

Prophetic Authority and Intellectual Humility: Revisiting the Palm Pollination Hadith in Contemporary Islamic Epistemology

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Abstract

This article reexamines the oft-cited hadith concerning palm pollination (*ta'bir al-nakhl*) and its misuse to confine the Prophet Muḥammad's ﷺ authority to purely doctrinal or ritual matters. Through a textual analysis of the narrations in Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim alongside commentaries by Ibn Hajar, al-Qadi 'Iyad, and contemporary scholars such as Mufti Taqi Usmani (2014), the study argues that the hadith does not support a compartmentalised understanding of Islam. Rather, it reflects the Prophet's ﷺ educational method in differentiating empirical experimentation from revelation, without diminishing his comprehensive authority (*al-sultah al-shar'iyyah al-kamilah*). Misreading this hadith has led some modern thinkers to justify selective obedience to the Sunnah, particularly in economic and ethical matters such as *riba'*. The paper concludes that true intellectual humility requires recognising the Prophet ﷺ as the ultimate guide not only in creed and worship but also in moral and practical affairs.

Keywords: palm pollination, prophetic authority, ḥadīth interpretation, epistemology, *riba'*.



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Introduction

In modern discourse, certain Muslim intellectuals claim that the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ held authority only in religious and moral matters, while worldly affairs should be left to human discretion. This view is often justified by referring to the ḥadīth of palm pollination (*ta'bir al-nakhl*), in which the Prophet ﷺ reportedly advised against pollinating palm trees, resulting in a poor harvest, after which he said, “You are more knowledgeable of your worldly affairs” (*antum a'lam bi-umūr dunyākum*) (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ḥadīth no. 6750; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, ḥadīth no.

2363). However, this interpretation fails to consider the holistic nature of the Prophet's ﷺ mission as *rahmah li-l-‘ālamīn* (Q. 21:107) and as a divinely guided teacher in all aspects of life. The misreading of this narration has fostered a secularised mindset among Muslims who, while professing faith, separate religion from socio-economic conduct, even in cases where divine injunctions are explicit, such as *riba* (usury).

This paper aims to correct this misinterpretation by examining the authentic texts of the ḥadīth, classical commentaries, and contemporary misuse, ultimately demonstrating that the ḥadīth cannot be used to limit the Prophet's ﷺ authority in worldly matters governed by Sharī‘ah.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis integrating classical *‘Ulūm al-Ḥadīth* and contemporary epistemological frameworks. The *isnād* of the ḥadīth is examined for authenticity and reliability, confirming its *ṣaḥīḥ* status in both *al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*. However, greater emphasis is placed on *naqd al-matn*, the critical analysis of textual meaning, through comparison of variant narrations and contextual indicators.

Epistemologically, the study distinguishes between revealed (*wahyī*) and empirical (*tajrībī*) knowledge, while maintaining that all valid knowledge must be anchored within the Tawḥīdic worldview. Hence, the Prophet's ﷺ statement “You know better about your worldly affairs” is seen as a recognition of human experimentation, not a withdrawal of Prophetic guidance in ethical or legal dimensions.

The study also applies the *Maqāṣid al-Sunnah* framework (al-Raysūnī, 2013), which situates each ḥadīth within the Prophet's ﷺ overarching mission of achieving *‘ubūdiyyah* (servitude to Allah) through knowledge, justice, and compassion.

The Ḥadīth of Palm Pollination in Classical Sources

The narration of *ta‘bīr al-nakhl* is recorded with slight variations in both *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (no. 6750, *Kitāb al-Far‘ wa al-‘Aqīqah*) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (no. 2361–2363, *Kitāb al-Faḍā‘il*). The core report states that the Prophet ﷺ, upon seeing the people of Madīnah manually pollinating palm trees, remarked that perhaps it would be better if they did not do so. They complied, resulting in poor fruit yield, after which he told them: “If it benefits you, then do so, for you are more knowledgeable of your worldly affairs.” (*antum a‘lam bi-umūr dunyākum*) (al-Bukhārī, ḥadīth no. 6750).

