr that are most in conformance with the Sunnah.

(1) How Many Rak'ats Is The Witr Prayer?

The first discussion is concerning the number of rak'ats that should be performed for witr.

The Various Opinions

According to Imam Shafi'ee (rahmatullahi alaih), Witr should be performed in units of one, three, five, seven, nine, or even eleven rak'ats. He states in his book Kitab al-Umm that one rak'ah can be performed as witr. However, 'Allama Qastalani (rahmatullahi alaih) relates in his commentary of Saheeh al-Bukhari, Irshad al-Sari, that Qadi Abu'l-Tayyib (rahmatullahi alaih) was of the opinion that it is undesirable (makrooh) to perform just one rak'ah for witr. [Irshad al-Sari 2:259]

Qadi Abu'l-Tayyib (rahmatullahi alaih) is regarded as one of the greatest cholars of Shafi'ee fiqh and was also one of its main teachers in 'Iraq during his time. He studied under Imam Daraqutni (rahmatullahi alaih), and among his students were the likes of Khatib al-Baghdadi (rahmatullahi alaih) and Abu Ishaq al-Shirazi (rahmatullahi alaih).

Following this, there is a difference of opinion among the Shafi'ee's as to how the rak'ats of witr should be performed. One opinion is that during Ramadan, three rak'ats should be performed with one set of salams, and in other months with two sets - one in the second rak'ah and the other in the third. Another opinion states that one set of salams should be made if the witr is being performed in congregation, and two sets if it is being performed individually.

The opinions of Imam Malik (rahmatullahi alaih) and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (rahmatullahi alaih) are similar to that of Imam Shafi'ee (rahmatullahi alaih) with just a few minor differences. The commentator of Sifr al-Sa'ada relates an opinion of Imam Ahmad (rahmatullahi alaih) which states that a single rak'ah of witr is undesirable (makrooh). According to the Imam, a person must perform some rak'ats before performing the witr. A similar opinion has been reported from Imam Malik

(rahmatullahi alaih) as well. He relates a hadeeth in his Muwatta on the authority of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas (radiallahu anh) in which the Companion is described as performing a single rak'ah for witr. Following this narration, Imam Malik (rahmatullahi alaih) states: **"Our practise is not based on this, since witr (in our opinion) is at least three rak'ats."** [Muwatta Imam Malik, 77]

The above review of opinions can be concluded as follows. According to Imam Shafi'ee (rahmatullahi alaih), witr can be performed in any number of odd rak'ats, ranging from one to eleven. Imam Ahmad's (rahmatullahi alaih) main and more popular view is that the witr be performed as one rak'ah and the rak'ats performed prior to it be considered as Qiyam al-Layl or Tahajjud (night-vigil prayer) [al-Mughni]. Imam Malik (rahmatullahi alaih) also does not recommend performing a single rak'ah for witr. He recommends that at least three rak'ats be performed. **Imam Abu Hanifa's (rahmatullahi alaih) opinion is simply that witr should be performed as three continuous rak'ats with two sittings - one in the second rak'ah and the other in the third - with salams to be performed in the final sitting only.**

The Ahadeeth On This Issue

Before looking at the apparently conflicting ahadeeth, we will first look at those ahadeeth which clearly state that witr consists of three rak'ats:

1) It is reported from Abu Salama (rahmatullahi alaih) that: he asked 'A'ishah (radiallahu anha) regarding the prayer of the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) during Ramadan. She explained, **"The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would not perform more than eleven rak'ats, neither in Ramadan nor out of it. He would perform four rak'ats, and do not ask of their beauty and length; followed by another four, and do not ask of their beauty and length; after which he would perform three (witr)."** 'A'ishah (radiallahu anha) continued, "I asked, **'O Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam)! Do you sleep before you perform witr?** He replied, **'O 'A'ishah! My eyes sleep, but my heart does not.'**" (Saheeh al-Bukhari 1:154, Saheeh Muslim 1:254, Sunan al-Nasa'i 1:248, Sunan Abi Dawood 196]

In this narration, Umm al-Mu'mineen (Mother of the Believers) 'A'ishah (radiallahu anha) mentions that the witr prayer performed by Allah's Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) consisted of three rak'ats.

