

Imam Shafi`i

By Dr. G.F. Haddad

Muhammad ibn Idris ibn al-`Abbas, al-Imam al-Shafi`i, Abu `Abd Allah al-Shafi`i al-Hijazi al-Qurashi al-Hashimi al-Muttalibi (d. 204), the offspring of the House of the Prophet, the peerless one of the great *mujtahid* imams and jurist *par excellence*, the scrupulously pious ascetic and Friend of Allah, he laid down the foundations of *fiqh* in his *Risala*, which he said he revised and re-read four hundred times, then said: "Only Allah's Book is perfect and free from error."

He is the cousin of the Prophet - Allah's blessings and peace upon him - descending from al-Muttalib who is the brother of Hashim, `Abd al-Muttalib's father. Someone praised the Banu Hashim in front of the Prophet, whereby he interlaced the fingers of his two hands and said: "We and they are but one and the same thing." Al-Nawawi listed three peculiar merits of al-Shafi`i: his sharing the Prophet's lineage at the level of their common ancestor `Abd Manaf; his birth in the Holy Land of Palestine and upbringing in Mecca; and his education at the hands of superlative scholars together with his own superlative intelligence and knowledge of the Arabic language. To this Ibn Hajar added two more: the hadith of the Prophet, "O Allah! Guide Quraysh, for the science of the scholar that comes from them will encompass the earth. O Allah! You have let the first of them taste bitterness, so let the latter of them taste reward." Another hadith of the Prophet says: "Truly, Allah shall send forth for this Community, at the onset of every hundred years, someone who will renew their Religion for them." The scholars agreed, among them Abu Qilaba (d. 276) and Imam Ahmad, that the first narration signified al-Shafi`i, and the second signified `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Aziz and then al-Shafi`i.

He was born in Ghazza or `Asqalan in 150, the year of Abu Hanifa's death, and moved to Mecca at the age of two, following his father's death, where he grew up. He was early a skillful archer, then he took to learning language and poetry until he gave himself to *fiqh*, beginning with hadith. He memorized the Qur'an at age seven, then Malik's *Muwatta'* at age ten, at which time his teacher would deputize him to teach in his absence. At age thirteen he went to see Malik, who was impressed by his memory and intelligence.

Malik ibn Anas and Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani were among his most prominent teachers and he took position against both of them in *fiqh*. Al-Shafi`i said: "From Muhammad ibn al-Hasan I wrote a camel-load." Al-Hakim narrated from `Abd Allah ibn `Abd al-Hakam: "Al-Shafi`i never ceased to speak according

to Malik's position and he would say: 'We do not differ from him other than in the way of his companions,' until some young men spoke unbecomingly at length behind his back, whereupon al-Shafi'i resolved to put his differences with Malik in writing. Otherwise, his whole life he would say, whenever asked something: 'This is what the Teacher said' - *hâdha qawl al-ustadh* - meaning Malik."

Like Abu Hanifa and al-Bukhari, he recited the entire Qur'an each day at prayer, and twice a day in the month of Ramadan.

Al-Muzani said: "I never saw one more handsome of face than al-Shafi'i. If he grasped his beard it would not exceed his fist." Ibn Rahuyah described him in Mecca as wearing bright white clothes with an intensely black beard. Al-Za'farani said that when he was in Baghdad in the year 195 he dyed his beard with henna.

Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam said: "If the intelligence of an entire nation was brought together he would have encompassed it." Similarly, al-Muzani said: "I have been looking into al-Shafi'i's *Risala* for fifty years, and I do not recall a single time I looked at it without learning some new benefit."

