



يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

"Allah raises those of you who believe and those given knowledge by degrees." (al-Mujādilah 58:11)

The Four Imams

The lives of Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik, ash-Shāfi'ī and Aḥmad:
how they learned, what they faced, how they reasoned and
the schools they left.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Before you begin

Every time you pray, fast, pay zakāh or learn a ruling of wuḍū', you are almost certainly following a path that was laid out, explained and tested by one of four men: **Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik, ash-Shāfi'ī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal**. Their names are spoken in every madrasah from Ado-Ekiti to Cairo, Istanbul, Lahore and Jakarta. Yet many students know their names and little else.

This book tells their stories in full: where they were born, how they were raised, who taught them, how they studied, the trials they faced from rulers, how they reasoned about the Qur'an and Sunnah, the students and books they left behind, and how they died. It also shows how closely the four are linked, as teachers and students of one another, and how much they loved and honoured each other even when they disagreed.

إِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ، وَإِنَّ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ لَمْ يُورَثُوا
دِينَارًا وَلَا دِرْهَمًا، وَإِنَّمَا وَرَثُوا الْعِلْمَ

“The scholars are the heirs of the prophets. The prophets did not leave behind dinars or dirhams; they left behind knowledge.”

Narrated by Abū Dāwūd (3641) and at-Tirmidhī (2682).

A note on sources

The basic facts of each imam's life (names, dates, teachers, students, books and trials) are well established in the classical biographies: adh-Dhahabī's *Siyar A'lām an-Nubalā'*, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's *Tārīkh Baghdād*, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr's *al-Intiqā'*, Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's *Tartīb al-Madārik*, al-Bayhaqī's *Manāqib ash-Shāfi'ī* and Ibn al-Jawzī's *Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad*.

Many stories about the imams are narrated in those books with chains of varying strength. Where a story is well known but its exact wording or details are less certain, this book says “it is reported”. Where reports give different dates, we give the most commonly cited one.

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How to read this book

1	Read one imam at a time . Each chapter opens with an at-a-glance table, then tells the life story in order, then explains his method, then ends with lessons for us.
2	Keep a notebook. Write down one saying from each imam that moves you, and memorise it in Arabic.
3	Use the timeline, the comparison table and the self-test at the end to fix what you have read.
4	Teachers and parents: each chapter can be read aloud in two or three sittings, with the “Lessons for us” as the discussion.

After the Prophet ﷺ

When the Messenger of Allah ﷺ died in 11 AH, he left behind the Qur'an, his Sunnah and a generation of Companions who had learned the religion from him directly. In the decades that followed, Islam spread from Arabia to Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Persia and North Africa. The Companions travelled with it. Some settled in Madinah, some in Makkah, some in Kūfah and Baṣrah in Iraq, some in Damascus and some in Egypt, and each taught the people around them.

So knowledge came to be gathered in great **centres**. In Madinah, the knowledge of 'Umar, 'Ā'ishah, Zayd ibn Thābit and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar (raḍiyallāhu 'anhum) was carried by the "Seven Jurists of Madinah", among them Sa'īd ibn al-Musayyib. In Kūfah, the knowledge of 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd and 'Alī (raḍiyallāhu 'anhumā) was carried by 'Alqamah, then Ibrāhīm an-Nakha'ī, then Ḥammād ibn Abī Sulaymān. In Makkah, the knowledge of 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās (raḍiyallāhu 'anhumā) was carried by 'Aṭā' ibn Abī Rabāḥ and Mujāhid.

خَيْرُ النَّاسِ قَرْنِي، ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُوتُهُمْ، ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُوتُهُمْ

"The best of people are my generation, then those who follow them, then those who follow them."

Narrated by al-Bukhārī (2652) and Muslim (2533).

The four imams were born into these blessed early generations. Abū Ḥanīfah is counted by many among the **Tābi'ūn** (the generation after the Companions), since he saw the Companion Anas ibn Mālik. Mālik was among the **Atbā' at-Tābi'in** (the generation after them). Ash-Shāfi'ī and Aḥmad studied with the students of those generations.

New questions, the same sources

As the Muslim world grew, new questions arose every day: about trade in new markets, land taxes in conquered provinces, contracts, crimes, marriage customs and acts of worship in different climates. The answers had to come from the same sources: the Qur'an and the Sunnah, guided by the understanding of the Companions. The scholars who could derive rulings from these sources with sound method are called **mujtahids**, and the effort they make is called **ijtihād**.

Historians sometimes describe two tendencies in this period: the **people of ḥadīth** (ahl al-ḥadīth), strong in Hijāz, who preferred to stay close to the narrated texts, and the **people of opinion** (ahl ar-ra'y), strong in Iraq, who were known for careful reasoning by analogy where texts were fewer. This is a simplification: every one of the imams used both texts and reasoning. But it helps explain the flavour of each school.

What is a madhhab?

A **madhhab** (literally “a way of going”) is a school of fiqh: a body of rulings and the method used to reach them, taught and refined by generations of scholars after the imam it is named after. A madhhab is **not** a different religion or a sect in belief. The four schools agree on the pillars of Islam and the overwhelming majority of rulings; they differ in details where the evidence allows more than one understanding.

Why only four?

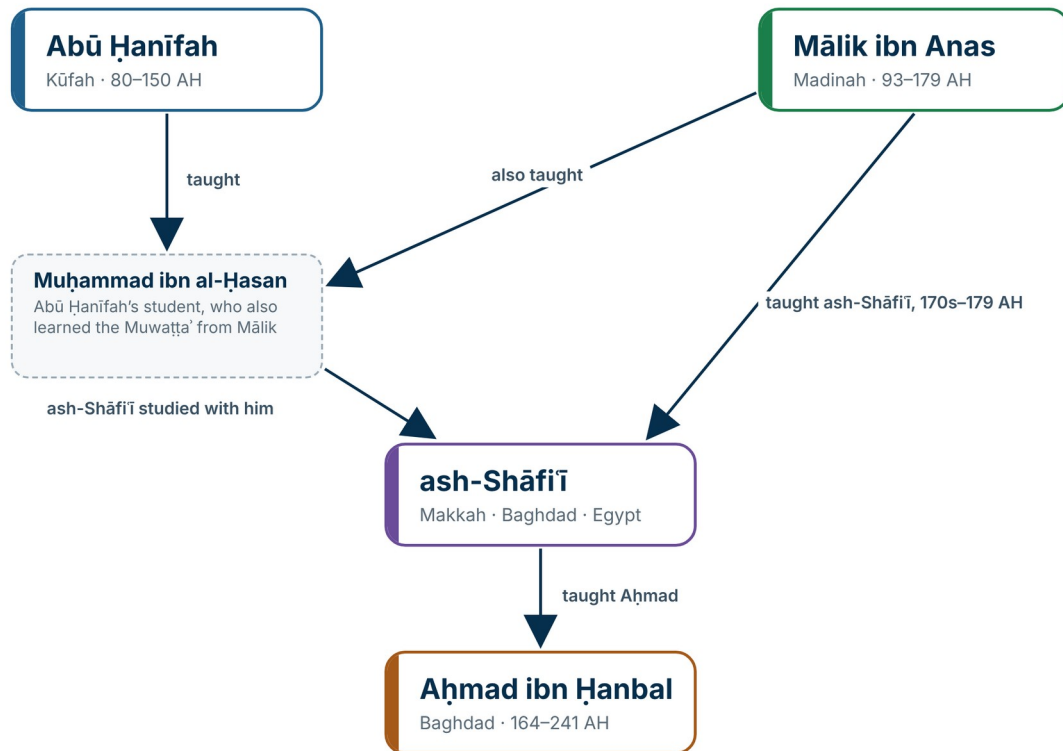
There were many other great mujtahids in this period: al-Awzā'ī in Syria (d. 157 AH), Sufyān ath-Thawrī in Kūfah (d. 161 AH), al-Layth ibn Sa'd in Egypt (d. 175 AH), Ishāq ibn Rāhawayh (d. 238 AH), Dāwūd aẓ-Ẓāhirī (d. 270 AH) and Ibn Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH), among others.

Their schools faded mainly because they did not have generations of students who recorded, organised and taught their fiqh. Ash-Shāfi'ī is reported to have said: “Al-Layth was more learned in fiqh than Mālik, but his students did not carry his knowledge.” The four schools survived because their students wrote them down, taught them in every city and kept refining them for twelve centuries.

