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Though Arabia did not have any government – national, regional or local – the city of Makka was dominated by the tribe of Quraysh, as noted before. Quraysh was composed of twelve clans. These clans shared responsibility for maintaining a modicum of law and order in the city.

One of the clans of Quraysh was Bani Hashim. Each clan had its own leader. The leader of Bani Hashim was Abu Talib ibn Abdul Muttalib ibn Hashim ibn Abd Manaf ibn Qusayy. Like his forefathers, Abu Talib was also a merchant. In addition to being the chief of the clan, he was also the guardian of the Kaaba – the House of Allah – built in Makka, many centuries earlier, by the prophets Ibrahim and Ismael, and dedicated by them to the service of Allah Ta'ala.

Abu Talib had a younger brother called Abdullah. In A.D. 570, Abdullah went to Syria with a caravan. A few months before his departure to Syria, he had been married to Amina hint Wahab, a lady of Yathrib (Medina).

On his return journey from Syria, Abdullah fell ill and died. He was only 17 years old at his death. When he left Makka, his wife was pregnant, and she was living in the house of her brother-in-law, Abu Talib. Two months after the death of Abdullah, her child – a boy – was born. His grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, gave him the name Muhammad. Muhammad was born on June 8, 570, in the house of his uncle, Abu Talib, in Makka.

The infant Muhammad was, some day, going to be handpicked by Allah Ta'ala to be His Messenger to the whole world, and he was going to change the destiny and the history of mankind forever.

Muhammad was six years old when his mother, Amina the daughter of Wahab, died, after a brief illness. Upon her death, his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, took him to his home. But only two years had passed when Abdul Muttalib also died.

Abdul Muttalib had ten sons. When he was on his deathbed, he called all of them, and designated his son, Abu Talib, as the new chief of the clan of Bani Hashim. He also made Abu Talib the guardian of Muhammad. Both Abu Talib and Abdullah, the father of Muhammad, were the sons of the same mother,

whereas Abdul Muttalib's other sons were born of his other wives.

Abu Talib brought Muhammad into his house. Muhammad came, he saw and he conquered – all. Abu Talib and his wife lavished all their love upon him. They loved him more than they loved their own children. Muhammad was born in their house. His birth in their house had made it a house of many blessings; and now, after the death of Abdul Muttalib, he had returned to it.

When Muhammad was a child, he didn't show any interest in the toys and the frolics of children. In his boyhood, he didn't show any interest in games and sports, or in the company of other boys of his own age. As young as he was, he preferred solitude to company.

Like other members of the tribe of Quraysh, Abu Talib also sent his merchandize to Syria and to Yemen every year. Sometimes he went in person with the caravans, and at other times, he engaged an agent who sold his merchandize in the markets of those countries.

In A.D. 582 Abu Talib decided to visit Syria with a caravan. His nephew, Muhammad, was 12 years old at this time. Abu Talib loved him so much that he could not bear to part company with him even for a few months. He, therefore, took him to Syria with him.

Muhammad was a precocious boy, and notwithstanding his extreme youth, was a highly gifted observer. In course of his journey and during his sojourn in Syria, he carefully observed the people and their customs, mores, modes of worship, costumes, speeches and dialects. And whatever he saw, he remembered. Upon his return to Makka, he could recreate his experience from beginning to end, and he could recollect all his observations in vivid and graphic detail. He never forgot anything; in fact, he had "total recall." And though he was young in years, he was mature in wisdom and in plain common sense. Abu Talib was aware that Muhammad was wise and intelligent beyond his years and his experience. He, therefore, did not treat him like a minor but showed him all the respect due to an adult in Arab society.

Soon young Muhammad entered his teens. Though now on the threshold of young manhood, he still didn't take any interest in the pleasures that other young men seek. He eschewed levity of all kinds and as noted before, he preferred to be alone with his thoughts. He had the opportunity to satisfy this predilection when he grazed the sheep of his uncle. He was all alone under the immense vault of the sky. The silent and the brooding desert rolled up to the horizons, and seemed to encourage and to invite him to reflect upon the wonders of creation, the mysteries of heaven and earth, and the meaning and purpose of life. He surveyed the landscape from horizon to horizon, and it appeared to him as if a vast, cosmic solitude was the only "presence" to keep him company. Solitude to him appeared to be a new "dimension" of his world.