2) Sa'd ibn Hisham (radiallahu anh) relates that **'A'ishah (radiallahu anha) informed him that the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) did not make salams in the second rak'ah of witr.** [Sunan al-Nasa'i 1:248, Muwatta Imam Muhammad 151]

3) This narrations has also been mentioned by Imam Hakim (rahmatullahi alaih) with a slight variation: **The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would not make salams in the first two rak'ats of witr.** (al-Mustadrak 1:304]

Imam Hakim (rahmatullahi alaih) then states, **"[This narration is] authentic according to the conditions of Imam Bukhari (rahmatullahi alaih) and Imam Muslim (rahmatullahi alaih)."** 'Allama Dhahabi (rahmatullahi alaih) agreed with him.

4) The following is another variation of the above narration related by Imam Hakim (rahmatullahi alaih): **The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would perform three rak'ats of witr making salams only at the end (in the final rak'ah). This was the practise of the Amir al-Mu'mineen (Leader of the Faithful) 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (radiallahu anh) and it is from him that the people of Madinah acquired this practise.** (al-Mustadrak 1:304)

5) Sa'd ibn Hisahm (radiallahu anh) narrates: **The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam), after completing the 'Isha prayer, would enter his home and perform two rak'ats, followed by another two more lengthier than the first. Thereafter, he would perform the witr prayer without any interval in between (i.e. without salams in the second rak'ah). He would then perform two rak'ats sitting down with the bowing and prostration also sitting down.** [Musnad Ahmad 6:156]

6) 'Abdullah ibn Qays (rahmatullahi alaih) narrates: I asked 'A'ishah (radiallahu anha), **'How many rak'ats of Witr did the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) perform?' She replied, 'Four with three, six with three, or eight with three. He would not perform more than thirteen rak'ats for witr or less than seven.'**" [Sunan Abu Dawood 1:200]

In this hadeeth, the whole Tahajjud prayer has been described as witr, whereas in reality only three rak'ats were witr, and the remaining four, six, or eight rak'ats were tahajjud. This is the reason why Umm al-Mu'mineen 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) distinguished between the three rak'ats of witr and the various other rak'ats in the above narrations.

7) 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Jurayj (rahmatullahi alaih) narrates: I asked 'A'ishah (radiallahu anha) regarding the chapters the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would recite in witr. She replied, **'He would recite Surat al-'Ala in the first rak'ah, Surat al-Kaafiroon in the second, and Surat al-Ikhlash along with the Mu'awwadhatayn (Surat al-Falaq and Surat an-Nas) in the third.'** (Sunan Abi Dawud 1:208, Sunan al-Tirmidhi 1:106, Sunan Ibn Majah 1:82)

Imam Tirmidhi (rahmatullahi alaih) has declared this hadeeth to be sound (hasan).

8) Imam Hakim (rahmatullahi alaih) has related a very similar narration from 'A'ishah (radiallahu anha) through 'Amra bint 'Abd al-Rahman (rahmatullahi alaih) and has stated it as being in accordance with the strict conditions of both Imam Bukhari (rahmatullahi alaih) and Imam Muslim (rahmatullahi alaih). 'Allama Dhahabi (rahmatullahi alaih) has also verified this by stating that the hadeeth has been transmitted through a reliable chain of narrators. [al-Mustadrak 1:305]

9) Muhammad ibn 'Ali (rahmatullahi alaih) reports from father, who narrates on the authority of his father, 'Abdullah Ibn Abbas (radiallahu anhuma), that: **the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) rose at night, cleaned his teeth with a siwak (toothstick), and performed two rak'ats of prayer, then went back to sleep. He again arose, used the siwak and made wudu', and thereafter performed another two rak'ats of prayer, (on and on) until he had completed six rak'ats (in this manner). He then performed three rak'ats witr followed by two rak'ats (nafi).** (Saheeh Muslim 1:261, Sunan al-Nasa'I 1:249)

10) 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas (radiallahu anhuma) has also reported the following narration regarding the Messenger's (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) witr prayer: **During the night before dawn, the Messenger**

of Allah (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) would perform eight rak’ats (tahajjud) and three rak’ats witr, followed by two rak’ats (nafli). [Sunan an-Nasa’i 1:249]

11) ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Abbas (radiallahu anhuma) narrates: **The Messenger of Allah (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) would perform three rak’ats witr. He would recite Surat al-‘Ala in the first rak’ah, Surat al-Kaafiroon in the second, and Surat al-Ikhlās in the third.** [Sunan al-Tirmidhi 1:106, Sunan al-Nasa’i 1:249, Sunan ibn Majah 82]

