

Imam al-Sha'bi ؓ

By Maulana Muaz Billoo

Among the most prolific and significant Imams from the early generations was Imam ‘Amir ibn Shurahbil, who was famously known as Imam al-Sha’bi ؓ. Although relatively unknown by the common Muslim, the impact and legacy left by this prolific Imam is felt until this day.

Hafiz Dhahabi ؓ introduces him in his *Siyar A’lam al-Nubala* as, “‘Amir ibn Shurahbil ibn ‘Abd ibn Dhu Kibar (Dhu Kibar was a leader from the leaders of Yemen), the Imam, the prolific scholar of his era, Abu ‘Amr al-Hamdani, then al-Sha’bi. It is also said that he is ‘Amir ibn Abdullah. His mother was a captive from the area of Jalula¹. He was born after six years of the khilafah of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab had passed; this is based on one narration while it has also been said that he was born in the year 21...and the incident of Jalula took place in the year 17.

Ibn ‘Uyaynah narrated from Sariyy ibn Isma’il who narrated from al-Sha’bi: ‘I was born in the year of the incident of Jalula.’ However, this narration is to be rejected (*munkar*) as Sariyy ibn Isma’il is unreliable, and has even been accused (of narrating fabrications). Ahmad ibn Yunus said that al-Sha’bi was born in the year 28. This is further supported by the narration of Hajjaj al-A’war, who narrates from Shu’bah who said that Abu Ishaq said to me, ‘Al-Sha’bi is older than me by a year or two.’ I (Dhahabi) say: Abu Ishaq was born after the year 32.

He saw ‘Ali ؓ and even prayed behind him. He also heard from a great number of the high ranking Sahabah ؓ.”²

He narrated from a great number of jurists of Kufah, many of whom were direct students of ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ud ؓ such as ‘Alqamah ibn Qays and Aswad ibn Yazid. He also narrated from the likes of Harith al-A’war, Abdur Rahman ibn Abu Layla, Qadi Shuraih,

Many of his students were prolific jurists and Hadith masters of the time. They included the likes of Hammad ibn Abu Sulaiman, Abu Ishaq, Ibn ‘Awn, ‘Ata ibn al-Saib, Ibn Abu Layla, Imam Abu Hanifah, and others. Imam al-Salihi quotes an incident in his *‘Uqud al-Juman* which suggests that Imam al-Sha’bi was the catalyst for Imam Abu Hanifah’s embarking on the path of knowledge.

Imam al-Hakim ؓ said: He was a Hafiz of Hadith even though he never wrote anything (i.e. his memory was so strong that he never had a need to write anything down).

Imam al-Sha’bi ؓ himself states: I met 500 companions of the Prophet ﷺ.

Makhul ؓ said, “I have not seen anyone more knowledgeable than al-Sha’bi.”

¹ An area of Persia that was conquered by the Muslims in the year 16 AH. Today it is located in Iraq.

² *Siyar A’lam al-Nubala*, v. 4, p. 294-295

Abu Hasin ؓ said, “I have never seen anyone more intelligent than Sha’bi.”

Abu Mijlaz ؓ said, “I have not seen anyone more intelligent than Sha’bi; not even the likes of Sa’eed ibn al-Musayyab, Tawus, Hasan (Basri), nor Ibn Sireen, and I have seen all of them.”

Ibn Sireen ؓ said, “Sit with al-Sha’bi, for I saw him being asked for a fatwa while the companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ were in abundant numbers.”

Sufyan ibn ‘Uyainah ؓ said: “The scholars of the people are three: ‘Ibn ‘Abbas ؓ in his time, al-Sha’bi ؓ in his time, and (Sufyan) al-Thawri ؓ in his time.”

Al-‘Ijli ؓ said, “al-Sha’bi heard from 48 companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.”

Abu Usamah ؓ said, “ ‘Umar ؓ was the leader of the in his era, then after him was Ibn ‘Abbas ؓ, then after him was al-Sha’bi ؓ, then after was al-Thawri ؓ, and after him was Yahya ibn Adam ؓ.”

Once, ibn ‘Umar ؓ passed by al-Sha’bi while he was reciting incidents from the expeditions of the Prophet ﷺ (*Maghazi*). Ibn ‘Umar ؓ remarked, “It is as though he was present with us, and he remembers it and knows more about it than I do.”

Dawud ibn Abu Hind said, “I have not sat with anyone more knowledgeable than al-Sha’bi.”

‘Asim ibn Sulaiman said, “I have not seen anyone more knowledgeable regarding the Ahadith of Kufa, Basrah, Hijza, and the various corners of the world than al-Sha’bi.”

Imam al-Sha’bi ؓ once said, “Indeed, we are not true fuqaha. Rather, we have heard Ahadith and narrated it. The true fuqaha are those who learn and practice (upon what they know).” It has been narrated that he used to pass by Abu Salih, and he would grab him by his ear and say, “Do you explain the meanings of the Qur’an without reciting it?!”

He also said, “Those who used to seek knowledge had two concurrent qualities: intelligence and worship (i.e. they used to practice upon their knowledge). If he (a potential student of knowledge) is intelligent but not a worshipper, he will say, ‘this is something that only the worshippers can acquire, so I will not seek it.’ If he is a worshipper but not intelligent, he will say, ‘this is something that only the intelligent can acquire, so I will not seek it.’” He goes on to say, “I fear that today, those who lack both qualities have started to seek this knowledge.”

There is simply not enough space on these pages to detail the life and legacy of this great imam. There is disagreement with regards to the specific year he passed away, but the general range is from between the years 103 and 110 AH, may Allah have mercy on him.