

Life of Imam Al-Shafi'i Part 1

Br. Tarek Ibrahim

This is a biographical approach to the life of Imam Al-Shafi (who he was, his background, experiences etc.) rather than a scholarly exploration on his views on fiqh. It's also important to note that as Muslims, we should appreciate all four scholars' extraordinary effort to obtain knowledge (above and beyond average person of knowledge)→ mandates respect regardless of madhab

Background and Family:

- His mother was a major influence on him
- Place of Birth
 - o Palestine, Gaza, 767 AH→ death of Imam Abu Hanifah is the birth of Imam Shafi
- First Name: Muhammed
- Patronym: Son of Idrees, Son of Abbas, Son of Uthman, Son of Shafi, Son of Saib, Son of Ubaid, Son of Aziz, Son of Hashim, Son of Abdul Muttalib, Son of Muhammed
 - o He was the only imam that was also a Sayyid
- He had two sons and two daughters:
 - o Both his sons were named Muhammed but had different kunya (Abu Uthman, Abu Hassan)
 - o His daughters were named Zainab and Fatima

Appearance and Demeanor:

- Tall, dark skin, red hair, handsome
 - o 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."
- Shafi was born a poor orphan and decided to lived a poor life→ his garments made of linen and cotton
- As a child, he wore a skull cap (Kufi)
- To preserve image as a hashimite, he upgraded his skull cap to a turban (statement of prestige and status)
 - o They way someone dressed was form of communication: Turban indicated highest status, skull cap decreased status, nothing would indicate lowest status
 - o Arab historians (not necessarily Islamic) portrayed significance of turban in the following poem: "Males are made more superior in many ways. One of them being that they can wear a turban."

Comparison with the other Imams

- o Although Imam Malik and Imam Abu Hanifah were both very rich and dressed fashionably, Imam Al-Shafi was not wealthy and dressed very modestly and simply.
- o Imam Ahmed however, remained the poorest even though he had many opportunities to become wealthy.
- o Imam Malik had started out poor but he sold furniture to become richer.
- Exchange that occurred between Imam Malik and Khalifah Jaffar Al Mansour:
 - o Malik: "Fear Allah! For you do not know what's happening in your kingdom."
 - o Jaffar: "Are you sure ya imam that I don't know?"

- Malik: "No"
- Jaffar: "Don't you boil water over and over again for your children until they fall asleep without feeding them?" → Despite the lack of communication that existed in those days, the Khalifah made it a priority to learn about Malik.
- Malik eventually became very wealthy via gifts from khalifah (built his wealth). On the other hand, Imam Abu Hanifah was born rich.

Beautiful Recitation:

- Having beautiful recitation was venerated: the Egyptian author Sayyid Qutb wanted to read Abdul Bassit in prison but had a very bad voice. He wrote a letter to his sister Aminah, "My mother wished I had a beautiful voice during recitation and I failed. But I hope that his book 'Shades of the Quran' Tafsir book will please her because I wasn't able to have a good voice during Quran" → that was his concern right before execution. It also showed his connection to Allah SAW as he was constantly aware of him.
- Al shafi was a hafiz of the Quran- Memorizing the Quran was necessary back then
- Al-Haakim reports by the authority of Bahr bin Nasr saying: "When we wanted to cry we would say come let us go to this young Muttalibee man (Al- Shafi) to hear him recite the Qur'an. We would reach him and he would initiate his recitation until when the people would start falling down in front of him and the sounds of everyone weeping and yelling could be heard by him he would stop."
 - Al Shafi saw it as a fitnaah that seduced people, when he saw people cry, he would stop and leave to prevent himself from enjoying it (feeling arrogant)

Accomplishments:

- Age at Death: 57
- Started as a faqih at the age of 20
 - In his short life, he wrote books, started a madhab → many accomplishments in 30 years
- At the day of Judgment, everyone will be asked about how they spent their time? Compare your answers with the four imams, Sahaba and everyone else

His Mother (Fatimah bint 'Abdullah):

- She was widowed at a very age of 20
- Rather than getting remarried or perusing any other avenues, her mission in life was to educate her son → I will give all my life to this boy to compensate him not having a father
- She was a very strong woman
 - She went to court once along with another woman, judge wanted to separate them to interrogate them. She refused the judge by quoting the Quran that two women can witness together. The judge later apologized.
- She wanted to ensure that her son maintains his Hashemite heritage so she took him to Mecca to develop his Islamic knowledge
- She sent her son to scribes to learn to write and learn Quran
 - Imam Shafi's mom could have ignored him and got remarried and prioritized herself → instead she lived for son (decided to do this at 20 years old)

- She Found a teacher in Mecca- appreciate that his mother leaves the house and played an active role in the outside sphere → question the presumption that the role of the women was confined to the house
- She told his teacher that she doesn't have any money but the teacher still accepted her son Muhammed under the condition that in his absence, Muhammed has to help him → the teacher realized that Imam Shafi was extremely intelligent and allowed him to act as a substitute teacher at 7 years old!
- Classes weren't segregated on age but talent

Imam Al-Shafi had An Amazing Memory:

- Memorizing hadith with the full chain of narration had to be done orally
- The Muwatta of Imam Malik was memorized in 9 days
- Memorization was important in the past → it was necessary to participate in discussions
 - It may not be as necessary these days as everything is accessible readily
 - Do not focus on his ability to memorize but his dedication
 - Know your abilities and push yourself to do it → dedication is important
 - After class, Imam Shafi would go beyond all the efforts of the rest of the class → wanted to surpass the status quo → dedication made him so remembered in history

Questions/Comments:

- 1) Do you need to memorize the sources to become a scholar? Yes. From a scholar who has ijazat in that particular subject via the classical methods of Islam.
- 2) Mother decided to dedicate herself to educating her son: tireless work with very little to show for it.

References:

1. Imam Al-Shafi'i, *Al-Risala*
2. Al-Bayhaqi, *Manâqib Al-Shâfi'î*
3. Shafii Institute, <http://www.shafiqh.com>