Numerous other Companions (radiallahu anhum) in their narrations have also mentioned the Messenger’s (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) recitation of these three surats (chapters) during witr in the above mentioned order:

(1) ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Abza (radiallahu anh) [Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah 2:298]

(2) Ubay ibn Ka’b (radiallahu anh) [Musannaf ibn Abi Shaybah 2:300]

(3) ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (radiallahu anh) [Sunan al-Tirmidhi 1:106]

(4) ‘Abdullah ibn Abi Awfa (radiallahu anh) [Majma’ am-Zawa’id 1:241]

(5) ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ood (radiallahu anh) [Majma’ al-Zawa’id 1:241]

(6) Nu’mān ibn Bashir (radiallahu anh) [Majma’ al-Zawa’id 1:241]

(7) Abu Hurayrah (radiallahu anh) [Majma’ al-Zawa’id 1:241]

(8) ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar (radiallahu anhuma) [Majma’ al-Zawa’id 1:241]

(9) ‘Imran ibn Husayn (radiallahu anh) [Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah 2:298]

(10) Abu Khaythama (rahmatullahi alaih) through his father Mu’awiyah ibn Khadij (radiallahu anh) [Majma’ al-Zawa’id 1:241]

The narrations of these Companions (radiallahu anhum) further support the opinion that witr consists of three rak’ats.

12) Thabit al-Bunani (rahmatullahi alaih) reports than Anas ibn Malik (radiallahu anh) addressed him saying: **”O Thabit! Take this from me, for you will not hear it from anyone more trustworthy than myself, since I heard it from the Messenger of Allah (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam), who acquired it from Jibreel (alayhisallam), and Jibreel (alayhisallam) acquired it from Allah (azza wa jal). The Messenger of Allah (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) performed ‘Isha prayer while I was in his company, followed by six rak’ats (nafli), during which he made salams at every second rak’ah. Thereafter, he performed three rak’ats witr with salams at the very end.”** [Kanz al-‘Ummal 4:196]

The great historian and hadeeth master Ibn Asakir (rahmatullahi alaih) narrated this hadeeth through a reliable chain.

From the above narrations, a number of points are derived: (1) It is established that witr is three rak'ats; and (2) that the three rak'ats are to be performed together and concluded with salams at the end of the third rak'ah.

The Companions (Sahabah – radiallahu anhum) And Followers (Tabi'een – rahmatullahi alaihim) On This Issue

1) Miswar ibn Makhrama (rahmatullahi alaihim) reports: **We finished burying Abu Bakr (radiallahu anh), when 'Umar (radiallahu anh) remembered that he had not yet performed witr. He stood up and we formed rows behind him. He led us in three rak'ats and made salams only at the end (in the third rak'ah).** [Musannaf Ibn Abi Shaybah 2:293, Musannaf 'Abd al-Razzaq 3:20]

2) Ibraheem an-Nakh'ay (rahmatullahi alaihim) reports that 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (radiallahu anh) said, **"I would not neglect the three rak'ats of witr, even if I were to receive red camels in exchange."** [Muwatta Imam Muhammad 150]

In those times red camels were considered valuable assets.

3) Hasan al-Basri (rahmatullahi alaihim) was informed that: **'Abdullah ibn 'Umar (radiallahu anhuma) would make salams in the second rak'ah of witr.** Hasan al-Basri (rahmatullahi alaihim) was informed that **'Umar (radiallahu anh) was a greater jurist than (his son), and his practise was to say the takbeer and stand up from the second rak'ah (for the third without making salams).** [al-Mustadrak 1:304]

4) Makhool (rahmatullahi alaihim) reports: **'Umar ibn al-Khattab (radiallahu anh) would perform three rak'ats witr without salams in between.** [Musannaf ibn abi Shaybah 2:295]

5) 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood (radiallahu anh) says, **"The rak'ats of witr are similar to the daytime witr prayer (i.e. Maghrib)."** [Muwatta Imam Muhammad 150, Majma' al-Zawa'id 2:242]

6) Ibraheem an-Nakh'ay (rahmatullahi alaihim) reports that 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood (radiallahu anh) said, **"One rak'ah does not suffice for witr."** (Muwatta Imam Muhammad 150)

7) It is reported from Anas (radiallahu anh) that, **"Witr is three rak'ats."** [Musannaf ibn abi Shaybah 2:293]