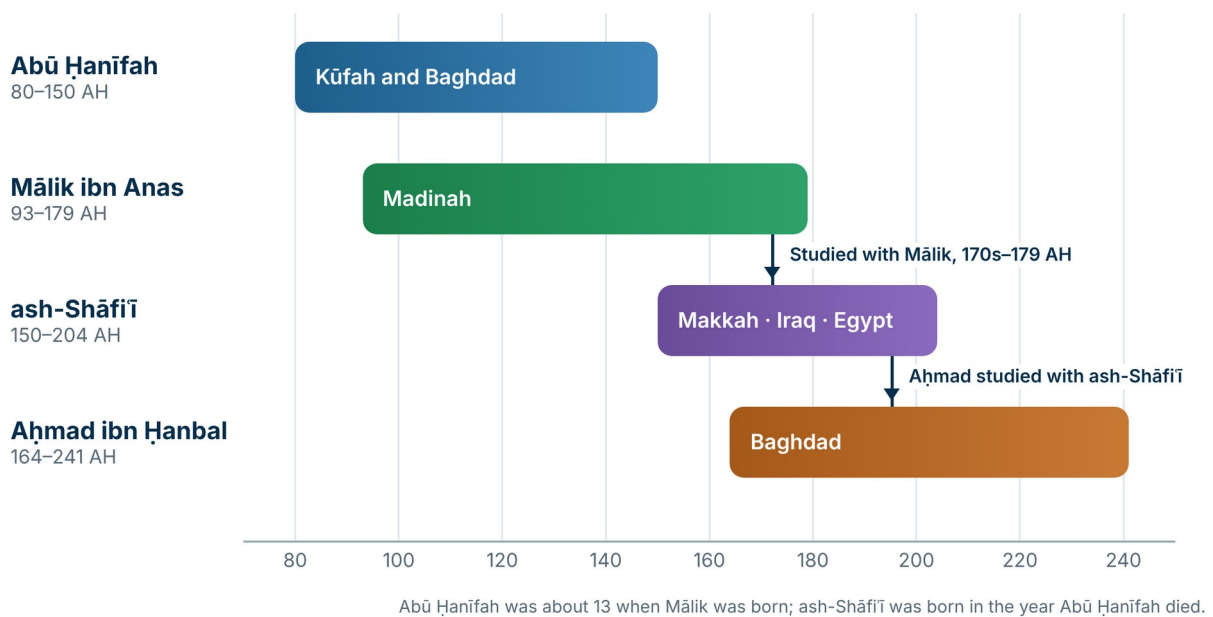
How the four are linked

One of the most beautiful facts about the four imams is that they are one chain of teachers and students. Mālik taught ash-Shāfi'ī. Ash-Shāfi'ī studied the books of Abū Ḥanīfah's student Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, who had also learned the Muwaṭṭa' from Mālik. And ash-Shāfi'ī taught Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.

Teachers and students: how the four are linked



The four imams on one timeline years after the Hijrah (AH)



01

THE FOUR IMAMS · 01

أَبُو حَنِيفَةَ النُّعْمَانُ

AL-IMĀM AL-A'ẒAM

Abū Ḥanīfah

an-Nu'mān ibn Thābit

80 – 150 AH · 699 – 767 CE · Kūfah and Baghdad

40

years of age when he
took his teacher's seat

18

years with his teacher
Ḥammād

70

years, the length of his
life

Imam 1 Abū Ḥanīfah: at a glance

Name	an-Nu‘mān ibn Thābit ibn Zūṭā, of Persian descent; a mawlā (client) of the tribe of Taym Allāh ibn Tha‘labah
Kunyah and title	Abū Ḥanīfah; called al-Imām al-A‘ẓam , “the Greatest Imam”, by his followers
Born	80 AH (699 CE) in Kūfah, Iraq
Died	150 AH (767 CE) in Baghdad, in prison, aged about 70
Main teachers	Ḥammād ibn Abī Sulaymān (for 18 years); also ‘Aṭā’ ibn Abī Rabāḥ, Nāfi’ the client of Ibn ‘Umar, ‘Āṣim ibn Abī an-Najūd and many others
Famous students	Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb (d. 182 AH), Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ash-Shaybānī (d. 189 AH), Zufar ibn al-Hudhayl (d. 158 AH), al-Ḥasan ibn Ziyād
Work	A cloth merchant, dealing in silk (khazz), with a shop in Kūfah
Followed today in	Turkey, the Balkans, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and parts of Iraq, Syria and Egypt; the largest school by number of followers

Birth and family

An-Nu‘mān was born in Kūfah in the year 80 AH, during the rule of the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān. His grandfather Zūṭā came from the lands of Persia (some reports say Kabul) and accepted Islam. It is reported that his father Thābit was taken as a child to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (raḍiyallāhu ‘anhu), who made du‘ā for blessing upon him and his descendants.

Kūfah was then one of the greatest cities of knowledge in the Muslim world. Around a thousand Companions had passed through or settled in it, among them ‘Abdullāh ibn Mas‘ūd, whom ‘Umar had sent to teach its people, and ‘Alī, who made it his capital. Abū Ḥanīfah grew up in a merchant family and memorised the Qur’an young. He is counted among the Tābi‘ūn by many scholars because he saw the Companion **Anas ibn Mālik** (raḍiyallāhu ‘anhu) when Anas visited Kūfah.

From the market to the circles of knowledge

As a young man Abū Ḥanīfah was busy with trade. It is reported that the great scholar **ash-Sha‘bī** saw him passing and asked him where he went. When Abū Ḥanīfah said he went to the market, ash-Sha‘bī said: “I did not mean the market; I meant, to which scholars do you go?” He told him he rarely sat with scholars, and ash-Sha‘bī said: “Do not neglect it. You must study and sit with the scholars, for I see in you alertness and energy.” Abū Ḥanīfah said that these words entered his heart.

He first studied ‘ilm al-kalām (theological debate), and became skilled in it, debating sects in Baṣrah. Then he turned away from it to **fiqh**, saying that he saw the people of fiqh were the most beneficial to the Muslims and the most upright in their way. He joined the circle of **Ḥammād ibn Abī**

Sulaymān, the leading jurist of Kūfah, whose knowledge went back through Ibrāhīm an-Nakha'ī and 'Alqamah to Ibn Mas'ūd.

He stayed with Ḥammād for about **eighteen years**, until Ḥammād died in 120 AH. Once, when Ḥammād travelled, Abū Ḥanīfah sat in his place and answered about sixty questions. When Ḥammād returned and Abū Ḥanīfah showed him the answers, Ḥammād agreed with forty and disagreed with twenty. Abū Ḥanīfah said: "I swore I would not leave him until he died." He kept that oath.

مَا صَلَّيْتُ صَلَاةً مُنْذُ مَاتَ حَمَّادٌ إِلَّا اسْتَعْفَرْتُ لَهُ مَعَ
وَالِدَيَّ

"I have not prayed a single prayer since Ḥammād died without seeking forgiveness for him along with my parents."

Reported from Abū Ḥanīfah in the biographies (Tārīkh Baghdād).

Abū Ḥanīfah also travelled to Makkah and Madinah many times for Ḥajj, and learned from scholars there, among them **'Aṭā' ibn Abī Rabāḥ**, the jurist of Makkah, and **Nāfi'**, the client of Ibn 'Umar. It is said he performed Ḥajj fifty-five times; the number cannot be confirmed, but his many journeys to the Ḥaramayn are well known.

The teacher of Kūfah

When Ḥammād died, his students asked Abū Ḥanīfah, then about forty years old, to take his place. He taught in the mosque of Kūfah for about thirty years. His method of teaching was unusual: he did not simply dictate answers. He would put a question to his students, let them argue it from the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the sayings of the Companions, and then give his view. Some questions were discussed for days before a ruling was recorded. In this way his school was built as a **council** of trained jurists, not the opinions of one man.

He was famous for **hypothetical fiqh**: he would ask "what if this happened?" and work out the ruling in advance. Some criticised this, but it prepared his students for the vast range of questions the growing Muslim state would face. Within a generation, his students were judges across the Abbasid empire.

His character: the honest merchant

Abū Ḥanīfah never relied on rulers or gifts. He earned his living through trade and was known for scrupulous honesty. It is reported that his partner, Ḥaḥṣ ibn 'Abd ar-Raḥmān, sold a batch of cloth that had a defect without telling the buyers, though Abū Ḥanīfah had told him to mention it. When Abū Ḥanīfah learned of it, he gave away the entire price of that cloth in charity, and it is said he ended the partnership.

He used his wealth for knowledge. He supported many of his poor students so they could study, paid for their marriages and needs, and it is reported that he paid the living costs of his student Abū

Yūsuf's family for years because Abū Yūsuf's mother wanted her son to work instead of study. When Abū Yūsuf later became the chief judge of the empire, he would remember this.

His worship was well known. His contemporaries described his long night prayers and his weeping in recitation. Reports that he prayed Fajr with the wuḍū' of 'Ishā' for forty years are found in the biographies; whatever the exact number, they describe a man who gave his nights to Allah. He was also known for **guarding his tongue**: Ibn al-Mubārak said he never heard him speak ill of anyone, even those who wronged him.

The trial of the judgeship

Rulers wanted Abū Ḥanīfah's name on their side. In the last years of the Umayyads, the governor of Iraq, **Yazīd ibn 'Umar ibn Hubayrah**, offered him a high post, by some accounts the keeping of the treasury seal. Abū Ḥanīfah refused, knowing he would be made responsible for injustice he could not stop. The governor had him flogged over a number of days. He still refused, and later left for Makkah, where he stayed for several years until the Umayyad state fell in 132 AH.

Under the Abbasids, the caliph **Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr** brought him to his new capital, Baghdad, and ordered him to become chief judge (qāḍī al-quḍāh). Abū Ḥanīfah refused again, saying he was not fit for it. When al-Manṣūr insisted, he said: "If I am telling the truth, then I am not fit; and if I am lying, then a liar is not fit to be a judge." He was imprisoned, and by many reports beaten. He died in prison or shortly after his release in **Rajab or Sha'bān, 150 AH**, aged about seventy. Some reports say he was poisoned.

