

The Foster Parents

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It was the custom of all the great families of Arab towns to send their sons, soon after their birth, into the desert, to be suckled and weaned and spend part of their childhood amongst one of the Bedouin desert tribes.

Nor had Mecca any reason for being an exception, since epidemics were very frequent and the rate of infant mortality was very high.

Some of the tribes had a high reputation for nursing and rearing children, and amongst these were the Bani Saad Ibin Bakr, an outlying branch of Hawazin, whose territory lay to the south-east of Mecca. Ameenah particularly was in favour of entrusting her son to the care of a woman of this tribe.

Halimah and Harith Mohammad's Foster Parents

They came periodically to Quraysh for nurselings, and some themselves were expecting. Their journey to Mecca on this occasion was described in after-years by one of their number. Halimah, the daughter of Abu Dhuayb, who was accompanied by her husband, Harith, and a recently born son of their own whom she was nursing. She recalled, "It was a year of drought, and we had nothing left. I set forth on a grey she-ass of mine, and we had with us an old she-camel which could not yield one drop of milk. We were kept awake all night by our son who was wailing for hunger, for I had not enough in my breasts to feed him. And that ass of mine was so weak and so emaciated that I often kept the others in the caravan waiting."

She told how they went on their way with nothing to hope for except a fall of rain which would enable the camel and the ass to graze enough for their udders to swell a little, but by the time they reached Mecca no rain had fallen.

Once there they set about looking for nurselings, and Ameenah offered her son first to one and then to another until finally she had tried them all and they had all refused. Halimah recalled, "That was only because we hoped for some favour from the boy's father. 'But An orphan!' We said,

'What will his mother and his grandfather be able to do for us?'

Not that they would have wanted direct payment for their services, since it was considered dishonourable for a woman to take a fee for suckling a child. The recompense they hoped for,

though less direct and less immediate, was of a far wider scope. This interchange of benefits between townsman and nomad was in the nature of things, for each was poor where the other was rich, and rich where the other was poor. The nomad had the age-old God-given way of life to offer, the way of Abel. The sons of Cain.

For it was Cain who built the first villages – had possessions and power. The advantage for the Bedouin was to make an enduring link with one of the great families. The foster-mother gained a new son who would look on her as a second mother and feel a filial duty to her for the rest of his life. He would also feel himself a brother to her own children.

Nor was the relationship merely a nominal one. The Arabs hold that the drinking of milk from a woman's breast is one of the channels of heredity and that a suckling drinks qualities into his nature from the nurse who suckles him. But little or nothing could be expected from the foster-child himself until he grew up, and meantime his father could normally be relied on to fulfil the duties of his son.

A grandfather, well that was too remote; and in this case they would have known that Abd Al-Muttalib was an old man who could not reasonably be expected to live much longer. When he died, his sons, not his grandson, would be his heirs. As to Ameenah, she was poor; and as to the boy himself, his father had been too young to have acquired wealth. He had left his son no more than five camels, a small flock of sheep and goats, and one slave girl. Abdulllah's son was indeed a child of one of the great families. But he was by far the poorest nurseling that these women were offered that year.

On the other side, though the foster-parents were not expected to be rich, they must not be too poverty-stricken, and it was evident that Halimah and her husband were poorer than any of their companions.

Whenever the choice lay between her and another, the other was preferred and chosen; and it was not long before every one of the Bani Saad women except Halimah had been entrusted with a babe. Only the poorest nurse was without a nurseling; and nurseling was without a nurse.

"When it was time to leave Mecca,"

Said Halimah,

"I told my husband, that I hated to return in the company of my friends without having taken a babe to suckle."

He said,

"As thou wilt. I shall go to that orphan may be that God will bless us in him."

So I went and took him, for reason save that I could find none but him. So I carried him back to

where our mounts were stationed, and no sooner had I put him in my bosom that my breasts overflowed with milk for him. He drank his fill with him foster-brother drank likewise his fill. They both slept and my husband went to that old she camal of ours, and lo, behold! her udders were full. He milked her and drank of her drank of her milk, and I also drank with him until we could drink no more and our hunger was well satisfied. We spent together the best of all nights

and my husband in the morning said to me,

"By God, Halimah, it is a blessed creature that thou hast taken."

I said to him,

"That is indeed my hope!"

Then we set out, and I rode upon my ass and carried him with me on her back. She outstripped the whole troop, nor could any of their asses keep pace with her.

"Confound thee!"

They cried out to me,

"Wait for us! Is it not this ass of thine, the same ass that thou didst come on."

I said to them.

"Yeah by God. She is the very same. Some wonder hath befallen her!"

We reached our tents in the Bani Saad country, and I know of no place on God's earth more barren than that then was. But after we brought him to live with us, my flock would come home to me replete at every eventide and full of milk. We milked them and drank, when others had no drop of milk, and our neighbours would say to their shepards.

"Out upon you, go graze your flocks where Harith grazeth his!"

Yet still their flocks came in hungry home, yielding no or little milk, while ours came well fed, with milk in plenty. And we ceased not to enjoy this increase and this bounty from Allah(swt) until the babe's two years had passed, and I weaned him gladly.

"He was growing well,"

She continued, and none of the boys could match him for growth. By the time he was two years old he was a well made, and we took him again to his mother Ameenah, although we were eager that he should stay with us: So Halimah pleaded to her.

"Leave my little son with me until he grows strong, for I fear lest he be stricken with the plague of Mecca."

And we importuned her until she gave him once more into our keeping and we brought him again to our home, in the wild desert.

Mohammad is returned to his Mother Ameenah

After a while Halimah took him once more to Mecca to visit with his mother. And Ameenah was happy to see her son and she picked him up and embraced him and said out aloud,
"Great things are in store for my little son."

She saw that Halimah was confused and Ameenah then told her of her pregnancy, and of the bright light she had been conscious of carrying within her. Halimah was moved to tears, but
this time Ameenah decided to keep her son.

"Leave him with me, and a good journey home."

.And Hamilah was deeply saddened and embraced the little lad and wept