

Fourth-Century Ash‘arī Father and Son: Abū Sahl and Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Ṣu‘lūkī

by GF Haddad - Rabī‘ al-Akhīr 1426

Abū Sahl al-Ṣu‘lūkī, Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān ibn Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān al-Shāfi‘ī al-‘Ijlī al-Naysābūrī al-Ash‘arī al-Ṣūfi of the Banū Ḥanīfa (d. 369), the Imām of Khurāsān among the jurists and scholars of *kalām*, *tafsīr*, and Arabic in his time. He accompanied Abū Ishāq al-Marwazī in *fiqh* and al-Shiblī in *taṣawwuf*, and took ḥadīth from Ibn Khuzayma, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn al-Anbārī, and others. Al-Sulamī in *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya* and al-Qushayrī in *al-Risāla* related from Ibn Fūrak that al-Ṣu‘lūkī defined *taṣawwuf* as “the turning away from objections” (*al-i-rād ‘an al-i-tirād*). Among his sayings also: “Whoever says to his Shaykh: ‘Why?’ shall never succeed.”¹ He spent seven years in Baghdād during which he said that he never let pass a day of *jumu‘a* except he visited al-Shiblī or asked him a question. The latter visited Abū Ishāq al-Marwazī one day and saw Abū Sahl there, whereupon he said to Abū Ishāq: “Is that crazy one one of your companions? No – he is one of ours!” In Baghdād he also studied with al-Ash‘arī according to Ibn Fūrak. His son Sahl (358-434) became one of the Renewers of the Fifth Hijri Century.²

Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Ṣu‘lūkī, Sahl ibn Muḥammad ibn Sulaymān ibn Mūsā ibn ‘Īsā ibn Ibrāhīm al-‘Ijlī al-Naysābūrī al-Shāfi‘ī of the Banū Ḥanīfa (d. 403), “the erudite imām,” like his father Abū Sahl mufti of Naysābūr and among its chief jurists and educators. He took *fiqh* and ḥadīth from his father, Abū al-‘Abbās al-Aṣamm, al-Hākīm, and others. From him narrated, among others, his own shaykh al-Hākīm and al-Bayhaqī. Al-Hākīm reported that his gathering counted five hundred inkwells. His father Abū Sahl praised his intelligence and energy and said of him: *Sahlun wālid* – “He is a father to me” – and in his last sickness: “Sahl’s absence weighs more heavily upon me than the state in which I find myself.” Al-Hākīm said: “I heard Abū al-Aṣbagh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn ‘Abd al-Mālik say in Bukhārā: ‘Since I left my homeland in the farthest part of Morocco, I have never seen anyone like him.’” Abū ‘Aṣim al-‘Abbādī said: “He is the Imām in Arabic literature, *fiqh*, *kalām*, and grammar; and a brilliant debater.”

Among Sahl al-Ṣu‘lūkī’s sayings: “The approval of people is hard to obtain and unattainable, but Divine approval is easily within reach and indispensable.” “Whoever takes up leadership before his time undertakes his own disgrace.”³ On playing chess:

*Idhā salima al-mālu min al-khusrān
was-Ṣalātu ‘an al-nisyān
fadhālika unsun bayn al-khillān
katabahu Sahl ibn Sulaymān.*

If money’s safe from loss and Prayer from oversight,
Chess is intimacy among friends. Signed, Sahl ibn Sulaymān.⁴

Abū Sa‘īd al-Shahḥam said: “I saw Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Ṣu‘lūkī in my sleep and said to him: ‘O Shaykh!’ He replied: ‘Drop the title of Shaykh.’ I said: ‘What about those spiritual states?’ He said: ‘They availed us nothing.’ I said: ‘What did Allāh do with you?’ He said: ‘He forgave me for questions which old women used to ask me.’” Some scholars considered him the renewer of the Religion at the head of the fifth Islamic century, together with Ibn al-Bāqillānī and Shaykh al-Islām Abū Ḥamid al-Isfarāyīnī.⁵

¹This statement was reiterated by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Gilānī in his *Ghunya* among others of the great Masters.

²*Siyar* (12:341-344 §3366); *Tabyīn* (p. 184-187). Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij* (2:39).

³Imām Zufar said something similar: “Whoever sits to speak before his time shall be brought low.”

⁴See the permitted status of chess in Islām in our documentation of the forgery “**Whoever plays chess (shitrānj) is cursed**” in our forthcoming translation of Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī’s *al-Mawdū‘āt al-Kubrā – in shā Allāh*.

⁵*Tabyīn* (p. 212-215); *Siyar* (13:126-127 §3735); *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya al-Kubrā* (4:393-404 §418). Abū Ḥamid al-Isfarāyīnī is Aḥmad ibn Abī Ṭāhir Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Baghdādī (344-406).