His funeral prayer was repeated several times because of the numbers who came, and he was buried in the Khayzurān cemetery in Baghdad, in the district now called al-A'ẓamiyyah after his title.

His method (uṣūl)

Abū Ḥanīfah described his own method in words reported by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī:

أَخَذُ بَكِتَابِ اللَّهِ، فَمَا لَمْ أَجِدْ فَيَسُنَّةِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ ﷺ،
فَإِنْ لَمْ أَجِدْ فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ وَلَا سُنَّةِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ
أَخَذْتُ بِقَوْلِ أَصْحَابِهِ

"I take from the Book of Allah. If I do not find it there, then from the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. If I find it in neither, I take the sayings of his Companions, choosing from among them, and I do not leave their sayings for the sayings of others. When the matter reaches Ibrāhīm, ash-Sha'bī, Ibn Sīrīn, al-Ḥasan and 'Aṭā', then they were men who exercised ijtihād, and I exercise ijtihād as they did."

Reported in Tārīkh Baghdād.

Source	How the Ḥanafī school uses it
The Qur'an	The first source. The school gives great weight to the plain, general wording of the Qur'an.
The Sunnah	Accepted fully. Abū Ḥanīfah was careful with solitary reports that seemed to clash with stronger principles, and set strict conditions for them in some areas.
Sayings of the Companions	He chose from among their views and did not go outside them.
Ijmā' (consensus)	Binding where it exists.
Qiyās (analogy)	Used widely and with great skill: extending a known ruling to a new case with the same underlying cause.
Istiḥsān	Departing from a strict analogy to a stronger consideration (a text, consensus or necessity) when the analogy would lead to hardship or contradict the aims of the Sharī'ah.
'Urf (custom)	Sound local custom is respected in matters like trade and contracts where the texts leave room.

His students and books

Abū Ḥanīfah did not write long books of fiqh himself, though short works such as **al-Fiqh al-Akbar** (on belief) are attributed to him. His fiqh was recorded by his students:

- **Abū Yūsuf** (d. 182 AH) became chief judge of the Abbasid state under Hārūn ar-Rashīd, the first to hold that title, and appointed Ḥanafī judges throughout the empire. His **Kitāb al-Kharāj** on public finance, written for Hārūn, still survives.
- **Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ash-Shaybānī** (d. 189 AH) wrote the six books known as **Ẓāhir ar-Riwāyah** (al-Aṣl, al-Jāmi' aṣ-Ṣaghīr, al-Jāmi' al-Kabīr, as-Siyar aṣ-Ṣaghīr, as-Siyar al-Kabīr and az-Ziyādāt), the backbone of the school. His **as-Siyar al-Kabīr** is one of the earliest works anywhere on the law of war and peace between nations.
- **Zufar ibn al-Hudhayl** (d. 158 AH) was known for his mastery of analogy.

Later Ḥanafī classics include **al-Hidāyah** of al-Marghīnānī, **al-Mabsūṭ** of as-Sarakhsī and **Radd al-Muḥtār** (Ḥāshiyat Ibn 'Ābidīn). The Ottoman state adopted the school officially, which is why it spread so widely.

What the scholars said about him

النَّاسُ عِيَالٌ فِي الْفِقْهِ عَلَى أَبِي حَنِيفَةَ

“In fiqh, people are dependants of Abū Ḥanīfah.”

Ash-Shāfi'ī, reported in Tārīkh Baghdād and Siyar A'lām an-Nubalā'.

- **Mālik**, asked about him, is reported to have said: “I saw a man who, if he spoke to you about this pillar to make it gold, would establish his argument.”
- **‘Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak** said: “If Allah had not rescued me through Abū Ḥanīfah and Sufyān, I would have been like the rest of the people.”
- **Adh-Dhahabī** wrote: “Leadership in fiqh and its fine points belongs to this imam; this is a matter about which there is no doubt.”

His sayings

لَا يَحِلُّ لِأَحَدٍ أَنْ يَأْخُذَ بِقَوْلِنَا مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ مِنْ أَيْنَ أَخَذْنَاهُ

“It is not permitted for anyone to take our view unless he knows where we took it from.”

Reported by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr in al-Intiqā’.

“This is the opinion of an-Nu‘mān ibn Thābit, and it is the best we were able to reach. Whoever brings something better than it, it is more deserving of being correct.”

Reported in Tārīkh Baghdād.

Lessons for us

1

A word of advice at the right moment can change a life: ash-Sha‘bī’s few words turned a merchant into an imam. **Advise kindly, and accept advice.**

2

Stay with your teacher. Eighteen years with Ḥammād, and du‘ā’ for him in every prayer after his death.

3

Earn honestly. A student of knowledge can be a trader, an engineer or a farmer; what matters is that the earning is clean.

4

Learn to reason, not only to memorise. Abū Ḥanīfah trained his students to ask why, and to think through new questions with sound method.

5

Integrity costs something. He accepted flogging and prison rather than lend his name to injustice.

02
THE FOUR IMAMS · 02

مَالِكُ بْنُ أَنَسٍ

IMĀM DĀR AL-HIJRAH

Mālik ibn Anas

Mālik ibn Anas al-Aṣḥabī

93 – 179 AH · 711 – 795 CE · Madinah

70

scholars testified
before he gave fatwa

40

years, reportedly,
refining the Muwaṭṭaʾ

86

years, nearly all in
Madinah

Imam 2 Mālik ibn Anas: at a glance

Name	Mālik ibn Anas ibn Mālik ibn Abī ‘Āmir al-Aṣḥabī, an Arab whose family came from Yemen
Kunyah and title	Abū ‘Abdillāh; Imām Dār al-Hijrah , “the Imam of the Abode of the Hijrah” (Madinah)
Born	93 AH (711 CE) in Madinah
Died	Rabī‘ al-Awwal 179 AH (795 CE) in Madinah, aged about 86; buried in al-Baqī‘
Main teachers	Rabī‘ah ibn Abī ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān (“Rabī‘at ar-Ra’y”), ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Hurmuz, Nāfi‘ the client of Ibn ‘Umar, Ibn Shihāb az-Zuhrī, Yaḥyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Anṣārī, Ja‘far aṣ-Ṣādiq
Famous students	Ash-Shāfi‘ī, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn al-Qāsim, ‘Abdullāh ibn Wahb, Ashhab, Asad ibn al-Furāt, Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā al-Laythī, al-Qa‘nabī, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan
Main book	al-Muwatta’ , one of the earliest surviving books of ḥadīth and fiqh
Followed today in	North and West Africa, including Nigeria and most of West Africa, Sudan, Upper Egypt, the Gulf states (parts), and historically al-Andalus

Born in the City of the Prophet ﷺ

Mālik was born in Madinah in 93 AH, the year the Companion Anas ibn Mālik died, into a family devoted to knowledge. His grandfather Mālik ibn Abī ‘Āmir was a trusted Tābi‘ī who narrated from ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān (raḍiyallāhu ‘anhumā). He grew up among the children and grandchildren of the Companions, in the city where the Qur’an was revealed and where the Sunnah was lived day by day. Except for Ḥajj, he hardly ever left Madinah in his long life.

His mother’s advice

Mālik’s mother prepared him for knowledge herself. She dressed him in fine clothes, put a turban on his head and said: “Go to Rabī‘ah and learn from his **adab** before his knowledge.” Rabī‘ah ibn Abī ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān was the leading jurist of Madinah at the time.

اَذْهَبْ إِلَى رَبِيعَةَ فَتَعَلَّمْ مِنْ أَدَبِهِ قَبْلَ عِلْمِهِ

“Go to Rabī‘ah and learn from his **adab** before his knowledge.”

Reported in Tartīb al-Madārik of Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ.

Years of study

Mālik sought knowledge with patience and sacrifice. He stayed close to ‘**Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Hurmuz**’ for many years (reports say seven or eight, or more) and learned from him without sharing it with others. He would put dates in his sleeve and give them to Ibn Hurmuz’s children so they would let him in. He also sat at the door of **Nāfi’**, the client of ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar, in the heat of midday, waiting for him to come out; Nāfi’ carried the knowledge of Ibn ‘Umar, and the chain “Mālik from Nāfi’ from Ibn ‘Umar” was later called by al-Bukhārī the “**golden chain**” (silsilat adh-dhahab), the soundest chain of narration.

He learned from **Ibn Shihāb az-Zuhrī**, one of the greatest memorisers of ḥadīth, from Yaḥyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Anṣārī, and from **Ja‘far aṣ-Ṣādiq**, the great-grandson of al-Ḥusayn, whom he described as always being in one of three states: praying, fasting or reciting the Qur’an. It is reported that he learned from hundreds of teachers, but narrated only from those he trusted fully in religion and precision.

Seventy scholars before the first fatwa

Mālik did not rush to teach. He sat to give fatwa only after the scholars of Madinah approved him:

مَا أَفْتَيْتُ حَتَّى شَهِدَ لِي سَبْعُونَ أَتِي أَهْلُ لِي ذَلِكَ

“I did not give fatwa until seventy scholars testified that I was qualified for it.”