Al-Sakhawi in the introduction to his *al-Jawahir wa al-Durar* and others narrate that someone criticized Ahmad ibn Hanbal for attending the *fiqh* sessions of al-Shafi'i and leaving the hadith sessions of Sufyan ibn 'Uyayna. Ahmad replied: "Keep quiet! If you miss a hadith with a shorter chain you can find it elsewhere with a longer chain and it will not harm you. But if you do not have the reasoning of this man [al-Shafi'i], I fear you will never be able to find it elsewhere." Ahmad is also related by his students Abu Talib and Humayd ibn Zanjuyah to say: "I never saw anyone adhere more to hadith than al-Shafi'i. No one preceded him in writing down the hadith in a book." The meaning of this is that al-Shafi'i possessed the understanding of hadith after which Ahmad sought, as evidenced by the latter's statement: "How rare is *fiqh* among the scholars of hadith!" This is a reference to the hadith: "It may be one carries understanding (*fiqh*) without being a person of understanding (*faqih*)." Sufyan himself would defer to al-Shafi'i in matters of *tafsîr* and *fatwa*. Yunus ibn Abi Ya'la said: "Whenever al-Shafi'i went into *tafsîr*, it was as if he had witnessed the revelation." Ahmad ibn Hanbal also said: "Not one of the scholars of hadith touched an inkwell nor a pen except he owed a huge debt to al-Shafi'i."

Al-Shafi'i was known for his peculiar strength in Arabic language, poetry, and philology. Bayhaqi narrated:

[From Ibn Hisham:] I was al-Shafi`i's sitting-companion for a long time, and I never heard him use except a word which, carefully considered, one would not find (in its context) a better word in the entire Arabic language. . . . Al-Shafi`i's discourse, in relation to language, is a proof in itself.

[From al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Za`farani:] A group of bedouins used to frequent al-Shafi`i's gathering with us and sit in a corner. One day I asked their leader: "You are not interested in scholarship; why do you keep coming to sit with us?" They said: "We come to hear al-Shafi`i's language."

Al-Shafi`i trod the path of the *Salaf* in avoiding any interpretation of the verses and narrations pertaining to the divine attributes. He practiced "relegation of the meaning" (*tafwîd al-mi`na*) to a higher source, as established in his saying: "I leave the meaning of the verses of the Attributes to Allah, and I leave the meaning of the hadiths of the attributes to Allah's Messenger." At the same time, rare instances of interpretation are recorded from him. Thus al-Bayhaqi relates that al-Muzani reported from al-Shafi`i the following commentary on the verse: "To Allah belong the East and the West, and wheresoever you turn, there is Allah's face (*wajh*)" (2:115): "It means - and Allah knows best - thither is the bearing (*wajh*) towards which Allah has directed you." Al-Hakkari (d. 486) related in his book *`Aqida al-Shafi`i* that the latter said: "We affirm those attributes, and we negate from them likeness between them and creation (*al-tashbîh*), just as He negated it from Himself when He said: **'There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him'** (42:11)."

Al-Shafi`i's hatred of dialectic theology (*kalâm*) was based on his extreme caution against errors which bear heavy consequences as they induce one into false beliefs. Among his sayings concerning this: "It is better for a scholar of knowledge to give a *fatwa* after which he is said to be wrong than to theologize and then be said to be a heretic (*zindîq*). I hate nothing more than theology and theologians." Dhahabi comments: "This indicates that Abu `Abd Allah's position concerning error in the principles of the Religion (*al-usûl*) is that it is not the same as error in the course of scholarly exertion in the branches." The reason is that in belief and doctrine neither *ijtihâd* nor divergences are permitted. In this respect al-Shafi`i said: "It cannot be asked 'Why?' concerning the principles, nor 'How?'" Yet al-Shafi`i did not completely close the door to the use of *kalâm* in defense of the Sunna, as shown below and in the notice on Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Yunus ibn Abi Ya`la narrated that al-Shafi`i defined the "principles" as: "The Qur'an, the Sunna, analogy (*al-qiyâs*), and consensus (*al-ijmâ`*)"; he defined the latter to mean: "The adherence of the Congregation (*jamâ`a*) of the Muslims to the conclusions of a given ruling pertaining to what is permitted and what is forbidden after the passing of the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him."