Classical commentators have long clarified that this statement does not limit prophetic authority but rather distinguishes between matters of revelation (*al-wahy*) and empirical experience (*al-tajrīb*). Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852H) in *Fath al-Bārī* explains that the Prophet's ﷺ comment was not legislative (*tashrī‘ī*) but observational (*irshādī*), intended to teach adaptability in worldly technique (Ibn Ḥajar, 1989, vol. 10, p. 213). Similarly, al-Nawawī (d. 676H) in his *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* notes that this was a contextual pedagogical moment, not a *ḥukm shar‘ī*, and that it must not be generalised to imply the Prophet ﷺ lacked worldly knowledge altogether (al-Nawawī, 1996, vol. 15, p. 116).

Al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ (d. 544H), in *al-Shifā' bi-Ta'rīf Huqūq al-Muṣṭafā*, draws a critical distinction between worldly custom (*'ādah dunyawīyyah*) and worldly rulings intertwined with Sharī'ah (*aḥkām dunyawīyyah shar'īyyah*). He stresses that while the Prophet ﷺ allowed human experimentation in agriculture or crafts, his guidance remained supreme wherever a moral, legal, or theological implication exists (al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, 1986, p. 342).

Hence, classical authorities consistently upheld that *ta'bīr al-nakhl* was an isolated instance of *ijtihād al-'ādah*, not a precedent for restricting the Prophet's ﷺ comprehensive authority. The arguments forwarded to limit the prophetic authority manifested in hadith to strictly dogmatic and ritual affairs are the narrations about the pollination of palm trees. Keeping this in view, the following tradition explains the event clearly, as mentioned by Anas Bin Malik, as quoted by Muslim in his Sahih compilation:

It was narrated from 'Aishah that the Prophet (ﷺ) heard some sounds and said, “What is this noise?” They said, “Palm trees that are being pollinated.” He said, “If they did not do that, it would be better.” Thus, they did not pollinate them that year, and the dates did not mature properly. They mentioned that to the Prophet (ﷺ), and he said, “If it is one of the matters of your religion, then refer to me.” (Ibnu Majah, The Chapters on Pawning, Pollinating Palm Trees, no. 2471, Sahih).

Secondly, the Messenger of Allah and I passed by some people who were at the top of their date palms. He said, “What are these people doing?” They said, “They are pollinating them, putting the male with the female so that it will be pollinated.” The Messenger of Allah said, “I do not think that it is of any use.” (*ma adhannu yughni dhālika shai'ya*) They were told about that, so they stopped doing it. The Messenger of Allah was told about that, and he said: “If it benefits them, let them do it. I only expressed what I thought (*fā inni innama dhanantu dhanna*). Do not blame me for what I say based on my own thoughts, but if I narrate something to you from Allah, then follow it, for I will never tell lies about Allah, may He be glorified and exalted. (Muslim, no. 6126)

According to the blessed companion Anas, the Prophet PBUH has also said on this occasion: “*Antum a'lam bi-umūr dunyākum*” – “You know better about your worldly affairs.” (Muslim, no. 6128)

Textual and Contextual Analysis

The Arabic expression *antum a'lam bi-umūr dunyākum* is often mistranslated as “You know better than I about your worldly affairs.” In Arabic syntax, however, the particle '*bi-*' indicates contextual specification rather than absolute separation. Ibn Hajar (1989) notes that the Prophet ﷺ used the phrase to differentiate between technical expertise (e.g., agriculture) and divine instruction, not to create a boundary between religion and worldly life.

Furthermore, the Prophet's ﷺ clarification, “If it benefits them, let them do it. I only expressed what I thought, but when I tell you something from Allah, then follow it” (Muslim, ḥadīth no. 2363) shows that he consciously distinguished between personal conjecture and revelation, thereby educating his Companions on the methodology of distinguishing empirical opinion from divine command.