Reported by Abū Nu‘aym in Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’.

His circle in the Prophet’s Mosque became the most famous in the world. Students came from Iraq, Egypt, North Africa and al-Andalus. He taught with great dignity: students sat silently, and visitors said there was more awe in his gathering than in the courts of kings.

Love and awe for the ḥadīth

Before teaching ḥadīth, Mālik would make wuḍū’ or bathe, put on his best clothes and perfume, and sit with calm and dignity. When asked why, he said he did it out of honour for the ḥadīth of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. He would not narrate ḥadīth standing, or in a hurry, or in the street.

‘**Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak**’ reported that he was with Mālik while he narrated ḥadīth, and a scorpion stung him again and again, sixteen times, while his face changed colour, yet he did not interrupt the ḥadīth of the Messenger ﷺ. When the gathering ended, Ibn al-Mubārak asked him, and he said: “I bore it patiently out of reverence for the ḥadīth of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.” It is also reported that he would not ride an animal in Madinah, saying: “I am ashamed to tread with an animal’s hoof on ground in which the Messenger of Allah ﷺ is buried.”

“I do not know”

Mālik was famous for saying **lā adrī**, “I do not know”. It is reported that a man came from a distant land (some say from al-Maghrib, a journey of six months) with about forty questions. Mālik answered a few and said “I do not know” to most of them. The man said: “I have travelled months to you; what shall I tell my people?” Mālik replied: “Tell them that Mālik says he does not know.” He used to say that the shield of the scholar is “I do not know”, and that if he abandons it, he will be struck down.

“Knowledge is visited; it does not visit”

Mālik refused to carry knowledge to the doors of rulers. When the caliph **Hārūn ar-Rashīd** came to Madinah, he asked Mālik to come to him and teach the Muwaṭṭa’ to his sons. Mālik is reported to have replied: “Knowledge is visited; it does not visit” (al-‘ilmu yu’tā wa lā ya’tī). Hārūn came to Mālik’s gathering instead. When the caliph asked that the common people be sent out so he could hear privately, Mālik refused, saying that if the common people were kept out because of the elite, the elite would not benefit either. Hārūn sat among them.

The Muwaṭṭa’

The caliph Abū Ja’far al-Manṣūr asked Mālik to write a book of the ḥadīth and fiqh of the people of Madinah, free from extremes. Mālik spent many years, reportedly about forty, writing and refining **al-Muwaṭṭa’**, “the well-trodden path”. It brings together ḥadīth of the Prophet ﷺ, sayings of the Companions and Tābi’ūn, and Mālik’s own rulings and the practice of Madinah, arranged by the chapters of fiqh. It is reported that he showed it to seventy scholars of Madinah and all of them agreed with it (wāṭa’ahū), which is one explanation of its name.

“There is no book on earth, after the Book of Allah, more correct than the book of Mālik.”

Ash-Shāfi’ī, said before the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī was written.

The Muwaṭṭa’ was narrated by many students, and their versions differ slightly. The most widely read is that of **Yahyā ibn Yahyā al-Laythī** of al-Andalus. By one classical count it holds about 1,720 reports, of which around 600 are connected ḥadīth of the Prophet ﷺ.

He refused to impose his book on the Ummah

Al-Manṣūr, and later Hārūn ar-Rashīd, wanted to make the Muwaṭṭa' the single law of the whole empire and hang it in the Ka'bah. Mālik refused. He explained that the Companions of the Messenger ﷺ had spread to many lands, each people had taken knowledge from those who came to them, and they had reached different views on details. Forcing all of them onto one book would cause great hardship.

This is one of the clearest lessons of the four imams: the greatest scholar of Madinah did not want his views forced on Muslims who followed other sound scholars.

The trial and the flogging

In 146 AH (some say 147), during an uprising in Madinah against al-Manṣūr, Mālik narrated the ḥadīth that **a divorce pronounced under compulsion does not take effect**. People reasoned that an oath of allegiance taken under compulsion was likewise not binding, since the Abbasids forced people to swear allegiance with an oath of divorce. The governor of Madinah, **Ja'far ibn Sulaymān**, ordered Mālik to stop narrating it. He refused to hide the ḥadīth. He was stripped and flogged, and his arms were pulled so hard that his shoulder was dislocated; for the rest of his life he could not raise his arms fully, and some say this is why he prayed with his hands at his sides.

After this, Mālik's standing only rose. When al-Manṣūr apologised to him, he said he had already forgiven the governor because of his relation to the Prophet ﷺ. He said: "I made him free of blame (ja'altuhu fī ḥill)."

His hidden illness and death

In his last years Mālik stopped coming to the Prophet's Mosque for the congregational prayers, and then for Jumu'ah, without explaining why. People criticised him, but he stayed silent, saying: "Not everyone can tell his excuse." Only at the end of his life did he reveal that he had an illness that made it hard to remain in a state of purity, and he did not want to sit in the Mosque of the Prophet ﷺ in that state. He bore the criticism rather than complain.

He died in Madinah in Rabī' al-Awwal 179 AH, aged about 86, after a short illness, saying the shahādah. He was buried in **al-Baqī'**. That same year a fifteen-year-old in Baghdad named Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal began seeking ḥadīth; he later said he wished he had been able to reach Mālik.

His method (uṣūl)

Source	How the Mālikī school uses it
The Qur'an and the Sunnah	The foundations, including solitary reports that are authentic.
‘Amal ahl al-Madīnah	The established practice of the people of Madinah, which Mālik saw as a living transmission of the Sunnah from thousands of Companions, stronger than a single narration where they conflict. This is the most distinctive principle of the school.
Ijmā' and sayings of the Companions	Consensus is binding; the Companions' sayings carry great weight.
Qiyās (analogy)	Used where there is no text.
al-Maṣāliḥ al-Mursalah	Public interests that the texts neither specifically affirm nor reject, used to protect religion, life, intellect, lineage and property.
Sadd adh-Dharā'ī'	Blocking the means: forbidding something permissible in itself when it is commonly used as a route to something forbidden.
‘Urf (custom)	Respected where it does not contradict the Sharī'ah.

His students and the spread of his school

Mālik's students carried his school west. **Ibn al-Qāsim** stayed with him for about twenty years; his answers, recorded by **Saḥnūn** of Qayrawān in **al-Mudawwanah**, became the core reference of the school. **Ibn Wahb** spread it in Egypt; **Asad ibn al-Furāt** in Tunisia; **Yaḥyā ibn Yaḥyā al-Laythī** in al-Andalus.

From North Africa, the school travelled across the Sahara with scholars and traders, and was strengthened by the Almoravids. It became the school of Timbuktu, of Kanem-Bornu and of the Sokoto Caliphate of **Shaykh 'Uthmān ibn Fūdī** (Usman dan Fodio), who was a Mālikī scholar. That is why, in **Nigeria** and most of West Africa today, the fiqh taught in our madāris is Mālikī, through texts such as **al-Akhḍarī**, **al-'Ashmāwīyyah**, the **Risālah** of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī and the **Mukhtaṣar** of Khalīl.

The ḥadīth of the scholar of Madinah

At-Tirmidhī (2680) narrates from Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Soon people will beat the livers of camels (travel far and hard) seeking knowledge, and they will not find anyone more knowledgeable than the scholar of Madinah." At-Tirmidhī graded it ḥasan, while other scholars have judged its chain weak. Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynah and others said that, if it is authentic, they believed it referred to Mālik.

His sayings

إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ أٌخْطِئُ وَأُصِيبُ، فَانْظُرُوا فِي رَأْيِي،
فَكُلُّ مَا وَافَقَ الْكِتَابَ وَالسُّنَّةَ فَخُذُوهُ، وَكُلُّ مَا لَمْ
يُوَافِقِ الْكِتَابَ وَالسُّنَّةَ فَاتْرُكُوهُ

“I am only a human being: I err and I am correct. So look into my opinion: whatever agrees with the Book and the Sunnah, take it, and whatever does not agree with the Book and the Sunnah, leave it.”

Reported by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr in Jāmi’ Bayān al-‘Ilm.

كُلُّ أَحَدٍ يُؤْخَذُ مِنْ قَوْلِهِ وَيُرَدُّ، إِلَّا صَاحِبَ هَذَا الْقَبْرِ
ﷺ

“Everyone’s word may be taken or left, except the occupant of this grave ﷺ.”

Famously associated with Mālik, pointing to the grave of the Prophet ﷺ; similar words are reported from earlier scholars.

Lessons for us

1

Adab before knowledge. A mother’s advice shaped the imam of Madinah. Parents: your words matter.

2

Do not rush to teach or to give fatwa. Mālik waited for seventy scholars to approve him.

3

Honour the words of the Prophet ﷺ in how you sit, dress and listen when they are read.

4

Say “I do not know” without shame. It is part of knowledge.

5

Do not force your opinions on others where sound scholars have differed. Mālik refused even when a caliph offered.

6

Hide your hardships and bear criticism patiently, as Mālik did with his illness.