8) Abu Mansoor (rahmatullahi alaihim): I asked Ibn 'Abbas (radiallahu anhuma) regarding the number of rak'ats in witr. He replied, **'Three rak'ats.'** [Sharh Ma'ani al-Athar]

9) 'Ata (rahmatullahi alaihim) reports that 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas (radiallahu anhuma) said: **"Witr is similar to the Maghrib prayer."** [Muwatta Imam Muhammad 150]

10) Hasan al-Basri (rahmatullahi alaihim) reports: **Ubay ibn Ka'b (radiallahu anh) would perform three rak'ats for witr and would make salams only at the end.** [Musannaf 'Abd al-Razzaq 2:294]

11) Abu Ghalib (rahmatullahi alaih) reports that, **Abu Umamah (radiallahu anh) would perform three rak'ats for witr.** [Musannaf ibn abi Shayba 2:294]

12) 'Alqamah (rahmatullahi alaih), the student of 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood (radiallahu anh), reports that, **witr is three rak'ats.** [Musannaf ibn abi Shaybah 2:294]

13) It is reported that Ibraheem an-Nakh'ay (rahmatullahi alaih) would say: **"There is no witr consisting of less than three rak'ats."** [Musannaf ibn abi Shayba 2:294]

14) Abu'l-Zanad (rahmatullahi alaih) reports: **'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azeez (rahmatullahi alaih) designated the three rak'ats of witr to be three based on the ruling of the jurists, with salams to be made only at the end.** [Sharh Ma'ani al-Athar]

15) It is reported that Hasan al-Basri (rahmatullahi alaih) said: **"The Muslims have reached a consensus concerning witr being three rak'ats with salams only at the end."** [Musannaf ibn abi Shaybah 2:294]

The reason for quoting the statements of so many Companions (radiallahu anhum) and Followers (rahmatullahi alaihim) is that their opinions and practises hold a high status in Islamic Law. Whenever a conflict is found between the ahadeeth concerning a certain issue, the scholars turn to the actions and statements of the Companions (radiallahu anhum) to remedy that conflict. The Companions (radiallahu anhum) undoubtedly possessed great insight into the reality of these issues, due to them being blessed with the close company of the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam). The scholars therefore hold their opinion in high regard and normally adopt those ahadeeth which conform to their practise. Likewise the opinions of the Follower (rahmatullahi alaihim) are also regarded since they succeeded the Companions (radiallahu anhum) and were the bearers of their knowledge.

The more prominent Companions like, Sayyidina 'Umar, 'Ali, 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ood, 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar, Anas ibn Malik, 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas, 'A'ishah, Ubay ibn Ka'b, and Abu Umamah (radiallahu anhum) all stated in clear terms that witr consists of three rak'ats. Those who came after them, like Ibraheem an-Nakh'ay, 'Alqamah, Abu Ishaq, Qasim ibn Muhammad, and others (rahmatullahi alaihim), held the same opinion. Even the renowned fuqaha' sab'ah, "The seven great jurists" of the earlier period, concluded that witr was three rak'ats. This was such a widely accepted opinion that Hasan al-Basri (rahmatullahi alaih) reported consensus (ijma') on it.

(2) How Many Salams In The Witr Prayer?

The Hanafi opinion in his matter is that, like every other prayer, only one set of salams should be made in witr. According to this opinion, one must not make two sets of salams and cause the third rak'ah to be performed separately.

The opinion of other scholars is that the musalli (person praying) should first perform two rak'ats and then, after terminating them with salams, perform the third rak'ah separately with another set of salams.

There are a number of reasons which establish the superiority of the Hanafi position in this issue:

1) None of the narrations mentioned above declare that two sets of salams should be made within the three rak'ah prayer. On the contrary, many of them have stated that the three rak'ats are to be performed continuously without any break in between. It is quite evident that if there had been an interval in between the second and third rak'ats, the narrators would have certainly mentioned it.

2) The narrations of 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) portray witr to be like any other set of three rak'ats, as they do not mention the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) making an extra set of salams in the second rak'ah. It should be noted that 'A'ishah (radiallahu anha) is considered the most knowledgeable regarding the Messenger's (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) witr prayer. This is due to her close observance of the Messenger's (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) witr prayer while at home, where he was habitually performing it. Hence, without further debate, her explanation that witr consists of three rak'ats should be accepted.