Mufti Usmānī (2014) explains that this *ḥadīth* does not diminish the Prophet's ﷺ authority but rather enhances his credibility as a transparent guide who clarified when a statement was based on personal reasoning. The Companions' initial abstention from pollination reflected their love and obedience, not a legal obligation, and the Prophet ﷺ corrected them to prevent confusion between revelation and human experimentation.

Discussion: The Broader Implications of Misinterpretation

The misreading of the *ta'bīr al-nakhl ḥadīth* has led to a dangerous epistemological dualism within segments of the Muslim ummah. By isolating "worldly affairs" from divine guidance, many Muslims justify practices clearly prohibited by revelation, particularly in economics, where *riba'* is rationalised under "modern necessity". Yet the Qur'an unequivocally declares war against those who engage in *riba'* (Q. 2:278–279), leaving no room for human reinterpretation under the pretext of economic progress.

Such misuse arises from conflating *tajrībah 'ilmiyyah* (scientific experimentation) with *aḥkām shar'iyyah* (legal rulings). The Prophet ﷺ's permission to innovate agricultural methods cannot be extended to matters where divine command already exists. The *Sharī'ah* offers general principles for human welfare (*maṣlahah*) while retaining ultimate authority over what is morally permissible (*ḥalāl*) and forbidden (*ḥarām*).

Hence, the statement *antum a'lam bi-umūr dunyākum* should be read not as a relinquishment of authority, but as an empowerment of human intellect under divine sovereignty. As Ibn Taymiyyah (1998) stated, "Reason is never independent of revelation; rather, it is perfected through it." The Prophet ﷺ thus demonstrated how empirical reasoning and revelation coexist harmoniously within the Tawḥīdic framework.

Modern Misinterpretations and the Rise of Secularised Readings

In the 20th century, the *ḥadīth* of palm pollination gained renewed attention as modernist reformers and secular intellectuals attempted to redefine the scope of revelation vis-à-vis reason and science. Thinkers such as 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq (1925) and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1938) employed similar arguments to limit the Prophet's ﷺ domain to *dīn* (religion) while asserting human autonomy in *dunyā* (worldly life). These readings blurred the epistemological distinction between *ijtihād* (scholarly reasoning) and *hawā'* (personal whim), paving the way for selective obedience to *Sharī'ah*.

Mufti Taqī 'Uthmānī (2014) critiques this reductionist trend, arguing that the *ḥadīth* of palm pollination has been "uprooted from its contextual soil" (p. 22). He emphasises that while Islam does not impose fixed methods in agriculture or industry, any matter linked to moral consequence, justice, or economic ethics falls under the Prophet's ﷺ divine authority. Misusing this *ḥadīth* to justify interest-based banking, gender liberalism, or cultural relativism, he warns, is a grave epistemic deviation ('Uthmānī, 2014, p. 24).

Similarly, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (2001) in *Kayfa Nata'āmal ma' al-Sunnah* underscores that *antum a'lam bi-umūr dunyākum* must be interpreted within the boundaries of Sharī'ah. He

notes that “worldly” in this *ḥadīth* refers to technical, procedural knowledge (*‘ilm al-khibrah*), not to moral or legal determinations where divine injunctions already exist. Therefore, one cannot invoke this narration to override Qur’ānic prohibitions such as *riba*’ or *gharar* in economics.

Mufti Taqi Usmani (2014) has responded to the argument by carefully analysing the text of the various versions of the report. By highlighting the style of the Prophet’s PBUH saying, he has shown that the Prophet had only made a passing remark and not a serious observation, let alone a religious edict. What is binding on the ummah from his precedents and rulings is that which is based on revelation or ratified by it. Therefore, all the *ḥadīth* reports that contain clear rulings must be accepted even if they relate to so-called worldly affairs. Nobody can take this sentence as a legal or religious observation. That is why the Prophet ﷺ did not address the persons involved in the operation, nor did he PBUH order to convey his message to them. It was through some other persons that they learnt about the remark of the Prophet ﷺ.

