153652 - A brief biography of Imam ash-Shafa`i

the question

We would like a brief biography of Imam ash-Shafa`i.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Most historians are of the view that ash-Shafa`i was born in Gaza in Palestine; this is the view of the vast majority of historians who wrote the biographies of jurists. However, there is another view which says that he was born in Asqalan (Ashkelon), which is three parasangs (16 km) from Gaza.

The majority of historians who discussed his lineage say that he was born to a Qurashi Muttalibi father, and his name was Muhammad ibn Idris ibn al-`Abbas ibn `Uthman ibn Shafi` ibn as-Sa'ib ibn `Ubayd ibn `Abd Yazid ibn Hashim ibn al-Muttalib ibn `Abd Manaf. Thus his lineage meets that of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) in `Abd Manaf.

The reports are agreed that he lived the life of a poor orphan. He memorized the Holy Quran, and his sharp intelligence was shown by his ability to memorize quickly. After memorizing the Holy Quran, he began to memorize the hadiths of the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). He loved the hadiths and became eager to collect them; he would listen to the hadith scholars and memorized the hadiths by hearing them. Then he wrote them down, sometimes on clay tablets and sometimes on vellum. He would go to the diwan (records office) to collect some discarded material to write on.

He went out to the wilderness and stayed with the tribe of Hudhayl. He himself said: I left Makkah and stayed with Hudhayl in the wilderness, to learn their speech and adopt their manners, for they were the most eloquent of the Arabs. I would move on when they moved on and halt when they halted. Then when I returned to Makkah, I began to compose poetry and narrate the literature and

stories of the people of the past. He memorized what he heard of the poetry and history of the Hudhaylis to the extent that al-Asma`i – who was known to be a prominent scholar of Arabic language – said: I corrected what I had memorized of the poems of Hudhayl by listening to a young man of Quraysh reciting them; his name is Muhammad ibn Idris.

Ash-Shafa`i sought knowledge in Makkah from those of the jurists and hadith scholars who were there, and he attained such a high level of knowledge that Muslim ibn Khalid az-Zinji gave him permission to issue fatwas and said to him: O Abu `Abdillah, the time has come for you to issue fatwas. That was at the time when Imam Malik was at the height of his fame, as travellers spread his renown everywhere, and he had attained immense knowledge of religion and hadith. So ash-Shafa`i resolved to migrate to Yathrib in pursuit of knowledge, but he did not want to go to Madinah with no knowledge at all of the teachings of Malik (may Allah be pleased with him), so he borrowed a copy of *Al-Muwatta'* from a man in Makkah and read it, and that there are reports which say that he memorized it.

Ash-Shafa`i went to Malik carrying a letter of recommendation from the governor of Makkah, and with this migration, he began to take an interest in jurisprudence, which he continued to focus on for the rest of his life. When Malik – who was very intuitive – saw him, he said to him: O Muhammad, fear Allah and avoid sins, for you will become very prominent. Allah, may He be Exalted, has cast light into your heart, so do not extinguish it with sin. Then he said to him: Come tomorrow and bring a book with you. Ash-Shafa`i said: I went to him the next day and I began to read from memory with the book in my hand. Every time I felt overwhelmed with awe of Malik and wanted to stop reading, he would tell me that he was impressed by how well I read, with correct grammar, and he would say: O young man, carry on, until I finished reading it to him within a few days.

When Malik died and ash-Shafa`i felt that he had acquired a good share of various kinds of knowledge, he decided that he needed to find some work that he could do in order to make a living and meet his needs, and avert poverty. It so happened that at that time the governor of Yemen came to the Hijaz. Some Qurashi people spoke to him and told him to take ash-Shafa`i with

him, so that governor took him with him. ash-Shafa`i said: My mother did not have anything to give me to help me on my journey, so I gave my house as collateral for a loan, and I was able to travel with the governor. When we arrived, he appointed to a position of authority. Ash-Shafa`i became the governor of Najran, where he established justice and governed on the basis of justice. He himself said concerning that: I was appointed as governor of Najran, which was inhabited by Banul-Harith and the freed slaves of Thaqif. When a new governor was appointed, they would try to appease him (in a hypocritical manner), and they wanted to deal with me in that way, but I refused to play along.