3) Some narrations, which have been reported from 'Abdullah Ibn 'Umar (radiallahu anhuma), state that witr was performed as a single rak'ah. Many scholars claim that Ibn 'Umar (radiallahu anhuma) never actually saw the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) performing the witr prayer, and that his narrations cannot be preferred over those of 'A'isha and Ibn 'Abbas (radiallahu anhum), both of whom were known to have seen Allah's Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) performing the prayer.

4) One narration states: **The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) prohibited the 'incomplete prayer' ("butayra", lit. an animal which has had its tail cut off) – where a person performs a single rak'ah as witr.**

Although this narration is said to contain some weaknesses, its prohibition of performing witr as one rak'ah holds; due to it being authentically transmitted through a number of reliable chains (isnad). In his Lisan al-Mizan, Hafiz ibn Hajr (rahmatullahi alaih) has related this narration through a strong chain under the biography of 'Uthman ibn Muhammad, one of its narrators. With the exception of 'Uqayli – known for his extreme strictness in the criticism of narrators (even though his criticism here is only of a mild nature) – most scholars of hadeeth have judged 'Uthman ibn Muhammad to be reliable. Hakim al-Naysaburi has related a narration from him in his Mustadrak and called it authentic, which 'Allama Dhahabi has verified. Hence, the status of the hadeeth can be now lower than hasan (sound), and the prohibition mentioned in it of performing one rak'ah separately will stand as a strong command. [see Fath al-Mulhim 2:309]

5) Many of the elect Companions, like 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, 'Ali ibn abi Talib, ibn Mas'ood, ibn 'Abbas, Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamam, Anas ibn Malik, and Ubay ibn Ka'b (radiallahu anhum), all performed witr with only one set of salams at the end of the salat. Some of their narrations have been mentioned above and others can be found in numerous collections of ahadeeth; the chapters (on witr) of which are especially replete with the narrations of 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) on witr. Therefore, the Sunnah method of performing witr would be to perform them as a continuous set of three rak'ats as practised by these great Companions (radiallahu anhum).

6) In some ahadeeth, the Maghrib prayer, which contains only one set of salams at the end, has

been called ‘the witr prayer of the day.’ Therefore, ‘the witr prayer of the night’ should also be offered like the Maghrib salah – with only one set of salams in the last rak’ah.

There is a report which mentions that the Messenger of Allah (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) prohibited that the witr be performed like the Maghrib prayer. What this actually means is that one should not perform the witr alone, like Maghrib, without performing any dual set of rak’ats (shuf’ah) before it. The report does not mean that one must make salams in between and separate the last rak’ah from the first two.

7) The ‘Seven Great Jurists’ (fuqaha’ sab’ah) all agreed that the witr was to be performed as three rak’ats with salams only at the end. These seven jurists would be consulted by the people on various issues, and whatever the majority of them agreed on would be accepted as the legal ruling (fatwa). In his book, Imam Tahawi (rahmatullahi alaih) has related their unanimous opinion that witr should be performed as three rak’ats with salams made only in the last rak’ah. The Seven Great Jurists were: Sa’id ibn al-Musayyib, ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, Qasim ibn Muhammad, Abu Bakr ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman, Kharija ibn Zayd, ‘Ubaydullah ibn ‘Abdillah, and Sulayman ibn Yasar (radiallahu anhum). [Awjaz al-Masalik 1:434]

8) Hasan al-Basri (rahmatullahi alaih) reported a consensus (ijma’) on the opinion that witr was three continuous rak’ats without any intervals in between; which means that it was a widely accepted view.

These points make it easy to conclude that the witr is indeed three rak’ats with a single set of salams to be performed in the third, and final, rak’ah. This was the widely held opinion among the Companions (radiallahu anhum) and Followers (rahmatullahi alaihim).

Some Confusing Narrations

1) Sa’id ibn Hisham (rahmatullahi alaih) asked ‘A’isha (radiallahu anha) to describe for him the witr prayer of the Messenger (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam). She replied: **“He would prepare his siwak (toothstick) and water for his ablution (wudu’). Allah would have him wake up during the night whenever He willed, and the Messenger (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) would clean his teeth with the siwak and complete his ablution. He would then perform nine rak’ats and would sit on the eighth rak’ah only, in which he would remember Allah, praise Him, and invoke (Du’a) Him. Thereafter, he would stand up without making salams and perform the ninth rak’ah, then he would sit down, and (again) he would remember Allah, praise Him, and invoke Him. He would then make the salams (loud enough) for us to hear. So, my son, these were eleven rak’ats. When the Messenger (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) became of age and heavier, he would perform (only) seven rak’ats, and his practise in the (final) two rak’ats would be the same as his earlier practise (of performing them seated). So there were (in total) seven rak’ats.”** [Saheeh Muslim 1:256]

