Abū `Abd Allāh Ḥāmīd b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal (164–241/780–855) was one of the foremost religious scholars of 3rd/9th century Baghdad. He was an Arab of the Banū Shaybān of Rabīʿa. His grandfather was a governor of Sarakhs under the Umayyads and also an early Abbasid supporter. His father was in the Khurasanian army and moved to Baghdad in 164/780, several months before Ahmad was born. Except for travel to study with various scholars and to make the pilgrimage, Ibn Ḥanbal lived almost his entire life in Baghdad. Toward the end of his life, he was pressured to spend time in Samarra at the court of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232–47/847–61), but he stayed there only briefly in 237/851. He was buried just outside the Harb Gate, and his tomb was venerated until it was destroyed by flood in the 8th/14th century. His reputation for learning was based primarily on his knowledge of traditions; his reputation for piety was based on the austerity of his lifestyle and his demeanor under duress during the miḥna.

Ibn Ḥanbal and his extended family resided in a compound in the northwestern part of the city. He owned at least one shop, which he rented out and which provided him with some income, but he shunned ease out of conviction, and he and his family were often in straitened circumstances. A number of anecdotes describe moments of particular hardship, but despite many offers from colleagues and students, he was always unwilling to accept gifts or money. After the miḥna was over, he was especially unwilling to accept anything from al-Mutawakkil and resisted the caliph’s attempts to provide him with substantial gifts. When his son Ṣāliḥ agreed to accept the caliph’s largesse, Ibn Ḥanbal refused to continue associating with him, despite Ṣāliḥ’s protestations that his own family was large and needy.

1 See Lassner, The Topography of Baghdad, 112 and 286, n. 4.
The main sources for these details of Ibn Ḥanbal’s life are found in *Manāqib al-Imām Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal* by ‘ʿAbd al-Rahāmān b. al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) and in the biography of him by Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 753/1353) in his *Tārikh al-Islām*. Ḥāḏī Muḥammad b. Abī Ya’lā (d. 458/1066) begins his *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila* with a biography of Ibn Ḥanbal,2 and there are entries on him in many other bio-bibliographic dictionaries.3 Until recently, modern scholarly studies of Ibn Ḥanbal in Western languages were limited to Goldziher’s article on his *Musnad*, Patton’s study of the *miḥna* and Laoust’s article on the Ḥanābilā school in Baghdad.4 In the last decade or so, a number of studies of Ibn Ḥanbal’s life and works have appeared in English. Michael Cooperson has examined the biographical tradition of Ibn Ḥanbal’s role in the *miḥna* and Nimrod Hurvitz has provided a picture of the study circle around him.5 Christopher Melchert has written several informative articles dealing with different aspects of his thinking, as well as a full biography which, although brief, is fully documented and useful for specialists and non-specialists alike.6 Given the availability of this material, my outline of Ibn Ḥanbal’s life below emphasizes those aspects of it most relevant to his contribution to the legal thought of the formative period of Islamic law.

Ibn Ḥanbal began his studies of *fiqh* and *ḥadīth* in Baghdad at about the age of sixteen. Subsequently, he studied in Kufa and Basra, as well as in Mecca and Ṣanʿā’. Biographies of him list a great many teachers, as well as a number of men from whom he heard at least some traditions. Among the most important of his teachers, we can single out one in each of the

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3 For a full list of Arabic bio-bibliographical sources on Ibn Ḥanbal’s life and works, see GAS, 1:303–4.


5 Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography* (Chapter 4 examines how different sources treat the way Ibn Ḥanbal behaved during his interrogation and imprisonment, over the course of the *miḥna*). Hurvitz, *The Formation of Hanbalism: Piety into Power* emphasizes Ibn Ḥanbal’s unwillingness to assume a leadership role as a scholar lest it interfere with the study of *ḥadīth* by means of which believers could discover and follow the *sunna* of the Prophet.