Ash-Shafa`i was accused of being an `Alawi (a supporter of the descendants of `Ali, who were opponents of the `Abbasids at that time), so Harun ar-Rashid sent orders that a group of nine `Alawis, along with ash-Shafa`i, be arrested and brought to him. The narrator said that the nine were executed, but ash-Shafa`i was spared because of his eloquent and sound argument in his defence and the testimony of Muhammad ibn al-Hasan in his favour. He came to Baghdad during this testing time in 184 AH, at the age of thirty-four. Perhaps Allah caused this trial to befall him at this time so that he would go back to seeking knowledge and would not continue to seek positions of authority.

Ibn Hajar said: Malik ibn Anas was the most prominent jurist in Madinah, so ash-Shafa`i went to learn from him and stayed with him. The most prominent jurist in Iraq was Abu Hanifah, so ash-Shafa`i learned from his companion Muhammad ibn al-Hasan and studied many books with him. Thus he acquired knowledge from ahl ar-ra'y (i.e., the companions of Abu Hanifah) and from ahl al-hadith (i.e., the companions of Malik), and it was on that basis that he set out general guidelines and principles of jurisprudence, and both those who agreed with him and those who disagreed with acknowledged his prominence in this field. He became renowned and was held in high esteem, until he attained great prominence, as is widely known.

Ahl ar-ra'y were very impressed with him the first time they met him in Baghdad in 184 AH, to the extent that ar-Razi said: Because of him, ahl ar-ra'y no longer had the upper hand over ahl al-hadith.

Then ash-Shafa`i returned to Makkah, where he began to teach in al-Haram al-Makki. He met with scholars during the Hajj season and they learned from him. It was at that time that Ahmad ibn Hanbal met him.

Then ash-Shafa`i went to Baghdad for the second time in 195 AH, and he wrote a book – entitled *Ar-Risalah* – for the first time, in which he laid the foundations for the field of usul al-fiqh (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence). In *Manaqib ash-Shafa`i* by ar-Razi, it says that he narrated that `Abd ar-Rahman ibn Mahdi asked ash-Shafa`i, when he was younger, to write a book for him in which he explained the guidelines on deriving rulings from the Quran, Sunnah, scholarly consensus (ijma`) and analogy (qiyas); explained which texts abrogate and which are abrogated (an-nasikh wal-mansukh); and different categories of reports with general meanings and reports with specific meanings. Ash-Shafa`i (may Allah be pleased with him) wrote the book *Ar-Risalah* and sent it to him, and when `Abd ar-Rahman ibn Mahdi read it, he said: I do not think that Allah, may He be glorified and Exalted, has created any man like him. Then ar-Razi said: You should know that ash-Shafa`i (may Allah be pleased with him) wrote *Ar-Risalah* when he was in Baghdad, and when he returned to Egypt, he rewrote *Ar-Risalah*, and in each of them there is a great deal of knowledge.

Then ash-Shafa`i moved to Egypt. Ar-Rabi` said: I heard ash-Shafa`i say in verse, regarding a story that he mentioned:

I am longing to go to Egypt… But there is wilderness and desert before I reach it. I do not know whether I am being driven to attain wealth and riches, or I am being driven towards my grave.

He said: By Allah, it did not take long after that before he attained both.

Tarikh Baghdad, 2/70; *Siyar A`lam an-Nubala'*, 10/77.

What is meant is that he attained wealth and riches, a life of ease, people's love and high status in Egypt, then he died there on the last night of Rajab 204 AH at the age of fifty-four, and his grave is there.

Dawud ibn `Ali az-Zahiri said:

Ash-Shafa`i possessed virtues and attributes that were not combined in anyone else, namely noble descent, sound faith and creed, a generous nature, and knowledge of which hadiths are sound and which are unsound, and which abrogate and which are abrogated. He memorised the Quran, the Sunnah and the biographies of the caliphs, and he wrote books in a beautiful style.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal (may Allah have mercy on him) said concerning him:

It was narrated from the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) that Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, would send to this ummah at the beginning of every century a man who would restore their faith and lead them back to the right path. `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Aziz came at the beginning of the century, and I hope that ash-Shafa`i will be that man at the beginning of the next century.

Imam Ahmad (may Allah have mercy on him) also said:

Ash-Shafa`i was like sunshine for this world and good health for the body. Is there anything that could be as good as them or replace them?

For more information about the life of this leading scholar, and his knowledge and jurisprudence, please see the book: *Al-Imam ash-Shafa`i: Hayatuhu wa Madhhabuhu, Ara'uhu wa Fiqhuhu* by Shaykh Muhammad Abu Zahrah.