The apparent wording of this narration suggest that the Messenger’s (salallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) witr prayer was a total of nine rak’ats, in which he would sit only at the end of the eight rak’ah and complete the prayer with salams in the ninth. The hadeeth then states that this was his earlier practise, for later on he reduced the number of rak’ats to seven, sitting briefly in the sixth and

ending with salams in the seventh.

In Sunan al-Nasa'ee, Muwatta Imam Malik, and a number of other hadeeth collections, the same narration has been transmitted through the same chain with the following addition, **"The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would not make salams in the second rak'ah of witr."** In the version of al-Mustadrak, it states: **"The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would perform three rak'ats witr with salams only at the end."** In Musnad Ahmad, it states: **"After the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) had performed the 'Isha prayer, he would enter his home and perform two rak'ats, followed by another two lengthier than the first. He would then perform the witr without any interval in between, after which he would perform a final two rak'ats seated."**

The following points come to light after studying the various transmissions of this narration:

- (a) At most, the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would perform a total of eleven rak'ats at night. Included in this were the witr and two rak'ats that succeeded it.
- (b) Three rak'ats out of the eleven were witr.
- (c) He would sit in the second rak'ah of witr without making any salams.
- (d) After witr, he would two rak'ats seated.
- (e) He would sit at the end of every second rak'ah.

From these points we learn that the various narrations concerning witr are indeed describing the same procedure of performing witr. The reason why they appear to be conflicting is due to the different words used in most of them.

The version in Saheeh Muslim only states the total number of rak'ats performed, without offering much detail as to how they were performed in connection with the tahajjud prayer. The reason for this is that 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) was specifically asked about the witr prayer and not about tahajjud. Hence, she did not feel it was necessary to provide any details about the rak'ats of tahajjud performed before the witr.

So, providing details on the witr, she said, **"The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would sit without making salams on the eights rak'ah."** This eighth rak'ah was in reality the second rak'ah of witr, which was being performed after the six rak'ats of tahajjud; then, on the ninth rak'ah (the third rak'ah of witr), he would make salams and thus complete his witr prayer.

It was common knowledge at that time that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) always performed his tahajjud prayer in sets of two; so 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) did not provide any detail about them and this mentioned the total number of rak'ats together. Lastly, she ended by saying that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would perform yet another two rak'ats seated after performing the ninth rak'ah, bringing the total number of rak'ats to eleven.

This is most likely the soundest interpretation for this hadeeth, as it encompasses all the variations of Sa'd ibn Hisham's narration, and at the same time reconciles the apparent conflicts between them. In summary, the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would perform the tahajjud prayer in sets of two, as stated in the above-mentioned narration in Musnad Ahmad (and probably all other narrations on tahajjud); and thereafter perform the three continuous rak'ats of witr, with salams made only at the end. After the final salams, he would then perform two more rak'ats sitting down.

2) 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) narrates: **The Messenger's (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) prayer at night would be thirteen rak'ats, five of which would be witr; and he would sit only at the end.**

The apparent wording of this hadeeth describes the witr prayer of the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) as being a continuous set of five rak'ats. However, just as in the previous narration, the apparent meaning in this narration is not to be taken as the implied meaning. The reason for this is that 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) only specified the total number of rak'ats performed by the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) at night and included in it the two rak'ats of nafl performed sitting down after the three rak'ats of witr. This is what she refers to then she says, **'five of which would be witr' [i.e. including the two rak'ats of nafl].**

When she says, **'he would sit only at the end,'** it means he would not sit for any lengthy period of time during the prayer to make extra supplication (du'a') and remembrance (dhikr) except at the very end. He sat only briefly in every other rak'ah to recite the tashahhud. Furthermore, she did not even mention that he made salams in the third rak'ah of witr, as it was common knowledge that salams had to be made in the third rak'ah. What 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) was referring to when she said, **'he would sit only at the end,' was the final sitting of the Messenger's (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) two rak'ats nafl salat that followed his witr (i.e. the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would only sit for an extended period of time in the final sitting of his last set of two rak'ats nafl salat).**

Some Hanafi scholars have explained this narration in a slightly different way. They state that it is known that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) would perform the rak'ats of tahajjud standing up or sitting down, while the two rak'ats following the witr he would mostly perform sitting down. Hence, if the hadeeth is approached with these points in mind, the apparent meaning of the hadeeth cannot be taken.

