

Seeking knowledge “even if it be in China”

Is it an authentic hadith?

An analysis by Dr Zahid Aziz

أَطْلُبُوا الْعِلْمَ وَتَوْبًا لِلصَّيْنِ، فَإِنَّ طَلَبَ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

*“Seek knowledge even if it be in China,
for the seeking of knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim.”*

This is a very well-known hadith. Its first part, “Seek knowledge even if it be in China”,¹ has been considered by many scholars of Islam, going back several centuries ago, as inauthentic and lacking authority. Some call it “fabricated”. Its second part, “the seeking of knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim”, though, is accepted by them because it is found in the Hadith collection of Ibn Majah (hadith 224), one of the six ‘authentic’ collections of Hadith.

Many Muslims, reading this verdict of those scholars, jump to the conclusion that the first half of this hadith are not the words of the Holy Prophet. The reason for declaring this version, with mention of China in it, as not authentic is that some of the narrators through whom it has been passed down from the Companions of the Holy Prophet were unreliable persons, whose narrations cannot be accepted. However, some scholars of classical times also noted that as this hadith has been passed down through several channels of narrators from various Companions of the Holy Prophet, even though all the several channels of the reporting of this hadith contain unreliable reporters, its widespread reporting itself indicates that it may be an authentic hadith. To put it in common terms, if we hear the same story from several unrelated people, each of whom is unreliable, the fact that they are saying the same thing, all independently from each other, would indicate that the story could be true.

Testing a hadith by the Quran

Besides examining the channels of reporting, another way of testing the authenticity of a hadith is to check if it is supported by the Quran or not. The Quran says:

¹ The Arabic word for China, as in this hadith, is *Ṣīn*, spelt with the letters *ṣād*, *yā* and *nūn*. In English there is a prefix *sino* which is placed before another name to indicate a joint relationship between China and someone else. For example, a ‘Sino-American’ organisation means a joint organisation of the Chinese and the US. Sinology is the name of a subject, which is the study of Chinese matters.

"Say: Travel in the earth then see how He makes the first creation, then Allah creates the latter creation. Surely Allah is Powerful over all things." —29:20

It says here that humans should go around the world studying creation to learn how creation began and how it is today. On this basis, a Muslim should go, not only to China, but everywhere in the world to acquire knowledge of creation. Therefore it is plausible that the Holy Prophet could have mentioned China as an example to indicate that you may need to go as far as China, which was distant from Arabia, to acquire knowledge if you realised that it could be found there.

Another verse of the Quran is as follows:

"Have they not travelled in the earth so that they should have hearts with which to understand, or ears with which to hear? For surely it is not the eyes that are blind, but blind are the hearts which are in the breasts." —22:46

In the verses before this, those people who rejected and opposed the Holy Prophet Muhammad are told that, in the case of previous prophets, Allah destroyed their opponents and their places of habitation after having given them respite for a time to see if they would repent. So in this verse it is said that the opponents of the Holy Prophet Muhammad should travel to those places to see the ruins of the towns of the opponents of the earlier prophets. Then they would learn a lesson about their possible fate. However, we need not take this verse in this limited sense of travelling to see such ruins. What it says is that to broaden the mind, to "have hearts with which to understand", and to open your ears and eyes, you need to travel in the earth, and of course acquire knowledge. This will cure the real blindness, which this verse says is the blindness of the hearts.

A third verse of the Quran is as follows:

"O mankind, surely We have created you from a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other. Surely the noblest of you with Allah is the most dutiful of you. Surely Allah is Knowing, Aware." —49:13

According to this verse, humanity consists of different nations and ethnic groups, and their differences constitute their identities. The only way to "know each other",

and identify each other, is by travelling in the world to visit and see the different nations which inhabit it. Knowledge about different nations cannot be acquired by sitting at home or going no further than the borders of your own country. This verse addresses all humanity, and of course what it is suggesting for all humans, that they should gain knowledge of each other, applies also to Muslims, that they should seek knowledge of the different nations of the world.