03

THE FOUR IMAMS · 03

مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ إِدْرِيسَ الشَّافِعِيُّ

NĀṢIR AS-SUNNAH

ash-Shāfi'ī

Muḥammad ibn Idrīs ash-Shāfi'ī

150 – 204 AH · 767 – 820 CE · Makkah, Baghdad and Egypt

7

years old when he had memorised the Qur'an

15

when his teacher allowed him to give fatwa

54

years, the length of his life

Name	Muḥammad ibn Idrīs ibn al-‘Abbās ibn ‘Uthmān ibn Shāfi‘ al-Muṭṭalibī al-Qurashī. His lineage meets the Prophet’s ﷺ at ‘Abd Manāf.
Kunyah and title	Abū ‘Abdillāh; called Nāṣir as-Sunnah , “the Defender of the Sunnah”, by the scholars of Baghdad
Born	150 AH (767 CE) in Gaza, Palestine, the year Abū Ḥanīfah died
Died	The end of Rajab 204 AH (820 CE) in Fustāt, Egypt, aged 54
Main teachers	Muslim ibn Khālīd az-Zanjī and Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah in Makkah; Mālik in Madinah; Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan in Iraq; Wakī‘ ibn al-Jarrāḥ
Famous students	Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, al-Muzanī, al-Buwayṭī, ar-Rabī‘ ibn Sulaymān al-Murādī, Ḥarmalah, Abū Thawr, al-Karābīsī, az-Za‘farānī
Main books	ar-Risālah (the first book of uṣūl al-fiqh), al-Umm , Ikhtilāf al-Ḥadīth
Followed today in	Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, East Africa (Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania), Kurdistan, and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, the southern Philippines)

An orphan from Quraysh

Ash-Shāfi'ī was born in **Gaza** in 150 AH (some reports say ‘Asqalān nearby). His father Idrīs died while he was a small child, leaving the family poor. His mother, from the tribe of Azd, feared that her son’s noble Qurashī lineage would be lost if he grew up far from his people, so when he was about two she took him to **Makkah**.

They were very poor. He could not pay a teacher, so the Qur’an teacher allowed him to stay because he would teach the younger children when the teacher was away. He memorised the Qur’an by the age of **seven**. He had no money for paper, so he wrote his lessons on pieces of bone, on palm leaves and on the backs of used papers collected from the government offices. He memorised the **Muwatta’a** of Mālik while still a boy, by about ten.

Among the Bedouin of Hudhayl

To master pure Arabic, ash-Shāfi'ī went out to the desert and lived for years with the tribe of **Hudhayl**, among the most eloquent of the Arabs. He learned their poetry, their language and their history, and became a fine archer: it is reported that he could hit ten out of ten targets. Later, the scholar of Arabic al-Aṣma'ī is reported to have corrected the poems of Hudhayl by reading them with a young man of Quraysh named Muḥammad ibn Idrīs. His command of Arabic became one of his greatest tools in understanding the Qur’an and Sunnah, and his own words are quoted by linguists as evidence.

Fatwa at fifteen

In Makkah he studied fiqh with **Muslim ibn Khālīd az-Zanjī**, the muftī of Makkah, and ḥadīth with **Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah**. His progress was so fast that az-Zanjī told him, when he was about fifteen: “Give fatwa, Abū ‘Abdillāh; by Allah, it is time for you to give fatwa.” Yet ash-Shāfi‘ī did not consider himself done. He wanted to learn from the imam whose book he had memorised.

With Mālik in Madinah

In his late teens or around twenty he travelled to Madinah with a letter of introduction to Mālik. He recited the Muwaṭṭa’ to Mālik from memory, and Mālik, impressed by his reading and understanding, told him to keep reading. Mālik saw something in him and is reported to have given him this advice:

إِنِّي أَرَى اللَّهَ قَدْ أَلْقَى عَلَى قَلْبِكَ نُورًا، فَلَا تُطْفِئْهُ
بِظُلْمَةِ الْمَعْصِيَةِ

“I see that Allah has placed light in your heart, so do not extinguish it with the darkness of sin.”

Mālik to ash-Shāfi‘ī, reported in the biographies.

Ash-Shāfi‘ī stayed with Mālik, visiting Makkah and his mother in between, until Mālik died in 179 AH. He always spoke of Mālik with great love: “When the scholars are mentioned, Mālik is the star among them.”

شَكَوْتُ إِلَى وَكِيعٍ سُوءَ حِفْظِي
فَأَرْشَدَنِي إِلَى تَرْكِ الْمَعَاصِي
وَأَخْبَرَنِي أَنَّ الْعِلْمَ نُورٌ
وَنُورُ اللَّهِ لَا يُهْدَى لِعَاصِي

“I complained to Wakī‘ of my poor memory, so he guided me to leave sins, and told me that knowledge is light, and the light of Allah is not given to a sinner.”

Verses attributed to ash-Shāfi‘ī about his teacher Wakī‘ ibn al-Jarrāḥ, in his Dīwān.

Yemen, chains and Baghdad

After Mālik’s death, ash-Shāfi‘ī took a government post in **Yemen** (in Najrān) to support himself. He was known for justice there, which made enemies. In 184 AH he was falsely accused of supporting a rebellion of the descendants of ‘Alī, and was taken in chains with others to the caliph **Hārūn ar-**

Rashīd in Raqqah. Many of those accused were executed. Ash-Shāfi'ī defended himself with eloquence, and **Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan**, Abū Ḥanīfah's student, who was a judge at the court, spoke for him. He was released.

He then stayed in Iraq and studied with Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan, writing down his books. He said: "I took from Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan a camel-load of knowledge." Now ash-Shāfi'ī held both traditions in his hands: the ḥadīth and practice of Ḥijāz from Mālik, and the reasoning of Iraq from the school of Abū Ḥanīfah. He debated Muḥammad with respect, and the two remained friends.

He returned to Makkah and taught in the Masjid al-Ḥarām for about nine years. It was there that a young scholar from Baghdad, **Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal**, first heard him and told his friends: "Come and see a man the like of whom your eyes have never seen."

Ar-Risālah: the birth of uṣūl al-fiqh

In 195 AH ash-Shāfi'ī went to **Baghdad**, where the great ḥadīth scholars, among them Aḥmad, sat in his circle. At the request of the ḥadīth master 'Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Mahdī, he wrote a book explaining how rulings are derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah: **ar-Risālah** ("The Epistle"). It was the first book to set out the principles of fiqh in order:

- How the Qur'an explains itself, and how the Sunnah explains the Qur'an.
- That an authentic ḥadīth narrated by a single trustworthy narrator (khabar al-wāḥid) is binding evidence.
- Abrogation (naskh), general and specific wording, and how to reconcile texts that seem to conflict.
- Consensus (ijmā') and analogy (qiyās), with their conditions.

Before ash-Shāfi'ī, scholars used these principles; after him, they were written down as a science, **uṣūl al-fiqh**. His views at this time are known as his **old school** (al-madhhab al-qadīm).

Egypt and the new school

In 199 AH he moved to **Egypt**. There he met new evidence, new scholars (especially the students of al-Layth ibn Sa'd and of Mālik) and new questions, and he reviewed his own rulings. He rewrote ar-Risālah and dictated **al-Umm**, his great book of fiqh. This is his **new school** (al-madhhab al-jadīd); where the two differ, the Shāfi'ī school generally follows the new, except in a small number of issues. A scholar who changes his view when he finds stronger evidence is showing honesty, not weakness.

His days in Egypt were full. Ar-Rabī' reported that he divided the night into three parts: a third for writing, a third for prayer and a third for sleep. It is also reported that in Ramaḍān he completed the Qur'an sixty times, in and out of prayer.

His death

He suffered a painful illness in his last years. When his student al-Muzanī visited him in his final illness and asked how he was, he is reported to have said: "I am leaving this world, parting from my

brothers, drinking from the cup of death, going to meet my bad deeds and coming to Allah, and I do not know whether my soul is going to Paradise so I can congratulate it, or to the Fire so I can console it.” Then he wept and recited verses of hope in Allah’s pardon. He died on the last night of **Rajab, 204 AH**, aged only 54, and was buried in the Qarāfah cemetery in Cairo.

His method (uṣūl)

Source	How the Shāfi‘ī school uses it
The Qur’an and the Sunnah	Together at the first level. An authentic ḥadīth, even from a single narrator, is binding; ash-Shāfi‘ī defended this against those who doubted it, earning the title “Defender of the Sunnah”.
Ijmā‘	Consensus of the scholars, binding where it is established.
Sayings of the Companions	Followed in the old school; in the new school treated more cautiously where they differ among themselves.
Qiyās	Analogy, with strict conditions. He defined it carefully and made it a disciplined tool.
Rejected sources	He rejected istiḥsān as a source on its own (it is reported that he said: “Whoever uses istiḥsān has legislated”) and did not accept the practice of Madinah as independent proof against a ḥadīth.

His students and the spread of his school

- **Al-Muzanī** (d. 264 AH) wrote the **Mukhtaṣar**, the first summary of the school, on which hundreds of commentaries were written.
- **Al-Buwayṭī** (d. 231 AH), his successor in Egypt, was taken in chains to Baghdad in the trial of the createdness of the Qur’an and died in prison, refusing to give in.
- **Ar-Rabī ibn Sulaymān al-Murādī** (d. 270 AH) narrated **al-Umm** and ar-Risālah.
- **Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal** learned fiqh and uṣūl from him in Makkah and Baghdad and became an imam in his own right.

