

Banu Hashim – Before the Birth of Islam

In the fifth century A.D. a man called Qusay, was born in the tribe of Quraysh. He won great honor and fame for his tribe by his wisdom. He rebuilt the Kaaba which was in a state of disrepair, and he ordered the Arabs to build their houses around it. He also built the “town hall” of Makkah, the first one in Arabia.

The leaders of the various clans gathered in this hall to ponder upon their social, commercial, cultural and political problems. Qusay formulated laws for the supply of food and water to the pilgrims who came to Makkah, and he persuaded the Arabs to pay a tax for their support.

Edward Gibbon

Qusay, born about A.D. 400, the great-grandfather of Abdul-Muttalib, and consequently fifth in the ascending line from Mohammed, obtained supreme power at Mecca. (*The decline and fall of the Roman Empire*)

Qusay died in A.D. 480, and his son, Abd Manaf, took charge of his duties. He too distinguished himself by his ability. He was noted for his generosity and good judgment. He was succeeded by his son Hashim.

It was this Hashim who gave his name to the clan which became famous in history as Banu Hashim. Hashim was an extraordinary man. It was he who made the Quraysh merchants and merchant princes. He was the first man who instituted the two caravan journeys of Quraysh, summer and winter, and the first to provide *thareed* (broth) to the Arabs. But for him, the Arabs might have remained shepherds forever.

Enlightened and benevolent leadership and generosity were only two out of many qualities which Muhammad, the future prophet, “inherited” from his fore-fathers. Hashim was married to a woman of Yathrib and from her he had a son – Abdul Muttalib. In due course, Abdul Muttalib was to succeed his father as the chief of the clan of Hashim.

Edward Gibbon

The grandfather of Mohammed (Abdul Muttalib), and his lineal ancestors, appear in foreign and domestic transactions as the princes of their country; but they reigned, like Pericles at Athens, or the Medici at Florence, by the opinion of their wisdom and integrity; their influence was divided with their patrimony.

The tribe of Koreish, by fraud or force (sic), had acquired the custody of the Kaaba; the sacerdotal office devolved through four lineal descents to the grandfather of Mohammed; and the family of Hashemites, from whence he sprang, was the most respectable and sacred in the eyes of their country.

Mohammed's descent from Ismael was a national privilege or fable (sic); but if the first steps of the pedigree are dark and doubtful (sic), he could produce many generations of pure and genuine nobility; he sprang from the tribe of Koreish and the family of Hashim, the most illustrious of the Arabs, the princes of Mecca, and the hereditary guardians of the Kaaba. (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

Hashim had a younger brother called Al-Muttalib, the son of Abd Manaf. For a time, he was chief of the clan, and when he died, his nephew – Abdul Muttalib – the son of Hashim, succeeded him as the new chief. Abdul Muttalib exhibited all the qualities which had made the names of his father and grandfather great and famous.

As noted before, the city of Makkah, like the rest of Arabia, was without a government and without a ruler, but it was dominated by the tribe of Quraysh. Quraysh was composed of twelve clans, and Banu Hashim was one of them. Reacting to the depravity of the times, the members of Banu Hashim, were prompted, a half-century before the birth of Muhammad, to make some tentative efforts to arrest the moral decline of the Arabs and to improve the social, economic and intellectual climate of the country.

They, therefore, forged the *League of the Virtuous*. The major aims of the League were to prevent wars from breaking out and to protect the weak and the defenseless from their enemies.

The Banu Hashim also interested itself in the economic welfare of the Arabs, and inaugurated a system of trade with neighboring countries by sending caravans to Syria in summer and to Yemen in winter, as noted before. These caravans left Makkah loaded with such products as date fruit, harness for horses and camels, blankets made from wool or camel hair; perfumes and aromatic herbs; spices, incense, hides and skins of the desert animals, and pedigreed horses. They brought back with them textiles, olive oil, weapons, coffee, fruits and grain.

Both the *League of the Virtuous* and the caravan trade were unquestionably great gifts of the Banu Hashim to the Arabs. But their greatest gift, not only to the Arabs, but to the whole world, was going to be the child to be called Muhammad, the son of Abdullah ibn Abdul Muttalib and Amina bint Wahab.

He was going to be the greatest benefactor not only of the Arabs but of all mankind. One of the notable events that took place during the incumbency of Abdul Muttalib as the guardian of Kaaba, was the invasion of Makkah by an Abyssinian army led by the Christian general, Abraha. The attempt to capture

Makkah failed as reported in the following verses of the Holy Qur'an.

“And He sent against them flights of birds, Striking them with stones of baked clay, Then He made them like an empty field of stalks and straw, all eaten up.” (Chapter 105, Verses 3, 4, 5.)

Since the invaders had brought some elephants with them, the year of their campaign came to be known as the “Year of the Elephant”. The Year of the Elephant coincides with the year A.D. 570 which also happens to be the year of the birth of Muhammad, the future prophet. The invading army withdrew from Makkah, and the terms of truce were negotiated, on behalf of the city of Makkah, by Abdul Muttalib.

Sir John Glubb

In 570 Abraha, the Christian Abyssinian viceroy of the Yemen marched on Mecca. Quraish were too timid or too weak to oppose the Abyssinian army and Abdul Muttalib, at the head of a deputation, went out to negotiate with Abraha. (*The Great Arab Conquests, 1963*)

One of the distant cousins of Hashim was one Abd Shams. A certain Umayya who claimed to be his son, was jealous of Abdul Muttalib's ascendancy and prestige. At one time, he made an attempt to grab his power and authority but failed. The failure rankled in his heart. He nursed a hatred against Abdul Muttalib and his children, and passed it on to his own sons and grandsons who came to be known as the Banu Umayya.

But there was more than mere tribal jealousy in the hostility of the Banu Umayya toward Banu Hashim. The two clans were the antithesis of each other in character and temperament, and in their outlook on and attitude toward life, as the events were soon to reveal when the former led the pack in opposition to Islam.

The Banu Hashim were destined to be the bulwark of Islam. God Himself chose them for this glorious destiny. Ibn Khaldun, the famous historian and sociologist, writes in his *Muqaddimah* (Prolegomena) that all true prophets must enjoy the support of some powerful group. This support, he says, is necessary, because it serves as a buffer that protects them against their antagonists and gives them a measure of security without which they cannot carry out their Divine mission.

In the case of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, the Banu Hashim constituted the “powerful group” that protected him from the malevolence of the Banu Umayya, provided him security and enabled him to carry out his Divine mission. Abdul Muttalib had ten sons. Four of them became famous in history. They were:

1. Abdullah, the father of Muhammad.
2. Abu Talib, the father of Ali.
3. Hamza, the hero-martyr of the battle of Uhud.

4. Abbas, the forebear of the Abbasi caliphs of Baghdad.

Abdullah and Abu Talib were the children of the same mother whereas the other eight sons of Abdul Muttalib were born of his other wives.

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