A fourth verse of the Quran may be cited here:

"And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for the learned." —
30:22

According to this verse, the diversity and variety of the languages and colours of mankind provides signs of the existence of God to the learned ones, the *'ālimīn* or *alims*. This diversity is a source of knowledge or *'ilm*. Again, it is obvious that to acquire knowledge about the languages and colours of mankind you would have to travel among different nations.

Two examples of travelling for knowledge cited in the Quran

The Quran mentions two examples of great persons travelling to remote and distant places to seek knowledge, and one of those locations mentioned could be as far as the border of China! In chapter 18 the Quran relates the journey of Moses with his assistant (18:82) undertaken to meet a person who possessed knowledge granted to him by God. According to a hadith in Bukhari, although this is not in the Quran, Allah told Moses to go and find this particular person, saying: "A servant from among My servants, who lives at the junction of two rivers, is greater in knowledge than you" (hadith 122). This junction is said to be the junction of the two branches of the River Nile, the white Nile and the blue Nile, which merge at Khartoum to become one river, the Nile. The Quran tells us that Moses became absolutely determined to reach his destination, and said that he would not stop until he reaches it even if it takes him years. This incident shows us that knowledge has such immense breadth and scope that even a great prophet requires more knowledge than what he has, and moreover he is prepared to go anywhere to find it.

The other example is in the same chapter 18, given immediately after the story of the journey of Moses. It is the journey of a man called Dhul Qarnain (18:83–98). He was a ruler of a huge territory, and commentators of the Quran have tried to identify who is meant. Whoever it is said to be, it is agreed that he had a vast territory in Central Asia. According to the Quran, he undertook three journeys, from which it appears that he was a ruler visiting the ends of his empire to find out the condition of the people there. His first journey was, says the Quran, to "the setting-place of the sun", where he saw the sun setting into **a black sea** (18:86). The "black sea" mentioned here was what is generally known as **the Black Sea** which lies between Ukraine to its north and Turkey to its south. The Quran calls it "the setting-place of the sun" because it was as far as he could go in the direction in which the sun sets; in other words, the furthest west in his empire. His second journey was, says the Quran, to "the rising-place of the sun" (18:90), meaning the eastern-most extent of his empire.

According to research done by Maulana Muhammad Ali, Dhul Qarnain was the Persian king known as Darius the First (or Darwaish in Persian), who lived about 500 years before Jesus.² Other sources tell us that his empire was the greatest that the world had ever known. In the east it stretched to what is now called Tajikistan, and that country has a border with China. Therefore, we may say with justification that the journey of Dhul Qarnain mentioned in the Quran in 18:90 was to the border of China. Hence the conclusion is that he reached China in search of knowledge.

Another point to be noted here is that Moses went to acquire spiritual knowledge, while Dhul Qarnain went primarily in search of worldly knowledge, and to strengthen his kingdom and check the needs of his people, but he also preached good to his people as the Quran tells us (18:87–88). This shows that one may go in search of either kind of knowledge, religious or worldly, and in the case of worldly knowledge one must still bear religious teachings in mind.

If my interpretation is correct then not only does the Quran say **in a general sense** that you should travel in the world in search of knowledge but it mentions **the specific example** of a famous king who journeyed up to the border of China. This confirms the

² See Maulana Muhammad Ali's English Translation of the Holy Quran with Commentary, footnote to 18:83.

hadith as authentic: "Seek knowledge even if it be in China, for the seeking of knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim".

Hadith reports

There are also Hadith reports speaking highly of travelling in search of knowledge. In Sahih Muslim, in a long hadith which mentions various qualities of believers, the Holy Prophet Muhammad is reported as saying:

"...whoever treads a path in search of knowledge, Allah would make it easy for him, through it, the path to paradise" (book 48, ch. 11, hadith 2699a).

This part also occurs as a hadith by itself in Tirmidhi (book 41, ch. 2, hadith 2646). Thus, travelling along a path physically in this world to seek knowledge is like an exercise or practice which makes it easier to walk along the road to paradise. What is meant, of course, is that by your journeys in the world you learn lessons which increase your faith and make you a better person.

In Ibn Majah there is the following hadith:

"Whenever anyone goes out of his house, leaving it in order to seek knowledge, the angels lower their wings in approval of what he is doing" (hadith 226).