Al-Shafi`i did not close the door on the right use of *kalâm* as is clear from Ibn Abi Hatim's narration from al-Rabi` of his words: "If I wished, I could produce a book against each one of those who deviated, but dialectic theology is none of my business, and I would not like to be attributed any part in it." Similar to it is his advice to his student al-Muzani: "Take proofs from creation about the Creator, and do not burden yourself with the knowledge of what your mind did not reach." Ibn Abi Hatim himself spoke similarly when he was told of Ibn Khuzayma's unsuccessful attempt at *kalâm*: "It is preferable not to meddle with what we did not learn." Note that al-Shafi`i also spoke of his wish not to have a single letter out of all his works attributed to him, regardless of topic.

Al-Shafi`i's attitude towards *tasawwuf* was as strict as with *kalâm*, and he both praised it and denigrated its abuse at the hands of its corrupters. In criticism of the latter he said: "No-one becomes a Sufi in the morning except he ends up a dolt by noon" while on the other hand he declared in his *Diwan*: "Be at the same time a *faqîh* and a Sufi." In Mecca al-Shafi`i was the student of Fudayl ibn `Iyad. Imam al-Nawawi in his *Bustan al-`Arifin fi al-Zuhd wa al-Tasawwuf* ("The Garden of the Gnostics in Asceticism and *Tasawwuf*") narrated from al-Shafi`i the saying: "Only the sincere one (*al-mukhlis*) can recognize self-display (*al-riyâ'*)." Al-Nawawi comments: "This means that it is impossible to know the reality of self-display and see its hidden shades except for one who resolutely seeks (*arâda*) sincerity. Such a one strives for a long time, searching, meditating, examining at length within himself until he knows, or knows something of what self-display is. This does not happen for everyone. Indeed, this happens only with special ones (*al-khawâss*). But for a given individual to claim that he knows what self-display is, this is real ignorance on his part."

Al-Shafi`i deferred primacy in the foundations of *fiqh* to Imam Abu Hanifa with his famous statement: "People are all the children of Abu Hanifa in *fiqh*." Ibn Hajar al-Haytami mentioned in the thirty-fifth chapter of his book on Imam Abu Hanifa entitled *al-Khayrat al-Hisan*: "When Imam al-Shafi`i was in Baghdad, he would visit the grave of Imam Abu Hanifa, greet him, and then ask Allah for the fulfillment of his need through his means."

Two schools of legal thought or *madhahib* are actually attributed to al-Shafi`i, englobing his writings and legal opinions (*fatâwa*). These two schools are known in the terminology of jurists as "The Old" (*al-qadîm*) and "The New" (*al-jadîd*), corresponding respectively to his stays in Iraq and Egypt. The most prominent transmitters of the New among al-Shafi`i's students are al-Buwayti, al-Muzani, al-Rabi` al-Muradi, and al-Bulqini, in *Kitab al-Umm* ("The Motherbook"). The most prominent transmitters of the Old are Ahmad ibn Hanbal, al-Karabisi, al-Za`farani, and Abu Thawr, in *Kitab al-Hujja* ("Book of the Proof"). What is presently known as the Shafi`i position refers to the New except in

approximately twenty-two questions, in which Shafi`i scholars and muftis have retained the positions of the Old.

Al-Subki related that the Shafi`i scholars considered al-Rabi`s narration from al-Shafi`i sounder from the viewpoint of transmission, while they considered al-Muzani`s sounder from the viewpoint of *fiqh*, although both were established hadith masters. Al-Shafi`i said to al-Rabi`: "How I love you!" and another time: "O Rabi`! If I could feed you the Science I would feed it to you." Al-Qaffal al-Shashi in his *Fatawa* relates that al-Rabi` was slow in his understanding, and that al-Shafi`i once repeated an explanation forty times for him in a gathering, yet he did not understand it then got up and left in embarrassment. Later, al-Shafi`i called him in private and resumed explaining it to him until he understood. This shows the accuracy of Ibn Rahuyah`s statement: "I consider the best part of me the time when I fully understand al-Shafi`i`s discourse."