By the time Muhammad was out of his teens, the people of Makka had begun to take notice of him. They knew that he never deviated from rectitude, and he never erred. They also noted that he didn't talk much but when he did, he spoke only the truth, and he spoke only the words of wisdom. Since the Makkans had never heard him utter a falsehood, they called him "Sadiq" (=the Truthful).

Within a few more years, the citizens of Makka were going to bestow another title upon Muhammad. Knowing that he was highly conscientious, many of them began to deposit their cash, their jewelry and ornaments, and other valuables with him for safe-keeping. Whenever anyone wanted his deposits back, Muhammad returned them to him. There never was an occasion when any repayment went by default. After such experience with him, over several years, they began to call him "Amin" (=the Trustworthy). He and he alone was called Sadig and Amin by the Makkans.

A. Yusuf Ali, the translator and commentator of Quran Majid, has explained the word Amin as follows:

"Amin = one to whom a trust has been given, with several shades of meaning implied: e.g., (1) worthy of trust, (2) bound to deliver his trust, as a prophet is bound to deliver his Message, (3) bound to act entirely as directed by the trust, as a prophet is bound to give only the Message of Allah, and not add anything of his own, and (4) not seeking any interest of his own."

The pre-Islamic Arabs held every year a "season of fairs" in various parts of the country. Some of these fairs were held in Makka or in the environs of Makka. Well-known among them were the fairs of Ukkaz, Majanna and Dhul-Majaz. Muhammad visited these fairs whenever it was convenient for him to do so.

All these fairs were held in the four sacred months of Rajab, Dhil-Qaada, Dhil-Hajj and Moharram, according to ancient Arab tradition. During these four months, there was a total embargo on all kinds of violence, warfare, plunder and brigandage. At the very beginning of the "season of peace," a general truce went into effect. This truce was recognized and respected by all Arabian tribes.

Merchants, farmers and craftsmen gathered at these fairs from far and near to sell, to buy and to exchange. They brought the best of their products with them, and proudly exhibited them. The other arts of peace, poetry among them, were cultivated during the suspension of hostilities.

Poetry was the first love of the Arabs. If poetic talent was discovered in any tribe, it was an occasion, for each and all, to celebrate. The other tribes, friendly to it, presented their congratulations to it, for producing such talent. The Arabs were great aficionados of Arabic words and the multiple nuances of their meanings. They called themselves the "sons of Arabic."

In these fairs the poets read their latest compositions, and held their audience spell-bound with the "pyrotechnics" of their eloquence. Eloquence was an attribute which the Arabs treasured as paramount in importance. One of their maxims was that the beauty of a woman is in her face; but the beauty of a man in his eloquence. They admired the skill of construction in an ode as much as the poet's felicity of expression. Weird-looking mystics of the desert and wild-looking soothsayers and the oracles of the tribes, regaled their audience with their cryptic speeches, parables and their esoteric prognostications, even though few, if any, could understand their language of symbolisms.

Most Arabs believed that astral influence determined man's fate. The soothsayers, therefore, were held in great awe in the whole country; it was believed that they had the power to commune with the stars.

Singers, dancers, entertainers, acrobats and magicians, all vied with each other for the attention of the public.

These fairs were also frequented by the saints, priests and holy men who preached their doctrines. They were all free to propagate their creeds and their ideas without fear of molestation from anyone during these four months. Peace and the arts of peace flourished against this panorama of untamed human vitality.

In these fairs, Muhammad found an opportunity to observe a cross-section of the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. He also studied, at first hand, the customs and beliefs of the people of different social, cultural and geographical backgrounds.

In the spring of A.D. 595, the merchants of Makka "assembled" their summer caravan to carry their merchandize to Syria. Khadija also had her merchandize ready but she had not found a man who would take charge of it as her agent. A few names were suggested to her but she did not consider them satisfactory.

Through some of his colleagues in the merchants' "guild" of Makka, Abu Talib learned that Khadija was in need of an agent who would take her cargo with the caravan to Syria and would sell it there.

