

The Life of Imam al-Suyuti

By Shaykh Gibril Fouad Haddad

ʿAbd al-Rahman ibn Kamal al-Din Abi Bakr ibn Muhammad ibn Sabiq al-Din, Jalal al-Din al-Misri al-Suyuti al-Shafiʿi al-Ashʿari, also known as Ibn al-Asyuti (849-911), the mujtahid imam and renewer of the tenth Islamic century, foremost hadith master, jurist, Sufi, philologist, and historian, he authored works in virtually every Islamic science.

Born to a Turkish mother and non-Arab father and raised as an orphan in Cairo, he memorized the Qur'an at eight, then several complete works of Sacred Law, fundamentals of jurisprudence, and Arabic grammar; after which he devoted himself to studying the Sacred Sciences under about a hundred and fifty shaykhs. Among them the foremost Shafiʿi and Hanafis shaykhs at the time, such as the hadith master and Shaykh al-Islam Siraj al-Din Bulqini, with whom he studied Shafiʿi jurisprudence until his death; the hadith scholar Shaykh al-Islam Sharaf al-Din al-Munawi, with whom he read Qur'anic exegesis and who commented al-Suyuti's al-Jamiʿ al-Saghir in a book entitled Fayd al-Qadir; Taqi al-Din al-Shamani in hadith and the sciences of Arabic; the specialist in the principles of the law Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli, together with whom he compiled the most widespread condensed commentary of Qur'an in our time, Tafsir al-Jalalayn; Burhan al-Din al-Biqāʿi; Shams al-Din al-Sakhawi; he also studied with the Hanafi shaykhs Taqi al-Din al-Shamni, Shihab al-Din al-Sharmisahi, Muhyi al-Din al-Kafayji, and the hadith master Sayf al-Din Qasim ibn Qatlubagha.

He travelled in the pursuit of knowledge to Damascus, the Hijaz, Yemen, India, Morocco, the lands south of Morocco, as well as to centers of learning in Egypt such as Mahalla, Dumyat, and Fayyum. He was some time head teacher of hadith at the Shaykhuniyya school in Cairo at the recommendation of Imam Kamal al-Din ibn al-Humam, then the Baybarsiyya, out of which he was divested through the complaints of disgruntled shaykhs which he had replaced as teachers. He then retired into scholarly seclusion, never to go back to teaching.

Ibn Iyas in Tarikh Misr states that when al-Suyuti reached forty years of age, he abandoned the company of men for the solitude of the Garden of al-Miqyas by the side of the Nile, avoiding his former colleagues as though he had never known them, and it was here that he authored most of his nearly six hundred books and treatises. Wealthy Muslims and princes would visit him with offers of money and gifts, but he put all of them off, and when the sultan requested his presence a number of times, he refused. He once said to the sultan's envoy: "Do not ever come back to us with a gift, for in truth Allah has put an end to all such needs for us." Blessed with success in his years of solitude, it is difficult to name a field in which al-Suyuti did not make outstanding contributions, among them his ten-volume hadith work Jamʿ al-Jawamiʿ ("The Collection of Collections"); his Qur'anic exegesis Tafsir al-Jalalayn ("Commentary of the Two Jalals"), of which he finished the second half of an uncompleted manuscript by Jalal al-Din Mahalli in just forty days; his classic commentary on the sciences of hadith Tadrib al-Rawi fi Sharh Taqrib al-Nawawi ("The Training of the Hadith Transmitter: An Exegesis of Nawawi's 'The Facilitation'"); and many others.

A giant among contemporaries, he remained alone, producing a sustained output of scholarly writings until his death at the age of sixty-two. He was buried in Hawsh Qawsun in Cairo. In the introduction to his book entitled al-Riyad al-Aniqa on the names of the Prophet he said: "It is my hope that Allah accept this book and that through this book I shall gain the Prophet's intercession. Perhaps it shall be that Allah make it the seal of all my works, and grant me what I have asked Him with longing regarding the Honorable One."

The editors of the Dalil Makhtutat al-Suyuti ("Guide to al-Suyuti's Manuscripts") have listed 723 works to al-Suyuti's name.¹ Some of these are brief fatwas which do not exceed four pages, like his notes on the hadith "Whoever says: 'I am knowledgeable,' he is ignorant"² entitled A`dhab al-Manahil fi Hadith Man Qala Ana `Alim; while others, like the Itqan fi `Ulum al-Qur'an or Tadrib al-Rawi, are full-fledged tomes.

