Muhammad’s life did not start out remarkably. He was born in the Hashim clan of the Quraysh, the leading tribe that controlled Makkah. However, the Hashim clan had fallen on hard times and was in decline.\(^1\) This was exacerbated by Muhammad’s own immediate circumstances, for his father died around the time he was born and his mother died six years later. His father hailed from Makkah, and his mother, via previous generations, from Madinah. Due to the latter, the young lad was taken by his widowed mother at times to visit his maternal relatives. When Muhammad’s mother died, his grandfather, \(\acute{A}bd\) al-Muttalib, took charge of the orphaned boy to ensure he was raised in Makkah. Thus, Muhammad had a foot in two worlds, and both would play a significant role in his life.

His tutelage under his grandfather would last but two years. With \(\acute{A}bd\) al-Muttalib’s death, Muhammad was taken under the wing of his paternal uncle, Abu Talib, to be raised as one of his own. However, while Muhammad was certainly cared for, his future looked bleak. He was an orphaned child now cared for by an uncle who himself had sons. Therefore, Muhammad could lay no legitimate claim to any inheritance because the lion’s share of such would typically go to the eldest natural-born son. Abu Talib’s two sons, Ja’far bin Abu Talib and \(\acute{A}li\) bin Abu Talib, would have priority of any inheritance and family blessing, leaving little for their cousin.
This did not mean that Abu Talib did not teach important lessons to his adopted child, for the early evidence indicates that Muhammad was taught the merchant’s vocation. He learned to ply the trade routes northward to Syria and certainly traveled to the various trade fairs in the region. If we are to accept the early evidence at face value, Muhammad gained a reputation for shrewd but honest bargaining. His reputation became sufficiently well known that he even began to act as a small banker for a number of the Quraysh in Makkah. As both a merchant and banker, Muhammad developed significant contacts, but these appear to be largely confined to the area of Makkah because people of the surrounding tribes did not know who he was once he announced his prophetic calling. His contact and support base was
therefore primarily local to Makkah, yet still retaining familial ties to Madinah.

Muhammad’s slow mercantile rise within Qurayshi circles mirrored the apparent gradual decline of the propertied shaykhs. The tribal shaykhs were local and regional leaders who established law and order and served as the judges of disputes. Their power was largely based on landed wealth, making them property rich but cash poor. One of their roles was that of the dispenser of welfare within their tribe, and this welfare was usually disbursed in kind rather than in any type of monetary instrument. But, as Makkah began to rise in importance as a waypoint for mercantile trade along the western caravan route, the authority of the shaykhs became subject to challenge.

It has largely been accepted as an established fact that the Quraysh were great traders of western Arabia who controlled the trade route between the eastern Byzantine Empire and the riches of the east. This interpretation has been effectively challenged by some, but this does not diminish the role of Makkah. Instead, it actually highlights more effectively what was probably taking place. The ascendancy of Islam in Arabia as a Qurayshi-dominated religious creed has possibly led to the influx of information that emphasized their trade while ignoring that of others. What we do know is that Qurayshi trade was largely regional, and that they were probably not the purveyors of eastern riches to expectant Byzantine markets. However, the fact that they were respected for maintaining law and order at various trade fairs indicates that they may have had a significantly different role than what has been portrayed by some. While being small traders themselves, the Quraysh may have gained a reputation as the guardians of caravans for others, such as the Yemenis from the south, a point attested to by some during the fairs. This would help to explain their significance while being consistent with what evidence we have regarding their trade.

Makkah and the Quraysh found themselves at an interesting crossroads between the Byzantines and the Sasanid Persians. For several centuries both empires had engaged in intermittent conflict along their nebulous frontiers, thereby disrupting life and trade in the lands between the two powers. Most of this fighting took place in northern Arabia, Syria, and Armenia. However, both powers became increasingly interested in southern Arabia, partly due to efforts by merchants to continue trading despite the disruption caused by ongoing wars. While such eastern trade was not the staple of the Byzantine Empire, it was
of some interest, and merchants sought ways to avoid the dangers of war and the high cost of tariffs imposed by local nobles, not to mention issued orders from Byzantine officials that such trade should cease. It would appear that they found this route by going through southern Arabia.9

The Persian nobles, in an effort to control what they may have regarded as illicit trade—that is, trade that circumvented their imposed tariffs—and spurred on by the decision of the Byzantine Emperor Justin to cease tribute payments, decided to invade Yemen around 572, only two years after the traditional birth date of Muhammad.10 Prior to this, the Abyssinians had conquered the region, and now the small army of invading Persians destroyed the occupying Abyssinian force and took control of the territory.11 This placed them in an ideal position to control both the Red Sea and the western caravan trade routes, and to impose tariffs or blockade these routes altogether. However, as
a sidelight of the greater Byzantine-Persian conflict, the occupation of Yemen languished as the Persians found themselves under intense pressure from renewed Byzantine operations. By 591, the Byzantines had helped Khusrau II, deposed son of the Persian emperor, seize the throne and, as the price for victory, imposed an exacting toll upon the Persians—the surrender of the disputed lands of Armenia.12

When Heraclius seized the reins of the Byzantine Empire in 610, the Persians would dispute his claim to the throne and engage in a massive offensive into Syria, Anatolia, and Egypt, marching to within a mile of Constantinople. The Persian conquests were so significant that it supposedly influenced one of the Qur’anic recitations.13 By a brilliant ruse and employing an indirect approach, Heraclius sailed from Constantinople in 614, and landed on the coast of Syria to invade the hinterlands of the Persian army then camped on the doorstep of his throne.

