



153333 - A brief biography of Imam Ahmad

the question

We would like a brief biography of Imam Ahmad and, if possible, a translation into French so that others may benefit.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (may Allah have mercy on him) was born – according to the established, well known reports – in Rabi` al-Awwal 164 AH. He was born in Baghdad, where his mother had come when she was pregnant with him from Marw, where his father had lived. His father was Shaybani [from the tribe of Shayban], and so was his mother, so he was not a non-Arab or a half-Arab; rather he was purely Arab. His family was originally from Basra and his grandfather was the governor of Sarkhas. When the `Abbasid movement emerged, he joined it and was killed for that cause. His father was an army commander, and died when Ahmad was small.

Ahmad had certain qualities which no one has but they will lead to him becoming prominent, having high aspirations, being furthest removed from trivial matters, and always focusing on sublime matters. These qualities are: noble descent and a good family; growing up as an orphan, which forces one to be self-reliant from an early age; being poor, but not to the point of destitution that leads to loss of dignity and self-respect. The one who has these characteristics will not become arrogant at times of ease or lose self-respect at times of hardship. In addition to these characteristics, he had a sense of contentment with his lot and an aspiration to attain prominence in knowledge on the basis of piety and fear of Allah, may He be Exalted. Ahmad had all of these qualities, in addition to being intelligent and smart.

Imam Ahmad spent his early years in Baghdad, which was filled with people of different



inclinations and aspirations, and all branches of knowledge and types of art flourished there. In this city there were scholars of Quran and hadith, Sufis, scholars of language and philosophers, and it was the capital of the Islamic world. He learned about the views of ahl al-ra'y when he was young, as he first learned hadith from Abu Yusuf, the companion of Abu Hanifah, who was one of the jurists of ahl ar-ra'y and was well versed and renowned in that field. Then Ahmad turned his attention to hadith, and when he decided in his youth to study hadith, he had no choice but to learn from all the scholars of hadith who were in Iraq, Syria and Hijaz. Perhaps he was the first scholar of hadith to collect hadiths from all Muslim regions and write them down. His *Musnad* is a true testimony to that, for he collected hadiths from Hijaz, Greater Syria, Basra and Kufah equally.

In the beginning, he learned from one of the leading scholars of hadith in Baghdad, and remained his student for four years, and he did not leave him until he reached the age of twenty. That great scholar was Hushaym ibn Bashir al-Wasiti (d. 183 AH). Then in 186 AH, he began his travels in search of hadiths. He travelled to Basra and Hijaz, and he travelled to Yemen and Kufa. He wanted to travel to ar-Rayy (now Tehran) to learn from Jarir ibn `Abd al-Hamid, as he had not seen him before in Baghdad, but what prevented him from travelling to meet him was the fact that he could not afford to undertake this journey.

He travelled to Hijaz five times, the first of which was in 187 AH. During this journey he met ash-Shafa`i, and in addition to learning hadith from Ibn `Uyaynah, he also learned jurisprudence and its principles from ash-Shafa`i, as well as what abrogates and what is abrogated (*an-nasikh wal-mansukh*) in the Quran. After that, he met ash-Shafa`i in Baghdad, when Ahmad's own jurisprudence and its principles had taken their final shape after he had refined and perfected them.

He went for Hajj five times, for three of which he travelled on foot. On one of these journeys he lost his way. He enjoyed hardship on journeys for the purpose of worship and seeking hadiths, to the extent that in 198 AH, he decided to go for Hajj with his companion Yahya ibn Ma`in, and after Hajj he planned to go to `Abd ar-Razzaq ibn Humam in San`aa' (Yemen). But when they were doing the tawaf upon arrival in Makkah (tawaf al-qudum), they saw `Abd ar-Razzaq also doing



tawaf. Ibn Ma`in saw him and recognised him, as he had met him before, so he greeted him with salaam and said to him: This is your brother Ahmad ibn Hanbal. [ʿAbd ar-Razzaq] said: May Allah bless him and make him steadfast; everything I have heard about him is good. [Ibn Ma`in] said: We will come to you tomorrow, if Allah wills, so that we may hear [hadith from you] and write them down. When he left, Ahmad said, objecting: Why did you make an appointment to meet the shaykh? He said: So that we can learn hadith from him; I have spared you the travel of one month there and one month back, as well as the expense of travel. Ahmad said: I would not like to spoil my intention on the basis of what you said; we will go and learn from him there. Then after Hajj, he went there and learned from him in San`aa'. On the way there, he ran out of funds, so he hired himself out as a carrier of baggage, and refused all offers of help from others.

He continued his efforts to seek out and narrate hadiths even after attaining prominence as a scholar, to the extent that one of his contemporaries saw him holding his inkpot in his hand and writing, and he said to him: O Abu `Abdillah, you have attained such prominence and become a leader of the Muslims [yet you still carry your ink pot]? He said: I will keep my inkpot with me until I die. And he (may Allah have mercy on him) used to say: I will continue to seek knowledge until I enter the grave.