It occurred to Abu Talib that his nephew, Muhammad, who was now 25 years old, would qualify for the job. He was anxious to find employment for him. He knew that he (Muhammad) had no experience as an agent but he also knew that he (Muhammad) would more than make up for such a lack by his exceptional talents. He had faith in the capacities and faculties of his nephew, and was confident that he had enough savvy to handle his responsibilities and duties as an agent to the entire satisfaction of his employer. Therefore, with his (Muhammad's) tacit agreement, he called on Khadija, and broached with her the subject of his (Muhammad's) candidacy, as her new agent.

Like most of the other citizens of Makka, Khadija had also heard about Muhammad. One thing she knew that she could not question, was his integrity. She sensed that she could trust Muhammad implicitly and explicitly. She therefore readily agreed to appoint him (Muhammad) as her agent. She did not consider his lack of experience a handicap, and said that she would, in any case, send her slave, Maysara – an experienced traveller – with him to assist him in his duties.

Khadija was a superb administrator and a consummate organizer. But she was also lucky. She had always been lucky in finding good agents for her business. Even though she was "success-oriented," she was soon surprised to discover that with Muhammad as her agent, her luck soared as it had never done before. For Khadija, there never was in the past, and there never was going to be in the future, an agent like Muhammad. If she had the "golden touch" in her hand, he had the "blessed touch" in his.

Khadija and Abu Talib worked out the details of the new arrangement. And when Muhammad called on his new employer to sign the contract, she explained to him the specifics of the trade. He immediately

grasped what she told him, and didn't ask any questions seeking clarification. Khadija told Abu Talib that the recompense she would pay to Muhammad for his services, would be the double of what she had paid to her other agents in the past.

What Khadija didn't know at this time was that it was the hand of destiny which was working behind this arrangement. Destiny had other plans for her and for Muhammad. Those plans transcended such mundane and picayune matters as making profit in a business enterprise, as events were very soon to show.

In the meantime, the "summer caravan" of the Makkan merchants had been equipped, and was ready for departure on its long journey. The merchants brought their cargo out of the warehouses to be loaded on camels. The documents were prepared and were signed. Provisions were taken, and guides and the escorts were engaged. At the appointed time, Muhammad arrived with Abu Talib and his other uncles. They were greeted by an uncle of Khadija who was awaiting them with the "Bill of Lading" and the other documents.

Muhammad had to take inventory of the merchandize that he was going to sell in Syria. With Maysara, he checked all items against the manifest, and found everything in order. Maysara had to do the paperwork relating to the sales and purchases. He was the record-keeper.

Abu Talib gave special instructions to Maysara and to the leader of the caravan regarding the comfort and safety of Muhammad. They promised to do everything to make the journey pleasant and safe for him. Abu Talib and his brothers thanked them for showing solicitude for Muhammad's welfare. They prayed for his success in the new venture, and for his safe return. Then they committed him to the protection of Allah, and bade him farewell.

During summer, most caravans travelled at night to escape the murderous heat of the day, and they rested during the day. Travel during the day could be extremely exhausting both for the riders and for their camels and horses. Most caravans, therefore, left Makka "with the declining day," as the Arabs said, or when the sun had passed the zenith, and the heat was a little less oppressive.

Presently one of the outriders of the caravan rang a bell. The bell alerted all travellers that the caravan was ready to march. The crouching camels were made to stand, much against their will, and they showed their displeasure by protesting and snorting but took their position in the long train. About three hours before sunset, the leader of the caravan gave a signal, and the caravan was set in motion.

The caravan headed toward the north. The folks and the friends of the travellers lingered for some more time waving at them and watching, as the caravan receded into the distance. When the last camel disappeared beyond the hills, they also dispersed, and went to their homes.

The new travellers rode pillion with the experienced travellers who showed them the sights which were familiar to them, and explained their peculiarities to the former. Maysara pointed out many interesting

sights to Muhammad. The latter also recognized all the landmarks that he had seen on the road which he had traversed 13 years earlier with his uncle.

Nothing had changed in those 13 years. Maysara proved to be a lively companion who could tell many pertinent stories and could recount numerous interesting incidents from his earlier travels. Muhammad found that other travellers were also cordial and friendly.