What really happened, they explain, is that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam), according to his normal routine, performed the witr along with the tahajjud prayer standing up and then sat down to perform the two nafl rak'ats. 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) described his prayer by saying, **'he would sit only at the end'** – that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam), after having performed the first eleven or so rak'ats (tahajjud and witr) standing, sat down and performed the last two rak'ats of nafl. She states that he sat down to perform the last two rak'ats of nafl after having performed all the other prayers standing up. [see Darse Tirmidhi 2:210-220, Fath al-Mulhim 2:219]

This makes the above narration of 'A'isha (radiallahu anha) very clear and dispels the notion that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) performed a lengthy prayer comprised of many rak'ats, with

only one sitting at the end and no sitting postures in between the various rak'ats he performed. The following narration of Ibn 'Abbas (radiallahu anhuma) further corroborates this explanation: **'The Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) performed eight rak'ats and seven rak'ats in Madinah, i.e. Zuhr and Asr (together) and Maghrib and 'Isha (together).'**' [Saheeh Muslim 1:246]

No scholar has taken this statement to imply that each of the four rak'ats of Zuhr and 'Asr, and the three of Maghrib and four 'Isha were combined together in such a way that there was no interval between them.

The reason why scholars have disregarded such an interpretation is because it suggests a new method of prayer that is inconsistent with the normal method of prayer used regularly by the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) and his Companions (radiallahu anhum). In the same way, those narrations which apparently suggest a method for witr contrary to the normal practise of prayer being a minimum of two rak'ats, will have to be interpreted accordingly and not taken literally.

(3) Is One Rak'ah Sufficient For Witr?

'Abdullah ibn 'Umar (radiallahu anhuma) narrates: Someone asked the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) about prayer at night. The Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) said, **'The prayer at night should be performed in sets of two. Then, when one anticipates the break of dawn, he should perform one more rak'ah which will convert what he has performed into witr for him.'** [Saheeh al-Bukhari 1:135, Saheeh Muslim 1:257]

In another version of this narration it states, **'Witr is a single rak'ah (performed) towards the end of the night.'** The version in Sunan ibn Majah states, **'The prayer of the night is (performed) in sets of two, and the witr is a rak'ah (performed) before dawn.'**

Some scholars have deduced from these narrations that the witr is a single rak'ah to be performed on its own separately. This deduction however does not bring out the real meaning of this hadeeth as all the characteristics of prayer have not been taken into consideration. The following points should be considered:

(a) May Allah (azza wa jal) bless the great Shafi'ee scholar Hafiz ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, who states in his Fath al-Bari: **"It could be contended that this (hadeeth) is not absolutely clear with regards to the intervals (between the second and third rak'ats of witr). It is possible that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) intended by his statement, 'he should perform one more rak'ah,' that this rak'ah should be performed together (mudafatan) with the two rak'ats before it."** [Fath al-Bari 2:385]

Hence, the real meaning of this hadeeth is that a person should perform the tahajjud prayer in sets of two throughout the night, and upon reaching the end of his vigil (qiyam al-layl), he should add an extra rak'ah to the final set of two and make it three rak'ats. This way, the rak'ats of his tahajjud and witr prayer will add up to an odd number and thereby be in accordance with Messenger's (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) statement: **'Then, when one anticipates the break of dawn, he should perform one more rak'ah, which will convert what he has performed into witr for him.'** [Saheeh al-Bukhari

1:135, Saheeh Muslim 1:257]

(b) The Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) said regarding the sacred pilgrimage (Hajj): **"The Pilgrimage (Hajj) is 'Arafah."** [Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, al-Daraqutni]

This narration is also not to be taken literally, as it would mean that a person's pilgrimage (Hajj) is completed by him merely proceeding to the plain of 'Arafat, standing there for some time, and then returning home without even entering into pilgrim sanctity (ihram). This is obviously not a valid interpretation since it has neglected many integral aspects of the worship. In actuality, the hadeeth is only expressing the importance of standing (waquf) in 'Arafat, as it is one of the integrals of the pilgrimage (Hajj); and not that it is the only integral act to be performed for Hajj.