Later Shāfi‘ī scholars include many names every student knows: **an-Nawawī**, author of the **Forty Ḥadīth** (al-Arba‘ūn an-Nawawiyyah) and Riyāḍ aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn; **Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī**, who explained Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī in Fath al-Bārī; al-Bayhaqī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn Kathīr and as-Suyūṭī.

His sayings

إِذَا صَحَّ الْحَدِيثُ فَهُوَ مَذْهَبِي

“If the ḥadīth is authentic, then it is my madhhab.”

Reported by an-Nawawī in al-Majmū‘ and others.

وَدِدْتُ أَنْ الْخَلْقَ تَعَلَّمُوا هَذَا الْعِلْمَ عَلَى أَنْ لَا يُنْسَبَ
إِلَيَّ حَرْفٌ مِنْهُ

“I wish that people would learn this knowledge without a single letter of it being attributed to me.”

Reported by Abū Nu‘aym in al-Ḥilyah and al-Bayhaqī in Manāqib ash-Shāfi‘ī.

مَا تَاطَرْتُ أَحَدًا قَطُّ إِلَّا أَحَبَبْتُ أَنْ يُوَفَّقَ وَيُسَدَّدَ
وَيُعَانَ

“I never debated anyone except that I loved for him to be guided, made correct and helped.”

Reported in the biographies.

Yūnus aṣ-Ṣadafī, one of his students in Egypt, said: “I have never seen anyone wiser than ash-Shāfi‘ī. I debated him one day on an issue and we parted. Then he met me, took my hand and said: ‘Abū Mūsā, can we not remain brothers, even if we do not agree on a single issue?’”

Lessons for us

1

Poverty is not an excuse. An orphan who wrote on bones became the founder of a science.

2

Master the Arabic language. Ash-Shāfi‘ī went to the desert to learn it, and it opened the Qur’an and Sunnah to him.

3

Keep sins away from your knowledge. Mālik and Wakī‘ told him the same thing in different words.

4

Learn from more than one tradition. He took the best of Madinah and of Iraq, and his fiqh was richer for it.

5

Change your view when the evidence is stronger, as he did with his new school, and let the ḥadīth be your madhhab.

6

Debate to reach the truth, not to win, and stay brothers after disagreeing.

04

THE FOUR IMAMS · 04

أَحْمَدُ بْنُ حَنْبَلٍ

IMĀM AHL AS-SUNNAH

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal

Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal

164 – 241 AH · 780 – 855 CE · Baghdad

15

years old when he
began hadith

28

months in prison in the
trial

27k

narrations in his
Musnad

Imam 4 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal: at a glance

Name	Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal ibn Hilāl ash-Shaybānī, an Arab of the tribe of Banū Shaybān
Kunya and title	Abū ‘Abdillāh; Imām Ahl as-Sunnah , “the Imam of the People of the Sunnah”
Born	Rabī‘ al-Awwal 164 AH (780 CE) in Baghdad
Died	Friday 12 Rabī‘ al-Awwal 241 AH (855 CE) in Baghdad, aged 77
Main teachers	Hushaym ibn Bashīr, Sufyān ibn ‘Uyaynah, Wakī‘ ibn al-Jarrāḥ, Yaḥyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Qaṭṭān, ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Maḥdī, ‘Abd ar-Razzāq aṣ-Ṣan‘ānī, ash-Shāfi‘ī
Famous students	His sons Ṣāliḥ and ‘Abdullāh; al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd (who narrated from him); al-Athram, al-Marrūdhī, Ibrāhīm al-Ḥarbī, Abū Bakr al-Khallāl (who gathered his fiqh)
Main book	al-Musnad , about 27,000 narrations in its standard edition; also az-Zuhd, Faḍā’il aṣ-Ṣaḥābah and al-‘Ilal
Followed today in	Saudi Arabia and Qatar mainly; historically Baghdad, Damascus and Palestine

An orphan of Baghdad

Aḥmad’s family came from Marw in Khurāsān, where his grandfather Ḥanbal had been a governor. His mother was carrying him when the family came to Baghdad, and he was born there in 164 AH. His father died young, at about thirty, and Aḥmad never knew him. He was raised by his **mother**, who gave him everything she had. He memorised the Qur’an as a boy, and it is reported that his mother would wake him before Fajr, warm water for his wuḍū’, and walk with him in the dark to the mosque, waiting until the sun rose.

He grew up with a small inheritance, a house and some land, and lived on its modest rent for the rest of his life, refusing gifts from rulers. From his youth he was known for seriousness and piety; it is reported that people would point him out to their children as an example.

“With the inkpot to the grave”

He began studying ḥadīth in **179 AH**, at fifteen, the year Mālik died. His first great teacher was **Hushaym ibn Bashīr**, the ḥadīth master of Baghdad, with whom he stayed until Hushaym’s death in 183 AH. Then he travelled. He went to Kūfah, Baṣrah, Makkah, Madinah, Yemen, Syria and the frontier lands, often on foot, collecting ḥadīth from the great masters of his time.

With his friend **Yaḥyā ibn Ma‘īn** he travelled to Ṣan‘ā’ in Yemen to learn from ‘**Abd ar-Razzāq ibn Hammām**. When his money ran out, he hired himself out as a porter to camel caravans rather than

accept charity. When someone saw an old man of knowledge still carrying his inkpot, he asked how long he would keep seeking. Aḥmad answered:

مَعَ الْمِخْبَرَةِ إِلَى الْمَقْبَرَةِ

“With the inkpot, to the grave.”

Attributed to Imām Aḥmad.

His memory was legendary. Abū Zur‘ah ar-Rāzī, himself one of the great memorisers, is reported to have said that Aḥmad had memorised a million ḥadīth, meaning narrations with all their chains and variants. He also learned fiqh and uṣūl from **ash-Shāfi‘ī** in Makkah and later in Baghdad, and loved him deeply.

“Ash-Shāfi‘ī was like the sun for the world and like good health for the body. Can anything replace these two?”

Aḥmad to his son ‘Abdullāh, who asked him why he made so much du‘ā’ for ash-Shāfi‘ī.

It is reported that Aḥmad said he had not prayed a prayer for thirty years (or forty, in another report) without making du‘ā’ for ash-Shāfi‘ī.

The great trial (al-Miḥnah)

In 218 AH the caliph **al-Ma’mūn**, influenced by the Mu‘tazilah, ordered that all judges and scholars must declare that **the Qur’an is created**, not the uncreated Speech of Allah. Those who refused were threatened, removed from office or imprisoned. Under the threat of the sword, almost all the scholars of Baghdad gave in, some saying the words while disagreeing in their hearts. Aḥmad and a young scholar, **Muḥammad ibn Nūḥ**, refused. They were put in chains and sent towards al-Ma’mūn at Ṭarsūs.

On the way, news came that al-Ma’mūn had died. It is reported that Aḥmad had made du‘ā’ that he would not see al-Ma’mūn. Muḥammad ibn Nūḥ fell ill and died on the return journey, still in chains, and Aḥmad washed and buried him. Before he died, Muḥammad told him: “You are not like me. You are a man people follow. Fear Allah and stand firm for Allah’s sake.” It is also reported that a man named Abū Ja‘far al-Anbārī crossed the Euphrates to meet him and said: “Today you are the head, and people follow you. If you answer, by Allah, many will answer with you.”

Aḥmad was imprisoned in Baghdad. Under the next caliph, **al-Mu‘taṣim**, he was brought for days of debate with the chief judge **Aḥmad ibn Abī Du‘ād** and the Mu‘tazilī scholars. To every argument he replied:

أَعْطُونِي شَيْئًا مِنْ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ أَوْ سُنَّةِ رَسُولِهِ ﷺ
حَتَّى أَقُولَ بِهِ

“Give me something from the Book of Allah or the Sunnah of His Messenger ﷺ, and I will say it.”

Reported from Imām Aḥmad in the account of the trial.

When he would not give in, he was flogged in the presence of the caliph, in **Ramaḍān**, around the year **220 AH** (the reports differ by a year), while fasting, by a series of floggers who took turns, until he lost consciousness. He spent about **twenty-eight months** in prison in total. It is reported that a thief named Abū al-Haytham had told him in prison: “I have been flogged thousands of lashes for falsehood and endured it; you are being flogged for the truth, so be patient.” Aḥmad would make du‘ā’ for him afterwards.

He was released, his body scarred for life. Under **al-Wāthiq** he was forbidden to teach or to mix with people, and stayed hidden in his house. The trial ended under **al-Mutawakkil**, around 232–234 AH, about fifteen years after it began. Aḥmad’s stand is remembered as the moment the belief of Ahl as-Sunnah about the Qur’an was preserved.

He forgave

After his release, Aḥmad said that he had forgiven everyone who had harmed him, and he forgave al-Mu‘taṣim. He recited: “The recompense for an evil is an evil like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation, his reward is with Allah” (ash-Shūrā 42:40), and he said: “What benefit is it to you that your Muslim brother is punished because of you?”