After nearly a month, the caravan arrived at its destination in Syria. Billeting arrangements had already been made for the weary travellers in an inn, and they all wanted to rest after enduring the rigors of a month-long journey over difficult terrain and in searing heat. They could take as much as a week to recuperate their vitality.

When the merchants had rested their aching limbs and were refreshed once again, they went into the market–place to dispose of the goods which they had brought from Makka. Some of it they sold against cash, and some of it they bartered for the Syrian goods. They had also to buy merchandize for the home market, and they sought and found many profitable bargains. These transactions could take anywhere from two to four months.

Muhammad also sold his cargo and bought new cargo. Though for him it was his first commercial venture, he did not falter, from lack of experience, in conducting business transactions. In fact, he surprised Maysara by his "professionalism" in the trade. Maysara also noted his perspicacity as a negotiator and his acumen and probity as a salesman. Muhammad protected the interests of both his employer and his customers. And yet, he made more profit for Khadija than she had ever made ever since she had taken charge of her father's business at his death. And the cargo he bought in Syria for her, was superb in quality and was certain to fetch high prices in Makka, as it did.

In Syria whoever met Muhammad, was impressed by him. He had a striking appearance that made him unforgettable to anyone who saw him once.

Though Muhammad was busy in selling, in negotiating, in investigating the market, and in buying, Maysara noted that he nevertheless found time to be alone with himself. For Maysara, these silent sessions of Muhammad were rather mysterious, but he did not interrupt them. He didn't know it then that his young master was in the habit of reflecting on the state and destiny of man.

In Syria, Muhammad met many Christians and Jews. He had assumed that each of these two groups would be "monolithic." But to his surprise, they were not. Both of them were splintered into many subgroups, and the mode of worship of each of them was different from that of the others. Who among them was right and who was wrong? It was a question that intrigued Muhammad. The quest for an answer to this question, and other kindred questions kept him awake at nights when everyone else had gone to sleep.

Eventually, when all sale and purchase transactions were completed, and presents for families and

friends were procured, the caravan returned to Makka. For the homesick travellers, homecoming is always an occasion for rejoicing. It's an occasion full of anticipation as one is going to meet one's loved ones whom one has missed for many months. The weary travellers cannot wait long enough to hear the merry laughter of their children, and they know that when that heavenly moment comes, they would not be able to withhold their tears, still less to conceal them. They know from long experience that there would be much laughter but also there would be many tears – the tears of joy. Laughter and Tears mixed freely on such blessed and blissful occasions.

The arrival of a caravan always generated much excitement in the city. It was, in fact, a festive occasion for everyone living in Makka and the surrounding areas. The "docks" where the "fleets" of the "ships of the desert" (i.e. the camels), unloaded their passengers and cargo, were the scenes of great animation. Most of the citizens and even the roving, nomadic tribesmen, found the hustle and bustle of a newly–arrived caravan a welcome change in the tempo of life.

R.V.C. Bodley

The arrivals and departures of caravans were important events in the lives of the Meccans. Almost everyone in Mecca had some kind of investment in the fortunes of the thousands of camels, the hundreds of men, horses, and donkeys which went out with hides, raisins, and silver bars, and came back with oils, perfumes, and manufactured goods from Syria and Egypt and Persia, and with spices and gold from the south. (The Messenger – the Life of Mohammed, 1946)

People came to greet their loved ones who were returning home after an absence of six months. Many among them came with mixed feelings – feelings of hope mixed with feelings of fear. Once anyone left the city with a caravan, there was no way for his folks to know if they would ever see him alive again. Some travellers died on the long journey and were buried in places which were remote, and were inaccessible. Their kith and kin could never visit their graves.

And it was only when a caravan arrived that the Makkans could hear news of the world outside the peninsula. The Arabs lived in those days, very much in total isolation from the rest of the world. With that world, they had only one tangible link and that was the caravan.

Almost every Makkan invested money in the caravan trade. The rich ones among them could visit foreign countries for extended periods of many months. But people with limited means had to stay home. They, therefore, gave their goods to a trustworthy agent to sell, and they gave him money to buy the goods which were in demand in Arabia but were available only in the markets of Syria, Yemen, Abyssinia and Egypt. When their agents brought those goods to Makka, they sold them and made a profit on their sales. It was a system which, after long years of experience, they had found to be reasonably workable.