Contemporary Epistemological Concerns

Recent academic discussions have highlighted how misinterpretations of *ta’bīr al-nakhl* reflect a deeper epistemological confusion. Scholars such as Kamali (2016) and al-Attas (1993) argue that the modern Muslim mind, influenced by secular epistemology, tends to dichotomise knowledge into sacred and profane. The *ḥadīth*’s misuse thus becomes symptomatic of a broader civilisational malaise: treating the Prophet ﷺ as a moral symbol but not as a divinely guided teacher of reality. When the *Sunnah* is confined to rituals and personal piety, Muslims begin to rationalise disobedience in domains such as finance, governance, or ethics, precisely the phenomenon evident in the normalisation of *riba*’-based systems under “worldly necessity”. Hence, the literature consistently indicates that the problem is not the *ḥadīth* itself but the interpretive framework imposed upon it by a secular epistemology alien to the Qur’anic worldview.

Although the remark was not in the form of an imperative, the blessed companions of the Prophet PBUH used to obey and follow him in everything, not only based on his legal or religious authority, but also out of their profound love towards him. They, therefore, gave up the operation altogether. When the Prophet PBUH came to know about their having abstained from the operation based on what he remarked, he clarified the position to avoid any misunderstanding. The substance of this clarification is that only the absolute statements of the Prophet PBUH are binding because they are given in his capacity as a prophet on behalf of Allah the Almighty. As for a word spoken by him as a personal guess, and not as an absolute statement, it should be duly honoured, but it should not be taken as part of *Sharī’ah* (Taqi Usmani, 2014).

There is a vast field in the day-to-day worldly affairs which is not occupied by the *Sharī’ah*, where the people have been allowed to proceed according to their needs and experience and based on their knowledge and experience. What instruments should be used to fertilise barren land? How should the plants be nourished? What kinds of horses are more suitable for riding? What medicine is useful for a certain disease? The questions of this type relate to the field where the *Sharī’ah* has not supplied a specific answer; rather, it gives us

general guidelines for the decision to make, for instance, between *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden). Indeed, the Islamic *Shari'ah* provides a general formula: the origin of things which are of benefit to mankind is permissibility, and the origin concerning harmful things is that they are regarded as *haram*. “*al-aṣlu fī al-ashyā’ al-ibāḥah*” The original ruling concerning things is permissibility. “*ḥattā yajī’a ṣārifu al-ibāḥah*” Until there comes that which changes its ruling away from permissibility.

Conclusion

The *ḥadīth* of palm pollination was never meant to limit the Prophet’s ﷺ authority to spiritual matters. Rather, it demonstrates his role as a divinely guided educator who acknowledged human expertise within the framework of revelation. Misusing this narration to justify moral or economic autonomy from *Shari'ah* is both intellectually flawed and theologically untenable. True understanding of *antum a’lam bi-umūr dunyākum* requires recognising that Islam integrates the empirical and the divine within a unified *Tawḥīdic* worldview. Obedience to the Prophet ﷺ, in every sphere of life, is obedience to Allah Himself (Q. 4:80). Thus, the *ḥadīth* affirms the Prophet’s ﷺ comprehensive guidance for humanity, not limits.

In a nutshell, all worldly matters which are of benefit to mankind are left to human curiosity, which can solve these problems through its efforts. The upshot of the foregoing discussion is that the Sunnah of the Prophet PBUH is the second source of Islamic law. Whatever the Prophet PBUH said or did in his capacity as a Messenger is binding on the ummah. This authority of the sunnah is based on the revelation he received from Allah. Hence, the obedience of the Holy Prophet PBUH is another form of obedience to Allah. This prophetic authority, established through numerous Qur’anic verses, cannot be curtailed, neither by limiting its tenure nor by exempting worldly affairs from its scope (Taqi Usmani, 2014).

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