The harder trial: wealth

Al-Mutawakkil honoured Aḥmad, sent him large sums of money and asked him to teach his son. Aḥmad refused the gifts or distributed them immediately to the poor, and was distressed when his sons accepted allowances. It is reported that he said this trial of the world was harder for him than the trial of the whip. He lived on bread, vinegar and salt, wore simple clothes and kept his house plain.

His death and funeral

Aḥmad died in Baghdad on Friday, 12 Rabī al-Awwal 241 AH, aged 77. His funeral was one of the largest in Islamic history; the reports describe hundreds of thousands of people. He had once said:

قُولُوا لِأَهْلِ الْبِدْعِ: بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْجَنَائِزِ

“Say to the people of innovation: between us and you is the day of the funerals.”

Reported from Imām Aḥmad.

The Musnad

Aḥmad’s great work is **al-Musnad**, a collection of ḥadīth arranged by the Companion who narrated them, beginning with Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī. He selected it from a far larger number of narrations he had heard, and his son ‘Abdullāh completed and narrated it. The standard printed edition contains about **27,000** narrations. He intended it as a reference that Muslims could return to.

His method (uṣūl)

Aḥmad’s fiqh grew out of his ḥadīth. His student Ibn al-Qayyim summarised his method in five foundations:

- 1 **The texts** of the Qur’an and authentic Sunnah, before anything else.
- 2 **The fatwas of the Companions**, where there is no known disagreement among them.
- 3 Where the Companions differed, **the view closest to the Qur’an and Sunnah**, without going outside their views.
- 4 **A ḥadīth with some weakness in its chain** (not fabricated or very weak) where nothing in the matter contradicts it, preferred over analogy.
- 5 **Qiyās** (analogy), used only when needed.

His school is known for staying very close to the texts and the Companions, and for being wide in what it permits in transactions unless there is evidence of prohibition.

His students and the spread of his school

Aḥmad did not want his opinions written down as a separate school. His students recorded his answers anyway, and **Abū Bakr al-Khallāl** (d. 311 AH) gathered them into one great collection. Later Ḥanbalī scholars include **Ibn Qudāmāh**, author of **al-Mughnī**, one of the greatest books of comparative fiqh; **Ibn Taymiyyah** and **Ibn al-Qayyim**; Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī; and, later, **Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb**, author of **al-Uṣūl ath-Thalāthah** which many of our students study.

His sayings

لَا تُقَلِّدْنِي، وَلَا تُقَلِّدْ مَالِكًا، وَلَا الشَّافِعِيَّ، وَلَا الثَّوْرِيَّ،
وَاخْذُ مِنْ حَيْثُ أَخَذُوا

“Do not blindly follow me, nor Mālik, nor ash-Shāfi‘ī, nor ath-Thawrī. Take from where they took.”

Reported by Ibn al-Qayyim in I‘lām al-Muwaqqi‘īn. Scholars explain this was said to students able to examine the evidence.

Lessons for us

1	Mothers make imams. Aḥmad’s mother walked him to the mosque in the dark.
2	Seek knowledge until death , “with the inkpot to the grave”, and work with your hands rather than ask people.
3	Stand firm on the truth with evidence: “Give me something from the Book of Allah or the Sunnah.”
4	Forgive those who wrong you once the trial is over.
5	The trial of comfort can be harder than the trial of pain. Guard your heart from love of the world.
6	Make du‘ā’ for your teachers for life , as Aḥmad did for ash-Shāfi‘ī.

Part 6 Why the imams differed

If the four imams all followed the Qur'an and Sunnah, why did they sometimes reach different rulings? Ibn Taymiyyah answered this in his famous short book **Raf' al-Malām 'an al-A'immat al-A'lām** ("Removing Blame from the Great Imams"). None of them deliberately opposed an authentic ḥadīth. Where they differed, it was for reasons like these:

Reason	What it means
The ḥadīth had not reached him	Before ḥadīth were gathered in great books, a ḥadīth known in Madinah might not have reached a scholar in Kūfah, or reached him later.
It reached him, but not authentically	He received it through a chain he judged weak, while another imam received it through a sound chain.
Different conditions for accepting reports	For example, Mālik gave weight to the practice of Madinah; Abū Ḥanīfah had conditions for solitary reports in some areas.
Different understanding of the words	Arabic words can carry more than one meaning, and the imams weighed the context differently.
He saw the text as abrogated or specified	He believed another text abrogated it, restricted it or explained it.
Different principles (uṣūl)	Such as istiḥsān, the practice of Madinah, or preferring a weak ḥadīth to analogy.

Two examples

Does touching a woman break wuḍū'?

Allah says: "... or you have touched (lāmastum) women and find no water, then seek clean earth" (an-Nisā' 4:43). Ibn 'Abbās (raḍiyallāhu 'anhumā) explained "touching" here as **intercourse**; others understood it as **skin contact**.

- **Ḥanafī**: touching alone does not break wuḍū'.
- **Shāfi'ī**: skin contact between a man and a woman who are not maḥram breaks wuḍū'.
- **Mālikī** and **Ḥanbalī**: it breaks wuḍū' when it is with desire, or (for the Mālikīs) when desire is intended or felt.

Each view rests on the verse, on ḥadīth such as 'Ā'ishah's report that the Prophet ﷺ touched her while praying, and on how the imam understood the Arabic.

Raising the hands in prayer

Ibn ‘Umar narrated that the Prophet ﷺ raised his hands at the opening takbīr, when going into rukū‘ and when rising from it (al-Bukhārī 735, Muslim 390). Ibn Mas‘ūd’s students in Kūfah narrated that he raised his hands only at the opening (Abū Dāwūd 748, at-Tirmidhī 257, who graded it ḥasan).

- **Shāfi‘ī and Ḥanbalī:** raise the hands at the opening, before rukū‘ and after rising from it.
- **Ḥanafī:** raise them only at the opening takbīr.
- **Mālikī:** the well-known view of the school is to raise them only at the opening, though other narrations from Mālik agree with Ibn ‘Umar’s ḥadīth.

All four agree the prayer is valid either way. This is a difference in a sunnah, not in a pillar.

The adab of disagreement

- **They prayed behind one another.** Imām Aḥmad was asked about praying behind someone who does not renew wuḍū’ after bleeding or cupping (which Aḥmad held breaks wuḍū’). He replied: “How could I not pray behind Mālik and Sa‘īd ibn al-Musayyib?” (reported by Ibn Taymiyyah).
- **They did not force their views.** Mālik refused to have the Muwaṭṭa’ imposed on the Ummah.
- **They hoped their opponents would be right.** Ash-Shāfi‘ī: “I never debated anyone except that I loved for him to be guided.”
- **They stayed brothers.** “Can we not remain brothers, even if we do not agree on a single issue?”
- **They all pointed back to the evidence.** Each of the four said, in his own words, that the authentic ḥadīth comes before his opinion.

Part 7 Brothers in knowledge: what they said about one another

Some people imagine the four imams as rival camps. The truth is the opposite. They studied with each other's teachers and students, honoured one another in public and private, and their students did the same.

Who	About whom	What he said (as reported)
Mālik	Abū Ḥanīfah	"I saw a man who, if he spoke to you about this pillar to make it gold, would establish his argument."
Ash-Shāfi'ī	Abū Ḥanīfah	"In fiqh, people are dependants of Abū Ḥanīfah."
Ash-Shāfi'ī	Mālik	"When the scholars are mentioned, Mālik is the star." And: "Mālik is my teacher, and from him I took knowledge."
Ash-Shāfi'ī	Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan	"I took from Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan a camel-load of knowledge."
Ash-Shāfi'ī	Aḥmad	"I left Baghdad and did not leave behind anyone more pious, more abstinent or more learned than Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal."
Aḥmad	Ash-Shāfi'ī	"He was like the sun for the world and like good health for the body."
Aḥmad	Mālik	When asked whose ḥadīth to write if one wanted to learn from one man, he is reported to have said: the ḥadīth of Mālik.
Aḥmad	Abū Ḥanīfah	Aḥmad wept when he was told how Abū Ḥanīfah was flogged for refusing the judgeship, and prayed for mercy on him.

Remember

When you hear someone belittle any of the four imams, or use one to attack another, remember how they spoke about each other. Loving them all, and benefiting from them all, is the way of the scholars.