The merchants and the agents in the caravans also brought back with them exotic gifts and presents for their folks and friends, as per ancient custom. Everyone was eager to see those gifts which conjured up before their eyes the pictures of the riches of Syria and the luxury of the Persian and the Roman Empires.

Upon entering Makka, Muhammad first went into the precincts of the Kaaba where he made the customary seven circuits, and then he went to see his employer. He gave her a detailed account of the journey and the business transactions he had conducted on her behalf. Later, he briefed his uncle, Abu Talib, on the highlights of his experience as a trader.

Maysara, the slave of Khadija, had his own story to tell her. He told her the story of the journey to and from Syria, and of the profits that Muhammad had made for her. But for him, far more interesting than the story of a successful trading mission, was the character and the personality of Muhammad himself. He was full of admiration for Muhammad's talents as a businessman. He told Khadija that Muhammad's foresight was fail–safe; his judgment was infallible; and his perception was unerring. He also mentioned to her Muhammad's affableness, his courtesy and his condescension.

Khadija found the story fascinating, and she posed many questions to Maysara about her new steward, Muhammad. She probably would not be surprised at all if Maysara had told her that Muhammad was the most extraordinary individual he had ever seen and who was capable of doing the most extraordinary things.

On the following day, Waraqa bin Naufal came to see Khadija. He too wanted to hear the news that travellers brought from abroad. The news that interested him most was that of the old conflict between the Persian and the Roman Empires. Each of those empires wished to establish its own hegemony over the entire region called the "Fertile Crescent." It is also probable that like other citizens, Waraqa too had invested money in the export and import trade of Makka, and he wanted to know how the caravan had fared business wise.

Khadija told her cousin the whole story as she had heard it from Muhammad himself and from Maysara. She also mentioned that her new steward had made unprecedented profits for her.

Waraqa also talked with Maysara about the journey and about Muhammad. Maysara, however, wanted to talk only about Muhammad. Nothing else seemed to interest him, business transactions least of all.

When Waraqa had heard the long story, he is said to have plunged into deep thought. After a long pause, he said to Khadija: "Judging by what you and Maysara have told me about Muhammad, and also judging from what I know about him, it seems to me that he has all the qualities, attributes, characteristics and potentialities of the messengers of God. He might, in fact, be destined to become one of them in the times to come."

By peering into the darkness of pagan Arabia, Waraqa was enabled, perhaps by his prescience, to espy glimmerings of the Light of Islam, soon to appear on the horizon, and in Muhammad perhaps he recognized the Bringer of that Light.

Many books on the life of Muhammad Mustafa, the future Prophet of Islam (may Allah bless him and his Ahlul-Bayt) have recorded a number of miracles alleged to have taken place during his journey to, and his sojourn, in Syria. A. Yusuf Ali, the translator and commentator of Quran Majid, writes as follows in this regard:

"No apostle performed any Miracle or showed forth any "Signs," except as God willed. God's Will (Mashiyat) is an all-wise, universal Plan, which is not formed for the benefit of one tribe or millat or of one age or country. The greatest Miracle in history was and is the Quran. We can apprehend its beauty and grandeur to-day as much as did the people of Mustafa's day, -even more, as our collective knowledge of nature and of God's creation has increased."

Elsewhere, A. Yusuf Ali says: "The Signs sent to the holy Prophet Muhammad, were: (1) the Ayats of the Quran, and (2) his life and work, in which God's Plan and Purpose were unfolded."

It appears that Muhammad's charm and charisma had worked upon Khadija also. Like Maysara, she too became his admirer, and how could anyone help but become his admirer. Khadija had known him to be a gentle, a modest, a quiet and an unobtrusive young man. She also knew that the Makkans called him Sadiq and Amin. And now he had revealed his ability as a businessman also. His proficiency and savvy were part of his charisma. Her new assessment of Muhammad, therefore, was that he was no mere starry–eyed dreamer but also was a practical man of affairs. This assessment prompted her decision to "draft" Muhammad as the manager of her business in all future expeditions.

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