Al-Shafi`i took the verse "**Or if you have touched women**" (4:43) literally, and considered that contact between the sexes, even accidental, nullified ablution. This is also the position of Ibn Mas`ud, Ibn `Umar, al-Sha`bi, al-Nakha`i, al-Zuhri, and al-Awza`i, which is confirmed by Ibn `Umar`s report: "Whoever kisses or touches his wife with his hand must renew his *wudû`*." It is authentic and related in numerous places including Malik's *Muwatta`*. Al-Shafi`i said: "Something similar has reached us from Ibn Mas`ud." They all read the above verse literally, without interpreting "touch" to mean "sexual intercourse" as do the Hanafis, or "touch with pleasure" as do the Malikis.

A major contribution of al-Shafi`i in the foundations of the Law was his division of innovation (*al-bid`a*) into good and bad on the basis of `Umar`s words about the *tarâwih* or congregational supererogatory night prayers in the month of Ramadan: "What a fine innovation this is!" Harmala narrated that al-Shafi`i concluded: "Therefore, whatever innovation conforms to the Sunna is approved (*mahmûd*), and whatever opposes it is abominable (*madhmûm*)." Agreement formed in the Four Schools around his division, as illustrated by the endorsement of some major later authorities in each school. Among the Hanafis: Ibn `Abidin, al-Turkumani, and al-Tahanawi; among the Malikis: al-Turtushi, Ibn al-Hajj, and al-Shatibi; consensus among the Shafi`is; and reluctant acceptance among later Hanbalis, who altered al-Shafi`i`s terminology to read "lexical innovation" (*bid`a lughawiyya*) and "legal innovation" (*bid`a shar`iyya*), respectively û although inaccurately û matching Shafi`i`s "approved" and "abominable".

Among al-Shafi`i`s other notable positions: Al-Muzani said: "I never saw any of the scholars make something obligatory on behalf of the Prophet as much as al-Shafi`i in his books, and this was due to his high remembrance of the Prophet. He said in the Old School: 'Supplication ends with the invocation of blessings on

the Prophet, and its end is but by means of it." Al-Karabisi said: "I heard al-Shafi`i say that he disliked for someone to say 'the Messenger' (*al-Rasûl*), but that he should say 'Allah's Messenger' (*Rasûl Allah*) out of veneration (*ta`zîm*) for him."

Among al-Shafi`i's other sayings:

"The study of hadith is better than supererogatory prayer, and the pursuit of knowledge is better than supererogatory prayer." Ibn `Abd al-Barr in *Kitab al-`Ilm* listed the many hadiths of the Prophet on the superior merit of knowledge. However, al-Shafi`i by this saying meant the essence and purpose of knowledge, not knowledge for its own sake which leads to Satanic pride. The latter is widely available while true knowledge is the knowledge that leads to godwariness (*taqwa*). This is confirmed by al-Shafi`i's saying: "Knowledge is what benefits. Knowledge is not what one has memorized." This is a corrective for those content to define knowledge as "the knowledge of the proof" (*ma`rifa al-dalîl*). **"He gives wisdom to whomever He will, and whoever receives wisdom receives immense good."** (2:269)

"You [the scholars of hadith] are the pharmacists but we [the jurists] are the physicians." This was explained by `Ali al-Qari in his book *Mu`taqad Abi Hanifa al-Imam* (p. 42): "The early scholars said: The hadith scholar without knowledge of *fiqh* is like a seller of drugs who is no physician: he has them but he does not know what to do with them; and the *fiqh* scholar without knowledge of hadith is like a physician without drugs: he knows what constitutes a remedy, but does not dispose of it."

