119256 - A brief biography of Imam Malik

the question

We would like a brief biography of Imam Malik .

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Malik ibn Anas (may Allah have mercy on him) – according to the majority of scholars – was born in 93 AH in Madinah. He was very close to the time of the Sahabah and Tabi`in, and to the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), and he lived in places where major events occurred. That had a great impact on his thinking, school of thought and life. For it was from Madinah that the light of Islam shone forth; it was the cradle of knowledge from which knowledge spread throughout the world.

His lineage goes back to the Yemeni tribe of Dhu Asbah. His mother's name was al-`Aliyah bint Shurayk al-Azdiyyah. Thus both his father and his mother were Yemeni Arabs.

He grew up in a family who focused on studying reports and hadiths, in an environment that was devoted to the study of reports and hadiths. His grandfather Malik ibn Abi `Amir was one of the senior Tabi`in; he narrated hadiths from `Umar ibn al-Khattab, `Uthman ibn `Affan, Talhah ibn `Ubaydillah and `A'ishah the Mother of the Believers. His sons Anas the father of Imam Malik, Rabi` and Nafi`, who was known by the kunyah Abu Suhayl, narrated from him, but it seems that his father Anas was not greatly focused on studying hadith. Whatever the case, it is sufficient that his paternal uncles and grandfather were focused on the study of hadith, and their prominence in Islamic knowledge was sufficient for this family to become one of the families who were renowned for their knowledge. Before Malik, his brother an-Nadr spent a lot of time with the scholars, learning from them.

Imam Malik memorized the Qur'an early in life – as is the case in many Muslim families – then he turned his attention to memorizing hadiths. The environment in which he grew up inspired him to follow that path, and in the atmosphere of Madinah he found motivation and encouragement. When he told his mother that he wanted to go and seek knowledge, she dressed him in his best clothes and put a turban on his head, then she said: Go and start learning now. And she used to say: Go to Rabi`ah and learn his manners and etiquette before you acquire knowledge from him. *Al-Madarik*, p. 115.

He studied with Ibn Hormuz for seven years when he was very young, and learned from him the views of various scholars and how to respond to people of whims and desires. He was influenced by his manners and bearing to the extent that he said: I heard Ibn Hormuz say: The students of a scholar should learn from him how to say: I do not know, so that this will be something that they can resort to whenever they need to. So if one of them is asked about something that he does not know about, he should say: I do not know… Ibn Wahb said: Malik used to say about most of what he was asked about: I do not know.

He studied with Nafi`, the freed slave of Ibn `Umar, and he used to say: I would go to Nafi` at midday, when no tree would shade me from the sun, and I would wait for him to come out. When he came out, I would leave him for a while, as if I had not seen him, then I would go to him and greet him with salaam and leave him, then when he came in, I would say to him: What did Ibn `Umar say about such and such? And he would answer me, then I would stop asking questions, as he was hot tempered. *Ad-Dibaj al-Mudh*ahhab, p. 117.

He studied under Imam Ibn Shihab az-Zuhri, and it was narrated from him that he said: I attended the Eid prayer, then I said: This is a day when Ibn Shihab will be by himself. So I left the prayer place and sat at his door, and I heard him say to his slave woman: Go and see who is at the door. So she looked, then I heard her say: It is your blond student Malik. He said: Let him in. So I entered and he said: I think that you did not go back to your house yet. I said: No. He said: Have you eaten anything? I said: No he said: Eat something. I said: I do not need to eat. He said: What do you want? I said: I want you to tell me hadith. He said to me: Very well. So I took out my boards and he

narrated forty hadiths to me. Then I said: Tell me more. He said: That is enough. If you learn these hadiths by heart, you will be one of those who have memorized many hadiths. I said: I can recite them from memory now. He took the boards from my hand, then he said: Narrate. So I narrated the hadiths, then he gave the boards back to me and said: Now go, for you are one of the vessels of knowledge.

One of the scholars of hadith said: The leading scholar after `Umar was Zayd ibn Thabit, then after him it was `Abdullah ibn `Umar. Twenty-one men acquired knowledge from Zayd, then the knowledge of these men ended up with three men: Ibn Shihab, Bukayr ibn `Abdillah and Abuz-Zinad, then the knowledge of all these men ended up with Malik ibn Anas. *Al-Madarik*, 68.

He greatly venerated the hadith of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), to the extent that when Malik was asked: Did you learn hadith from `Amr ibn Dinar? He replied: I saw him narrating hadith and the people were standing and writing, but I did not want to write the hadith of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) whilst standing. He spared no effort in memorizing hadith and learning from the scholars, but he did not spare any wealth in pursuit of that, to the extent that Ibn al-Qasim said: Malik was so preoccupied with seeking knowledge that he ended up having to knock down the roof of his house and sell the lumber, then after that he became well off. *Al-Madarik*, p. 115.