In Tirmidhi we also read the hadith:

"Whoever goes out seeking knowledge, he is in Allah's way (*fī sabīl-i-llāh*) until he returns" (book 41, ch. 2, hadith 2647).

The meaning is that in going out to seek knowledge he is performing an act in Allah's way. There is a well-known hadith, also in Tirmidhi, in which the Holy Prophet said:

"The word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer, so wherever he finds it he has a better right to it" (book 41, ch. 19, hadith 2687).

Maulana Muhammad Ali has included this hadith in his book *A Manual of Hadith*, and commented on it as follows:

"This hadith lays down upon every Muslim the obligation of acquiring knowledge. *Hikmah* means *wisdom* or *knowledge*, and *ḍāllah* means a *lost animal* or

an object of persevering quest, so that the believer should set out in search of knowledge as perseveringly as the owner of a lost animal would search for it."
(*A Manual of Hadith*, ch. 3, hadith 11)

Now to search for something you have lost, you will go everywhere where there is a possibility that it may be found. You will search not only open spaces, but concealed places as well. You will turn things over to look under them. To find your possession you will, as the saying goes, leave no stone unturned. Of course, knowledge you find somewhere is not like a thing which was previously your possession and you misplaced it and lost it. In fact, it is something new which was not in your knowledge before. What is meant is that you must look for knowledge with the same eagerness and urgency with which you try to find your lost property. Again, if a believer follows this hadith then he would travel all over the world to find knowledge.

Historical facts support this hadith

The authenticity of a hadith can also be established by actual facts. There is an ancient Muslim community in China, known as the Hui people, who believe that certain Companions of the Holy Prophet Muhammad visited China and established Islam there. Their claim is often considered as without any evidence. However, Sir T.W. Arnold, the British scholar, who was Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, 1921–1930, in his famous book *The Preaching of Islam*, has a chapter on the spread of Islam in China. Referring to the time when Muslims had just conquered Iran and the last Iranian king had died in exile in the time of Hazrat Uthman as Khalifa, Sir T.W. Arnold says that trustworthy records show that the king's son appealed to China for help against the Arab invaders. The Chinese emperor said in reply that he could not send his troops such a long distance but he sent an ambassador to Hazrat Uthman to plead for the king's son who was a fugitive from the Muslims. Hazrat Uthman then sent one of his generals to accompany the Chinese ambassador back to China. This was in 651, less than twenty years after the Holy Prophet Muhammad's death. This Muslim envoy was received with honour by the Chinese emperor.

Sir T.W. Arnold also mentions two occasions when later Khalifas sent Muslim envoys to Chinese emperors, first in the year 713 and again in the year 726, and this

was still less than a hundred years after the Holy Prophet's death. He also writes that a little later, in the year 756, the second of these emperors faced a rebellion in China, and his son sent a message to the Muslim Khalifa of the time asking for military help. The Khalifa sent some Arab troops to help him. With their support the emperor succeeded in getting some of his territory back. At the end of this war, these Muslim troops settled in China and married there. Sir T.W. Arnold also writes that Chinese imperial records of the years 713–742 show the existence of Muslims in China, especially merchants in the port towns.³

The fact that, as early as the time of Hazrat Uthman, when most Companions of the Holy Prophet were still alive, there was direct, person-to-person contact between Muslims and the Chinese, and a Muslim went to China, shows that the Holy Prophet could well have said: "Seek knowledge even if it be in China."

Knowledge coming from China to the Arabs

It is a historical fact that the early Muslims brought knowledge and inventions that existed in China, they developed them further for their own use, and then through the Islamic world these were passed to Europe. After coming to Europe, this knowledge was instrumental in creating the modern science-based Western civilisation. Paper, on which writing and printing is done, is a prime example. It was invented in China long before Islam and was in use there. The writing material used at that time in the Middle East, and available to Muslims when Islam came, was rare and expensive and awkward to write on. This limited the spread of literacy and knowledge in the world. It also hindered the efficient running of institutions such as the government and held back economic progress.⁴

It so happened that in the year 751, which was almost 120 years after the Holy Prophet's death, when Islam had spread into Central Asia, there was a battle between Muslims and the Chinese Tang dynasty of the time at the western end of the Chinese empire. The Muslims won the battle and captured Chinese prisoners of war. It is said

³ Sir Thomas Walker Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, second edition, 1913, pp. 295–297.