The combination of internal turmoil and external conflict meant that the Persians in Yemen withered on the vine. Intermarrying with Yemeni women, they settled in the territory and developed the government and trade of the region. By the time Muhammad had declared his prophethood, these Persian soldiers and their descendants in Yemen had become known as the 'Abna, who would play an interesting and largely unexamined role in the Riddah, or Apostates War, after Muhammad’s death.14 The 'Abna seemingly regulated the southern portion of the western caravan trade route but, with less control from Persia, probably decided that flourishing trade was far more in their interest than the vagaries of imperial politics. As a result, the trade routes began to expand, which led to the rise of the merchant class in western Arabia and Makkah.

Because the tribal shaykhs were cash poor, their only influence over the people of their tribes was through general consensus upheld by tradition and the in-kind largess they lavished upon their people. The growing wealth of merchants meant that these traders could break free of the politics and social strictures of the shaykhs and chart their own course, capable of buying virtually anything they needed to support them in their endeavors. As a consequence, the more wealthy merchants began to build their own small fortifications that were separate from their tribal kinsmen, employed small bands of men as retainers to protect their lives and property, and used their wealth to ignore selected decisions coming from the body of tribal leaders. Makkah was governed by a tribal council called the mala’, in which the shaykhs held
However, they had little power to force any clan of the Quraysh to accept a decision, and this lack of authority trickled down to the merchants, who rose like a phoenix in the towns to demand a level of independence unheard of in Arabian life.

Most Arabian municipalities were a series of small fortified communities interlocked by regional self-interest. While these small communities, not much larger than a modern suburban block, were walled with limited means of ingress and egress, few towns and cities in Arabia had a single fortified wall encompassing the totality of the residents. Although without an outer wall, the towns and cities still represented a measure of unity in a given region due to some common interest. Some merchants challenged this approach and began to build small castles on the outside of the towns and cities, asserting their independence not only economically but physically as well. This was a direct challenge to the traditional authority of the shaykhs. When Muhammad was a young man, he was able to witness and participate in some of events that were generated by the conflicts between propertied and moneyed classes. The question must be asked: on which side was Muhammad?

Muhammad’s state of affairs must be recalled. He was an orphaned son raised by an uncle from a clan that was apparently in decline. By all measures of traditional Qurayshi or Arabian life, Muhammad’s future was bleak. Nevertheless, by the time he was twenty-five years old, he had at least gained some status as a merchant, although he was still unmarried and without a son, both issues that were of critical importance to enhance one’s stature in the community. This naturally placed a considerable stress on his life as he struggled to choose between the individualism of the merchant class and the collectivism of the tribe. Two issues can illustrate this conflict.

Muhammad’s circumstances clearly highlight that he had difficulty with the traditional concept of inheritance. Since the eldest son received the lion’s share of the family wealth, it meant that Muhammad, an adopted orphan, had no claim to any inheritance at all, relegating him to obscurity and relative poverty within the clan. For this reason he would individually empathize with those of like circumstance, desirous to change the customary means of allotments. Yet in contrast, he obviously liked and accepted the traditional concept of tribal welfare, along with the largess that was distributed by the shaykhs to their people as a means of wealth redistribution and collective social control. The merchants, in their push for independence, were neglecting the
perceived role of spreading their rising wealth to others, and this was indeed one of Muhammad’s primary criticisms of them in the early days of his prophetic ministry. But while he criticized what he viewed as the stinginess of the merchants, he did not demand that they at this early stage endorse the collective notion of the worship of Allah alone, and for several years there was some acceptance of his message among the Quraysh. These two issues of inheritance and welfare largess offer examples of how Muhammad approached the tension between individual and collective prerogatives. While he sided with individuals in cases where he felt personal empathy, he tended to lean toward demands regarding a more collective outcome.

The world of the Quraysh had developed over several hundred years until they had gained control of Makkah and its important religious shrine, the ka’bah. Tradition had it that Adam had built the ka’bah and then implanted into its eastern corner the hajaru al-aswad, or black stone that had been thrown from heaven to land at his feet. The Noahic flood destroyed the ka’bah, and it was subsequently rebuilt by Abraham and his son Ishmael. It was supposed to be, according to the traditions, an exact replica of the one in paradise, and positioned exactly beneath its location as well. The ka’bah, as important as it was, was not without competitors. Another shrine, apparently calling itself ka’bah, had been built in Najran in Yemen, to the south of Makkah, while the Christian Abyssinians who later conquered Yemen built a church there to draw pilgrims away from Makkah. A well-respected and time-honored religious shrine meant economic activity; thus, competitors to the ka’bah in Makkah meant a loss of economic status and wealth, a point not to be forgotten in the context of Muhammad’s later message and his focus on the ka’bah of Makkah.

With the shrine came responsibilities and privileges that were to be shouldered by selected groups in Makkah. After some internecine struggles, the Qusay clan of the Quraysh seized control of the five offices that had developed connected to the care and maintenance of the ka’bah, and the pilgrims that came with it. These responsibilities also entailed privilege, another point critical to Muhammad’s mission. The offices involved holding the keys to the ka’bah; exercising authority over governing assemblies; handing out war banners, or liwa’; watering the pilgrims from the sacred well of Zamzam, or siqayah; feeding these pilgrims, or rifadah. Of these offices, only one involved the direct contribution of money, or a tax, to a treasury, that being the rifadah.