Part 8 The four side by side

	Abū Ḥanīfah	Mālik	Ash-Shāfiʿī	Aḥmad
Name	an-Nuʿmān ibn Thābit	Mālik ibn Anas	Muḥammad ibn Idrīs	Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal
Born	80 AH, Kūfah	93 AH, Madinah	150 AH, Gaza	164 AH, Baghdad
Died	150 AH, Baghdad	179 AH, Madinah	204 AH, Egypt	241 AH, Baghdad
Age	about 70	about 86	54	77
Origin	Persian descent	Arab (Yemeni roots)	Arab of Quraysh	Arab of Shaybān
Key teacher	Ḥammād ibn Abī Sulaymān	Ibn Hurmuz, Nāfiʿ, Rabīʿah	Mālik, Muslim az-Zanjī	Hushaym, ash-Shāfiʿī
Key work	Recorded by students (Zāhir ar-Riwāyah)	al-Muwaṭṭaʿ	ar-Risālah, al-Umm	al-Musnad
Trial	Flogged and imprisoned for refusing to be judge	Flogged for narrating a ḥadīth on forced divorce	Taken in chains to Hārūn ar-Rashīd	Flogged and imprisoned in the Miḥnah
Distinctive principle	Qiyās and istiḥsān	Practice of Madinah	Uṣūl written as a science; khabar al-wāḥid	Texts and Companions first; weak ḥadīth over qiyās
Main regions today	Turkey, Central and South Asia	North and West Africa (incl. Nigeria)	Egypt, East Africa, Southeast Asia	Arabian Peninsula

Timeline of key events

Year	Event
80 AH (699 CE)	Abū Ḥanīfah is born in Kūfah.
93 AH (711 CE)	Mālik is born in Madinah.
120 AH (738 CE)	Ḥammād ibn Abī Sulaymān dies; Abū Ḥanīfah, about 40, takes his place.
c. 130 AH	Abū Ḥanīfah is flogged by Ibn Hubayrah for refusing office, and later goes to Makkah.
132 AH (750 CE)	The Abbasids replace the Umayyads.
146 AH (763 CE)	Mālik is flogged in Madinah.
150 AH (767 CE)	Abū Ḥanīfah dies in Baghdad. Ash-Shāfi'ī is born in Gaza.
164 AH (780 CE)	Aḥmad is born in Baghdad.
c. 170 AH	Ash-Shāfi'ī comes to Mālik in Madinah.
179 AH (795 CE)	Mālik dies. Aḥmad, aged 15, begins studying ḥadīth.
184 AH (800 CE)	Ash-Shāfi'ī is taken in chains to Hārūn ar-Rashīd; studies with Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan.
195 AH (810 CE)	Ash-Shāfi'ī in Baghdad; ar-Risālah; Aḥmad studies with him.
199 AH (814 CE)	Ash-Shāfi'ī moves to Egypt; his new school.
204 AH (820 CE)	Ash-Shāfi'ī dies in Egypt.
218 AH (833 CE)	Al-Ma'mūn begins the Miḥnah.
c. 220 AH (835 CE)	Aḥmad is flogged under al-Mu'taṣim.
c. 232–234 AH	Al-Mutawakkil ends the Miḥnah.
241 AH (855 CE)	Aḥmad dies in Baghdad.

Part 9 The madhabs and the student today

How should a student of knowledge in Nigeria, or anywhere, relate to the four schools? The scholars have given clear guidance:

Guidance for students

- 1** **Learn fiqh step by step through one school** with a qualified teacher. In West Africa that is usually the Mālikī school, through texts like al-Akhḍarī, al-‘Ashmāwīyah and the Risālah. This is how the imams’ own students learned: in order, from a teacher, without jumping between opinions.
- 2** **Know that the other schools are also upon guidance.** A Muslim who follows the Ḥanafī, Shāfi‘ī or Ḥanbalī school in his prayer is not doing something wrong. Do not correct or argue with people over matters in which the imams differed.
- 3** **Avoid fanaticism.** No imam is infallible except the Messenger ﷺ. Every imam told us to put the authentic Sunnah before his words.
- 4** **Avoid the opposite extreme.** Do not belittle the imams or the schools, or think a beginner can derive rulings himself. “Take from where they took” was said to those able to do so; the rest of us ask the people of knowledge (an-Naḥl 16:43).
- 5** **As you advance, study the evidence** of your school and of the others, with your teachers, so your following becomes following with understanding.
- 6** **Do not pick the easiest view from each school** to follow your desires. The scholars warned against tracking concessions (tatabbu‘ ar-rukhaṣ).

فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

“So ask the people of knowledge if you do not know.”

An-Naḥl 16:43.

Choose the best answer. The answers are on the next page.

- 1. Which imam was born in the year another imam died?**
a) Mālik b) Ash-Shāfi‘ī c) Aḥmad d) Abū Ḥanīfah
- 2. Who was Abū Ḥanīfah’s main teacher, for about eighteen years?**
a) ‘Aṭā’ b) Nāfi‘ c) Ḥammād ibn Abī Sulaymān d) Ibn Hurmuz
- 3. Why was Abū Ḥanīfah imprisoned by al-Manṣūr?**
a) He led a revolt b) He refused to become chief judge c) He narrated a ḥadīth d) He left Baghdad
- 4. What did Mālik’s mother tell him to learn from Rabī‘ah first?**
a) His ḥadīth b) His adab c) His Arabic d) His fiqh
- 5. How many scholars testified for Mālik before he gave fatwa?**
a) Seven b) Forty c) Seventy d) A hundred
- 6. What is the chain “Mālik from Nāfi‘ from Ibn ‘Umar” called?**
a) The silver chain b) The golden chain c) The Madinan chain d) The short chain
- 7. Why was Mālik flogged?**
a) He refused to teach Hārūn b) He narrated that divorce under compulsion does not count c) He refused a judgeship d) He criticised the Mu‘tazilah
- 8. Where did ash-Shāfi‘ī go to master Arabic?**
a) Baghdad b) The tribe of Hudhayl c) Yemen d) Egypt
- 9. Which book is the first written work on uṣūl al-fiqh?**
a) al-Muwaṭṭa‘ b) al-Musnad c) ar-Risālah d) al-Mudawwanah
- 10. Ash-Shāfi‘ī’s “new school” was formed in:**
a) Makkah b) Baghdad c) Yemen d) Egypt
- 11. Who said: “If the ḥadīth is authentic, then it is my madhhab”?**
a) Ash-Shāfi‘ī b) Aḥmad c) Mālik d) Abū Yūsuf
- 12. At what age did Aḥmad begin seeking ḥadīth?**
a) Seven b) Fifteen c) Twenty d) Thirty
- 13. The Miḥnah was about the claim that:**
a) Ḥadīth are not binding b) The Qur’an is created c) Analogy is forbidden d) The caliph is infallible
- 14. Which school is most followed in Nigeria?**
a) Ḥanafī b) Mālikī c) Shāfi‘ī d) Ḥanbalī
- 15. An-Nawawī, author of the Forty Ḥadīth, belonged to which school?**
a) Ḥanafī b) Mālikī c) Shāfi‘ī d) Ḥanbalī

No.	Answer	No.	Answer
1	b) Ash-Shāfi'ī, born in 150 AH, the year Abū Ḥanīfah died	9	c) ar-Risālah
2	c) Ḥammād ibn Abī Sulaymān	10	d) Egypt
3	b) He refused to become chief judge	11	a) Ash-Shāfi'ī
4	b) His adab	12	b) Fifteen, in 179 AH
5	c) Seventy	13	b) The Qur'an is created
6	b) The golden chain	14	b) Mālikī
7	b) He narrated that divorce under compulsion does not count	15	c) Shāfi'ī
8	b) The tribe of Hudhayl		

Activities

1 Which imam's story moved you most, and why?

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2 Choose one quality from each imam that you want in your own life. How will you practise it this month?

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3 Write one saying of the imams in Arabic and memorise it this week.

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Term	Meaning
Fiqh	Understanding of the practical rulings of Islam from their detailed evidence.
Uṣūl al-fiqh	The principles and methods used to derive rulings from the evidence.
Madhhab	A school of fiqh: its method and its body of rulings.
Ijtihād / Mujtahid	The scholar's full effort to derive a ruling / a scholar qualified to do so.
Taqlīd	Following a qualified scholar's ruling without knowing the detailed evidence; the duty of those unable to do ijtihād.
Ijmā'	Consensus of the qualified scholars of the Ummah on a ruling.
Qiyās	Analogy: applying a ruling to a new case that shares the same cause.
Istiḥsān	Leaving a strict analogy for a stronger consideration.
'Amal ahl al-Madīnah	The inherited practice of the people of Madinah.
Khabar al-wāḥid	A ḥadīth narrated by one or few narrators at some level of the chain, not reaching mass transmission.
Tābi'ī	A Muslim who met a Companion and learned from him.
Muwatṭa'	"The well-trodden path": Mālik's book of ḥadīth and fiqh.
Musnad	A ḥadīth collection arranged by the Companion who narrated each ḥadīth.
Miḥnah	The "trial" (218 – c. 234 AH) in which scholars were forced to say the Qur'an was created.

For further reading

- **Siyar A'lām an-Nubalā'**, adh-Dhahabī: full biographies of all four imams (Arabic).
- **al-Intiqā' fī Faḍā'il ath-Thalāthat al-A'imma al-Fuqahā'**, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr: on Mālik, ash-Shāfi'ī and Abū Ḥanīfah.
- **Tartīb al-Madārik**, Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ: on Mālik and his school.
- **Manāqib ash-Shāfi'ī**, al-Bayhaqī; **Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad**, Ibn al-Jawzī.
- **Raf' al-Malām 'an al-A'immat al-A'lām**, Ibn Taymiyyah: why the imams differed (available in English as "Removal of Blame from the Great Imams").
- The four biographies by **Muḥammad Abū Zahrah**: Abū Ḥanīfah, Mālik, ash-Shāfi'ī and Ibn Ḥanbal (Arabic; some in English translation).

رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَا
تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا غِلًا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا

“Our Lord, forgive us and our brothers who preceded us in faith, and put not in our hearts any resentment toward those who have believed.”

Al-Hashr 59:10.

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