"Malik was asked about *kalâm* and [the Science of] Oneness (*tawhîd*) and he said: 'It is inconceivable that the Prophet should teach his Community hygiene and not teach them about Oneness! And Oneness is exactly what the Prophet said: 'I was ordered to fight people until they say 'There is no God but Allah.' So, whatever makes blood and property untouchable û that is the reality of Oneness (*haqîqa al-tawhîd*).'" This is a proof from the *Salaf* against those who, in later times, innovated sub-divisions for *tawhîd* or legislated that their own understanding of Allah's Attributes was a precondition for the declaration of Oneness. Al-Halimi said: "In this hadith there is explicit proof that that declaration (*lâ ilâha illallâh*) suffices to extirpate oneself from all the different kinds of disbelief in Allah Almighty."

"Satiation weighs down the body, hardens the heart, does away with sagacity, brings on sleep, and weakens one from worship." This is similar to the definition of *tasawwuf* as "hunger" (*al-jû`*) given by some of the early masters, who acquired hunger as a permanent attribute and were called "hungerers" (*jû`iyyûn*). A

notable example is al-Qasim ibn `Uthman al-`Abdi al-Dimashqi al-Ju`i (d. 248), whom al-Dhahabi describes as "the Imam, the exemplar, the *wali*, the *muhaddith*, the shaykh of the Sufis and the friend of Ahmad ibn al-Hawari."

"I never swore by Allah - neither truthfully nor deceptively." This is similar to the saying of the Sufi master Sahl ibn `Abd Allah al-Tustari narrated by al-Dhahabi: "Among the manners of the truthful saints (*al-siddiqîn*) is that they never swear by Allah, nor commit backbiting, nor does backbiting take place around them, nor do they eat to satiation, if they promise they are true to their word, and they never speak in jest."

Al-Buwayti asked: "Should I pray behind the *Rafidi*?" Al-Shafi`i said: "Do not pray behind the *Rafidi*, nor behind the *Qadari*, nor behind the *Murji*." Al-Buwayti said: "Define them for us." He replied: "Whoever says 'Belief consists only in speech' is a *Murji*', and whoever says 'Abu Bakr and `Umar are not Imams' is a *Rafidi*, and whoever attributes destiny to himself is a *Qadari*."

Abu Hatim narrated from Harmala that al-Shafi`i said: "The Caliphs (*al-khulafâ'*) are five: Abu Bakr, `Umar, `Uthman, `Ali, and `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Aziz." In his *Diwan* he named them "leaders of their people, by whose guidance one obtains guidance," and declaimed of the Family of the Prophet:

The Family of the Prophet are my intermediary to him! (wasîlatî)

Through them I hope to be given my record with the right hand.

and:

O Family of Allah's Messenger! To love you is an obligation

Which Allah ordained and revealed in the Qur'an.

It is enough proof of your immense glory that

Whoever invokes not blessings upon you, his prayer is invalid.

Ibn Hajar said that the first to write a biography of al-Shafi`i was Dawud al-Zahiri (d. 275). Al-Nawawi in *Tahdhib al-Asma' wa al-Lughat* (1:44) mentioned that the best biography of al-Shafi`i was al-Bayhaqi's for its sound chains of transmission. Ibn Hajar summarized it and added to it al-Shafi`i's *Musnad* in his *Tawali al-Ta'sis fi Ma`ali Ibn Idris*.

In the introduction of his compendium of Shafi`i *fiqh* entitled *al-Majmu` al-Nawawi* mentions that al-Shafi`i used a walking stick for which he was asked:

"Why do you carry a stick when you are neither old nor ailing?" He replied: "To remember I am only a traveller in this world."

Main sources: al-Shafi`i, *Diwan*; Abu Nu`aym, *Hilya al-Awliya'* 9:71-172 #442; al-Nawawi, *Tahdhib al-Asma' wa al-Lughat* 1:44-67 #2; al-Dhahabi, *Siyar A`lam al-Nubala'* 8:377-423 #1539, 10:79, 10:649; al-Subki, *Tabaqat al-Shafi`iyya al-Kubra* 2:133-134; Ibn Hajar, *Tawali al-Ta'sis* p. 3-157.