⁴ See for example: Abdul Ahad Hannawi, *The Role of the Arabs in the Introduction of Paper into Europe*, MELA (Middle East Librarians' Association) Notes, No. 85 (2012); and Jonathan M. Bloom, *Revolution by the Ream — A History of Paper*, *Aramco World*, May/June 1999, vol. 50, no. 3.

that these prisoners brought the art of papermaking to the notice of the Muslims. Paper was a much better material to write on, easier to mass produce, and cheaper than the earlier materials available to the Muslims. Muslims adopted paper production but they also modified and improved this process, and produced their own kind of paper. Knowledge of paper production was not just knowledge on its own, going no further, but it was revolutionary for the transmission of knowledge itself. In other words, what Muslims learnt from China was not just knowledge itself, but a way of spreading all kinds of knowledge. Perhaps this is why the saying of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, no doubt inspired by Allah, specifically mentioned China, that not only was knowledge to be found there but, more than that, knowledge which would enable you to spread knowledge itself more widely. Muslims went on to establish the first paper mills in Spain, and from there paper manufacture spread into Europe. It was known in Europe as Arab paper or Islamic paper.

There is an academic research paper, published in 2018 by a researcher in a university in Canada, entitled *The Adoption of Paper in the Middle East, 700-1300 AD*. In its conclusion, the author notes that someone has said:

“Technological innovation will not occur in a society, which is malnourished, superstitious or extremely traditional with tight social constraints preventing it from being open to diversity and tolerance.”

Having quoted this, the author adds this:

“Early Islamic society represented just the reverse. ... Islamic society reached into a pool of existing cultural heritage and knowledge and developed tools to exploit local and international scholarly traditions. It was an ethnic mix which displayed tolerance of diversity, a condition necessary for technological innovation to occur. Together, these were infrastructures that made Islamic society more disposed to adopt, implement, benefit and generate technological innovation on its own.”⁵

⁵ Maya Shatzmiller, The University of Western Ontario, in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 61 (2018), pp. 1–32; see pp. 27–28.

It is, therefore, sad and tragic to note that the development of knowledge went into decline in the Islamic world some four or five hundred years ago. In a journal, *The New Atlantis*, there was an article in 2011 about this decline. It says:

"...the disparity between the intellectual achievements of the Middle East then [8th to 13th centuries] and now — particularly relative to the rest of the world — is staggering indeed. ... Today, however, the spirit of science in the Muslim world is as dry as the desert." ⁶

Perhaps we can see in a new light the words of the Holy Prophet Muhammad which I quoted above: "The word of wisdom is the lost property of the believer, so wherever he finds it he has a better right to it". Muslims have lost the knowledge which they would have possessed if they had continued on the path of enlightenment which the Quran and the Holy Prophet set them on. That lost property was inherited largely by the Western world. Muslims had a better right to it, but they gave up their right by their lack of concern and interest.

Far from going to search for knowledge, when the modern branches of knowledge were brought to their doorstep, for example in the Indian subcontinent during British rule of India, they were greatly reluctant to accept it. The Muslim religious leaders, some 150 years ago, declared it as un-Islamic to undertake the Western form of education and to learn the English language. As a result, Muslims of the Indian subcontinent suffered deep and long-lasting damage, whose effects still exist even now. Perhaps this may be why the Holy Prophet Muhammad urged Muslims to seek knowledge even if it were to be found in China, meaning that there is nothing wrong in accepting knowledge from non-Muslim nations.

So may Allah enable Muslims to follow the very vital, wise and beneficial guidance of the Quran and the Holy Prophet in this respect — *Ameen*.

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⁶ Hillel Ofek, *Why the Arabic World turned away from Science — On the lost Golden Age and the rejection of reason*, No. 30, Winter 2011 issue.