After Malik had finished studying hadiths and acquired sufficient knowledge to issue fatwas, he began to teach people in the Prophet’s Mosque. According to some reports, his age at that time was seventeen years, and he (may Allah have mercy on him) said concerning that – explaining his situation when he felt that he wanted to start teaching and issuing fatwas –:

No one who wants to sit in the mosque to teach hadith and issue fatwas should do that before he consults people of virtue and righteousness, and if they think that he is qualified to do that, then he may do that. I did not sit in the mosque to teach until seventy elder of great knowledge testified that I was qualified to do that. *Al-Madarik*, p. 127.

Imam Malik (may Allah have mercy on him) used to dress nicely when teaching hadith and his

circle reflected a level of respect and awe that were not reflected in the circles of other scholars, to the extent that al-Waqidi said: His circle was a circle of dignity and knowledge, and he was a man of dignity and nobility; there were no arguments in his circle, and no chatter, clamour or raising of voices. If he was asked about something and gave an answer, no one would say to him: Where did you get this from?

As a sign of his devotion to knowledge, he adhered to some things and kept away from others. He adhered to the Sunnah and to matters that are clear and unambiguous. Hence he would say: The best of matters are those that are clear; if you have two options and have doubts about both of them, then choose the option that you are more certain about.

When he issued fatwas on novel matters, he did not impose his opinion on others for fear that his fatwa might be wrong and not in accordance with the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

He would deliberate and be cautious in issuing fatwas; he would think deeply for a long time and was not hasty in issuing fatwas, for haste could lead to error. His student Ibn al-Qasim said: I heard Malik say: I have been thinking about an issue for more than ten years, and I have not yet reached any conclusion about it.

And he used to say: Whoever wants to give an answer about some issue, let him think of Paradise and Hell, and how he will be saved in the hereafter. *Ad-Dibaj al-Mudhahhab*, p. 23.

On one occasion, someone asked him a question and said: It is a light issue. Malik got angry and said: A light and easy issue?! No issue of knowledge is light. Have you not heard what Allah, may He be Exalted, says: {Indeed, We will cast upon you a heavy word} [al-Muzzammil 73:5]? All knowledge is heavy, especially that which will be asked about on the Day of Resurrection. *Al-Madarik*, 162.

Even though Imam Malik kept away from joining any revolt or encouraging people to join it, and he focused on issues of knowledge, he still went through some turmoil during the `Abbasid era, at the time of Abu Ja`far al-Mansur (146 AH). He was arrested and whipped during this turmoil, and

strung up by his arms until his shoulders were dislocated. The well-known reason for that was that he used to narrate the hadith: “The divorce (talaq) of one who issues a divorce under duress does not count as such and is not valid.” Those who revolted used this hadith as evidence to prove that allegiance sworn to [the `Abbasid caliph] Abu Ja`far Mansur was invalid, and this was something that was very widespread at the time when Muhammad ibn `Abdillah ibn al-Hasan, who was known as an-Nafs az-Zakiyyah (“the Pure Soul”), led a revolt in Madinah. Al-Mansur ordered Imam Malik to stop narrating this hadith, then he sent a spy to him to ask him about it, and he narrated it in front of the people. So the governor of Madinah, Ja`far ibn Sulayman, subjected him to a beating. In some reports it says that Abu Ja`far al-Mansur later apologized to Imam Malik, saying that what had happened was done without his knowledge.

Abu Yusuf, the companion of Abu Hanifah, said:

I have never seen anyone more knowledgeable than three men: Malik, Ibn Abi Layla and Abu Hanifah.

`Abd ar-Rahman ibn Mahdi said:

The leading scholars of hadith who are to be taken as examples are four: Sufyan ath-Thawri in Kufa, Malik in al-Hijaz, al-Awza’i in ash-Sham (Syria), and Hammad ibn Zayd in Basra.

Sufyan ibn `Uyaynah said: Who are we in comparison to Malik? We used to seek out hadiths narrated by Malik. We would examine a narrator of hadith, and if Malik narrated from him, we would narrate from him… I do not think but that Madinah will be ruined after the death of Malik ibn Anas.

Ash-Shafa`i said: If a report comes to you from Malik, then trust it… When it comes to hadith narrations, Malik is the star, and when you talk about scholars, Malik is the star. No one ever matched the level of Malik in terms of knowledge, because of his memorization, precision and prudence. Whoever is seeking authentic hadiths should seek them from Malik.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal said:

Malik is one of the leading scholars. He is the leading scholar of hadith and jurisprudence, and who is like Malik? He sought out hadiths and reports about the early generations with reason and dignity.

Al-Qadi `Iyad (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

He lived for approximately ninety years, and was a leading scholar who narrated hadiths and issued fatwas. People learned from him for approximately seventy years, and he increased in dignity and respect with the passage of time. Every day he increased in virtue and prominence, until he died. He was the most prominent for years, and attained uncontested leadership in both worldly and religious terms. *Al-Madarik*, 111.

Most historians are of the view that he died in 179 AH.

May Allah have mercy on Imam Malik and all the leading scholars of the Muslims.

See: *Malik: Hayatuhu wa `Asruhu, Ara'uhu wa Fiqhuhu* by Shaykh Muhammad Abu Zahrah.

And Allah knows best.