Al-Tabarani stated that the hadith "Whoever says: 'I am knowledgeable,' he is ignorant" is not narrated except through the chain containing al-Layth ibn Abi Sulaym, who is weak. Al-'Ajluni in *Kashf al-Khafa'* states that this hadith is narrated by al-Tabarani in al-Awsat from Ibn 'Umar rather than the Prophet, and that al-Haytami said in his *Fatawa Hadithiyya* that it is actually a saying of (the Tabi'i) Yahya ibn Kathir. For his part, Ibn Kathir cites it from 'Umar in his *Tafsir* in commentary of the verse: (Have you not seen those who praise themselves for purity?) (4:49) Three narrations are indeed mentioned from 'Umar in *Kanz al-Ummal*, but all are weak. Al-'Iraqi in his *al-Mughni* said that the part actually attributed to Yahya ibn Kathir is:

"Whoever says: 'I am a believer,' he is a disbeliever," while al-Haythami in *Majma' al-Zawa'id* cites it from Yahya ibn Kathir with a weak chain as follows: "Whoever says: 'I am knowledgeable,' he is ignorant, and whoever says: 'I am ignorant,' he is ignorant. Whoever says: 'I am in Paradise,' he is in the Fire, and whoever says: 'I am in the Fire,' he is in the Fire." Al-Haytami further said: "It is established from countless Companions and others that they said they were knowledgeable, and they would not commit something which the Prophet had blamed.

A greater proof yet is Yusuf's statement: 'I am a knowledgeable guardian' (12:55)." However, the narration of al-Layth is confirmed by the hadith of the Prophet: "Islam shall be on the rise until traders take to the sea [carrying it], and horses charge in the cause of Allah. After that a people will come and recite the Qur'an, saying: Who recites it better than us? Who is more knowledgeable than us? Who is wiser than us?" Then he turned to his Companions and asked: "Is there any good in such as these?" They said: "Allah and His Prophet know best." He said: "Those are from among you, O Umma! Those are fodder for the Fire."2

What reconciles the two views is that the hadith of Ibn Abi Sulaym applies to those who claim knowledge either undeservedly, or proudly, and not to those who act out of sincerity and obligation. Ibn 'Ata' Allah said in his *Hikam*:

The root of every disobedience, forgetfulness, and desire is contentment with the self, while the root of every obedience, vigilance, and continence is your dissatisfaction with it. That you accompany an ignorant who is not pleased with his self is better for you than to accompany a knowledgeable person who is pleased with his self. And what ignorance is that of one who is dissatisfied with himself? And what knowledge is that of one who is satisfied with himself?

Imam al-Sha'rani in *al-Uhud al-Muhammadiyya* ("The Pledges We Made to the Prophet") said something similar:

The Prophet took our pledge that we should not claim to possess knowledge except for a licit cause, and that we should never say: "We are the most knowledgeable of people" - not with our mouths, and not with our hearts. How could we say such a thing when we know full well that in our country, let alone our region, there is one who is more knowledgeable than we? But if it is one day ordained for us to claim knowledge, then we must immediately follow this with repentance and ask forgiveness lest punishment descend on us. This is a problem which no wise person ever faces, for there is no science which one has looked up except the scholars of knowledge anticipated him and wrote books about it - scholars whose pupil he might not even deserve to be.

Al-Suyuti's student and biographer Shams al-Din al-Dawudi al-Maliki - the author of *Tabaqat al-Mufassirin al-Kubra* - said: "I saw the shaykh with my own eyes writing and finishing three works in one day which he himself authored and proofread. At the same time he was dictating hadith and replying beautifully to whatever was brought to his attention." Sakhawi reproached him his plagiarism of past books, and others said that the profusion of his works made for their lack of completion and the frequency of flaws and contradictions in them. This is a charge commonly laid at the door of prolific authors, such as Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn Taymiyya. Note also that there was some animosity between al-Suyuti and his shaykh al-Sakhawi, as shown by the former's tract *al-Kawi fi al-Radd 'ala al-Sakhawi* ("The Searing Brand in Refuting al-Sakhawi") and his unflattering mention in the poem *Nazm al-Iqyan fi A'yan al-A'yan*.