Thus Ahmad was following the ancient aphorism: a man will remain knowledgeable so long as he seeks knowledge, but when he thinks that he knows it all, then he becomes ignorant. By saying that, he demonstrated that his actions and his words were in harmony.

Among the knowledge that he (may Allah have mercy on him) sought was jurisprudence and how to understand reports and derive rulings from them, in addition to narrating hadiths. He learned that from ash-Shafa`i and others. In fact we would accept what was said about him, that he kept the books of ahl ar-ra'y, but he did not follow them. His student al-Khallal said: Ahmad wrote out and kept the books of ahl ar-ra'y, but he did not pay attention to them.

Ibn al-Jawzi said: Ahmad did not start to teach hadith and issuing fatwas until he reached the age of forty and after he became renowned throughout the Muslim lands. His lessons would be crowded with people, to the extent that some narrators said that the number of people who would



attend his lesson was five thousand, and that those who would write down what he said were five hundred only; the rest would learn from watching his manners, bearing and conduct. His lesson was after `Asr, and the atmosphere was one of awe and veneration of the hadith of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

In *Tarikh adh-Dhahabi* it is narrated from al-Marzuq, the companion of Ahmad, who described his study circles: I never saw a poor man more honoured in any gathering than the gathering of Abu `Abdillah [that is, Ahmad]. He was inclined towards the poor and kept a distance from people of worldly prominence. He was forbearing and never hasty; rather he was very humble and modest, and he was calm and dignified. When he took his seat in his gathering he would not speak until he was asked a question.

He did not narrate any hadith except by reading from his books, for the purpose of being more certain [in his narration], to the extent that his son `Abdullah said: I never saw my father narrate any hadith from memory without a book, except in the case of less than one hundred hadiths.

It is worth noting an important matter, which is that Ahmad (may Allah be pleased with him) lived his life like the early generations (the salaf) in the fullest sense. He stayed away from contemporary issues and debates, and from any arguments and disputes in the intellectual, political, social and military fields. He preferred to live like the Sahabah and the elite of the Tabi`in and those who came after them, those who followed in their footsteps and chose to adhere to their paths. Hence his knowledge and understanding were grounded in the Sunnah and hadiths, and he did not discuss any issue unless he came to know that the Sahabah had discussed it; if he came to know that they had discussed an issue, he would follow their view and would stay away from any other view.

Ahmad lived on the income of property that his father had left to him, the rent of which sufficed him and made him independent of means. He would not accept any gift from anyone, especially gifts from the caliphs, to the extent that when Imam Ash-Shafa`i suggested to him on one occasion that he should be appointed to a judicial position in Yemen at the request of the caliph al-Amin, Ahmad said to ash-Shafa`i: O Abu `Abdillah, if I hear this from you a second time, you will



never see me again.

Harmalah ibn Yahya, the student of ash-Shafa`i, narrated that he said: I left Baghdad and I did not leave it when there was anyone more pious, more fearing of Allah and more knowledgeable than Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

`Ali ibn al-Madini said: I have known Abu `Abdillah [Imam Ahmad] for more than fifty years, and he has been increasing constantly in goodness.

Yahya ibn Ma`in said: By Allah, we cannot put up with what Ahmad puts up with or achieve what he has achieved, and we cannot emulate his way.

Is-haq ibn Rahawayh said: In Iraq, I used to sit with Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Yahya ibn Ma`in and our companions, and we would discuss a hadith with one or two or three isnads. I would say: What does it mean? How are we to understand it? How is it to be implemented? And they would all keep quiet except Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

Imam Ahmad faced a great test and went through turmoil because of the caliph al-Ma'mun's demand that the jurists and scholars of hadith agree with his view that the Quran is created. He was detained and beaten for that reason by three of the caliphs in succession: al-Ma'mun, al-Mu`tasim and al-Wathiq.

Imam Ahmad was known for his patience, strength and resilience. The biographers spoke about that and said that he was taken to the caliph during the time of the turmoil mentioned above, and they warned him and advised him to say that which would save him and please the court. Two men were beheaded in his presence, but in the midst of this terrifying scene, he looked around and saw one of the companions of ash-Shafa`i, so he asked him: What have you learned from ash-Shafa`i about wiping over the khuffs? This astonished those present, and they were so amazed at this strength that Allah had given to his heart that his opponent Ahmad ibn Abi Dawud [who was a Mu`tazili] said in astonishment: Look at this man! He has been brought to be beheaded yet he is still discussing issues of jurisprudence! That was due to his strong will, deep faith, and a heart that delegated all his affairs to Allah and submitted to His will and decree.



This great scholar passed away on a Friday morning, on the twelfth of Rabi` al-Awwal 241 AH, in Baghdad.

There are many lessons in the life of this great scholar. May Allah have mercy on Imam Ahmad and all the great scholars of the Muslims.

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

And Allah knows best.