Similarly, by stating that the witr is one rak'ah performed before the end of the night, the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) is only defining the distinctive factor between witr and the two rak'ats of tahajjud; that adding an extra rak'ah to the last two rak'ats of tahajjud would render all three rak'ats into witr, thus allowing the person to fulfil his requirement of witr.

(c) The personal practise of Ibn 'Umar (radiallahu anhuma), although appearing otherwise from the above hadeeth, was to perform three rak'ats of witr together; as is indicated in the following narration of Imam Malik (rahmatullahi alaih): **'Ibn 'Umar (radiallahu anhuma) would state that the Maghrib prayer is the witr of the day.'** [Muwatta Imam Malik 77]

If the Maghrib prayer (which everyone agrees is three continuous rak'ats) has been stated a being the witr of the day, then it follow that the witr prayer itself should be performed as three continuous rak'ats as well.

In light of the above, it is very difficult to establish that witr could be performed as just one rak'ah. Hafiz ibn Hajar (rahmatullahi alaih) relates in his Fath al-Bari that ibn al-Salah (rahmatullahi alaih) said: **We cannot infer from the narrations of witr, despite their being so many, that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) only performed a single rak'ah for witr.** [Fath al-Bari 2:15]

Hence, any narration which states that the witr prayer was anything but three rak'ats cannot be taken literally. Instead, it has to be analyzed and suitably interpreted so as to draw out its true meaning and harmonize it with the other narrations that mention the witr as being three rak'ats.

A Final Question

After reading the ahadeeth, one might ask why these narrations differ from one another in describing the witr prayer? The answer to this is very simple. There are two types of narrators. Firstly, there are those who refer to the whole combination of night prayer (tahajjud) and witr as being witr, and do not mention any distinction between the two. They state only the total number of rak'ats the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) performed at night, since it was common knowledge anyway that the final three rak'ats of the tahajjud prayer would be set aside for witr. Hence, they include the whole night-vigil (tahajjud) prayer when mentioning the witr prayer. Examples of this can be found above in the section titled 'Some Confusing Narrations.'

As opposed to this, the second type of narrators do not refer to all of the rak'ats as being witr, but rather describe the tahajjud and witr prayer separately in terms of the number of rak'ats performed for each. Hence, they do not leave any room for speculation. The majority of the second type of narrations state very clearly that the witr consists of three rak'ats. Examples of this can be found above in the section titled 'The Ahadeeth On This Issue.'

Imam Tirmidhi (rahmatullahi alaih), quoting the words of Ishaq ibn Ibraheem Rahway (or Rahuya), concluded: **'The narrations that state that the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) performed thirteen rak'ats witr actually mean (as Ishaq says) that he performed thirteen rak'ats including the three rak'ats of witr, and (it follows from this) that the whole night prayer was referred to as witr.'** [Sunan al-Tirmidhi 1:105]

Imam Abu Muhammad al-Manbaji (rahmatullahi alaih), a Hanafi jurist and hadeeth scholar, writes: **'One way of reconciling between the (conflicting) narrations is to say that (initially) the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) used to perform one rak'ah as witr and even instructed others in this; but his final position was to perform (the witr as) three rak'ats.'** [al-Lubab fi al-Jam' l bayn al-sunnati wa'l-kitab 1:173]

Conclusion

In conclusion, the witr should be performed as a three rak'ah prayer, since this is how, according to the majority of the narrations, the Messenger of Allah (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) performed his witr prayer. These three rak'ats should be performed together without separating the third rak'ah from the first two. Performing one rak'ah witr has been classified as being an incomplete prayer by the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam). Evidence of this is the fact that there is no other example of a prayer consisting of just one rak'ah in Islamic Jurisprudence. Hence, the witr prayer should be performed continuously just like the Maghrib prayer and not on its own as a single rak'ah.

Furthermore, it has been made clear tht the practise of the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) was to perform witr at night after the tahajjud prayer. He would perform the tahajjud prayer in sets of two rak'ats until the time of Fajr drew close, at which time he would add an extra rak'ah to the final set, thus converting both the last two rak'ats set and the additional rak'ah into witr. Surely, this explanation is what the Messenger (salallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) intended when he said, **'Them when one anticipates the break of dawn, he should perform one more rak'ah, which will convert what he has performed into witr for him.'** [Saheeh al-Bukhari 1:135, Saheeh Muslim 1:257]

And Allah, the Exalted, knows best.