

Essay Three — Muhammad
“Early Persecution in Mecca”

Russell J Lowke, December 18th, 2001.

In 1976, Moustapha Akkad released *The Message*, a film about Muhammad and the beginning of Islam. In contrast to the success of religious masterpieces of the fifties and sixties, such as *The Ten Commandments*, *The Robe*, and *King of Kings*, Hollywood concluded that a film portraying Muslim origins would never succeed due to the necessity of portraying the Prophet Muhammad, a concept highly sacrilegious to Muslims.¹ Akkad used various cinematic techniques to avoid this problem, and, to insure Islamic acceptance of the film, hired numerous scholars to oversee the script. A proclamation at the beginning of the film states, “The scholars and historians of Islam — The University of Al-Azhar in Cairo, The High Islamic Congress of the Shiat in Lebanon, have approved the accuracy and fidelity of this film.” However, there remain notable inaccuracies — in particular, the film highly exaggerates the persecution of Muslims in Mecca during the early years of Islam to generate sympathy.

When Muhammad preached in Mecca, his message was mostly religious, although there was implicit a critique of the conduct and attitudes of the merchant class.² Some of the Quraysh, the ruling tribe of Mecca, started a campaign to discredit and depose of him, as they regarded him as an enemy of the profitable pilgrimages to (then non-Muslim) Mecca.³ Attempts were made to convince Abu Talib, the chief of Muhammad’s clan, to withdraw protection (*awliya*) from Muhammad. Without protection, he could be killed with impunity.⁴ Abu Talib was told that, “[Muhammad] has cursed our gods, insulted our religion, mocked our way of life and accused our forefathers of error; either you must stop him or you must let us get at him... and we will rid you of him.”⁵ Once it became evident that Abu Talib would not remove his protection, the Quraysh offered bribery. Muhammad was offered a fuller share in trade, and a marriage alliance with one of the wealthiest families if he softened his criticism. These offers were decisively rejected,⁶ and Muhammad

¹ *The making of an Epic — Muhammad*, (Filmco International: 1976).

² “Muhammad” Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

³ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad*, (New York:HarperCollins, 1992):119.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Muhammad” Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

responded by saying, “By God, if they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left on condition that I abandon this course, until God has made it victorious, or I perish therein, I would not abandon it.”⁷ Subsequent to this statement, there commenced the general persecution of the followers of Muhammad, particularly against those who were more vulnerable, such as slaves and those without clan protection.

Director Akkad does present Meccan sentiment well when he depicts Abu Sofyan chastising a follower of Muhammad, “...doesn’t Muhammad realize, we live by giving housing to the gods. We own the Ka’bah. Every year the tribes of Arabia come here to Mecca pray and to buy from us. Now were we to replace three hundred gods with just one... Where would Mecca be then?” Mecca had transformed the Ka’bah, a building thought to be built by Abraham as the house of God, into a house of idolatry, keeping inside over three hundred images of various gods. It was visited annually by many pilgrims for prayer, and an armistice was necessary due to the intermixing of so many beliefs. This provided a perfect environment for trade, tying Mecca to the religious significance of the Ka’bah.⁸ By preaching monotheism, and criticizing the merchants, Muhammad appeared to threaten the economic stability of Mecca. The Quraysh and other Meccans responded by bringing economic pressure to bear on Muhammad’s supporters; in some families there was harassment of junior members who followed him, though there was little physical violence.⁹ Muhammad himself suffered only minor annoyances. Nevertheless, this period of persecution is remembered by Islam bitterly,¹⁰ and this bitterness is reflected in Akkad’s film.

At various points in the movie, subtle changes are made to the historical narrative that profoundly alter the impact of a series of events. In the scene where the slave Bilal is ordered to whip the obstinate Muslim that Abu Sofyan had chastised, Bilal refuses, knowing that the teachings of Muhammad offered him freedom. For his refusal, Bilal is tied down, whipped, and then crushed

⁷ Karen Armstrong:119.

⁸ *The making of an Epic — Muhammad*, (Filmco International: 1976).

⁹ "Muhammad" Encyclopædia Britannica Online.

¹⁰ Ibid.

under a huge stone. Throughout this ordeal he defiantly proclaims “One God, One God,” and is saved from death by his purchase by Abu Bakr, a close friend of Muhammad. Historically, Ummayah, the chief of the Jumah clan, frequently took his Abyssinian Muslim slave, Bilal, outside during the hottest part of the day, tying him up and leaving him exposed to the sun with a great stone on his chest. Bilal, undaunted, would loudly proclaim Allah as the one god, shouting “One! One!” and attracting the attention of Abu Baker, who, unable to bear hearing his suffering, brought him from Ummayah, and granted him freedom.¹¹ The differences between these two scenarios are subtle, but significant. Firstly, there is no historical evidence that Bilal invited punishment by refusing to whip a Muslim. In this tale, the film effectively exalts Bilal for his courage. Secondly, in reality, Ummayah was not seeking to kill Bilal. The film makes a martyr of Bilal, who is defiant to the point of sacrificing his own life.

Akkad uses the punishment of Bilal as a template to portray the systematic persecution of Muslims, thus exaggerating the localized contentions that occurred. Muslims are depicted as being tied, whipped, beaten and exposed. A whole group awaits imprisoned, listening to the cries of their brethren. A young Muslim is forced to watch his mother tortured by way of stretching on the ground. The scene is comparable to that of Bilal’s torment, only when the mother is questioned, “Who is your god?” She replies, “There is only one God, and Muhammad is the messenger of God!” Again, we see a strong correlation with Bilal exclaiming “One!” except this time the captors are so affronted that the mother is killed. When rescuers arrive, they find a further six tortured to death and a Muslim youth is told , “... [his] father and mother are the first Martyrs of Islam, they are promised paradise!”

Review of the literature indicates that this event is entirely fictitious. Clearly, some early Muslims did suffer, but it was often at the hands of their own families or clans. Khalid ibn Sa’id was locked up by his father and deprived of food and water;¹² the clan of Makhzum abused the

¹¹ Karen Armstrong:121.

¹² Karen Armstrong:122.

family of the freedman Ammar ibn Yasir so badly that his mother eventually died.¹³ However, these isolated cases of cruelty are not accurately depicted by Akkad, who implies that, at a minimum, seven Muslims were systematically killed, and many imprisoned. Were this the level of persecution, Muhammad would likely have fled Mecca. Instead, he remained until Abu Talib died and his protection was removed.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, *The Message*, although adhering faithfully to Islamic doctrine, is a dramatized and subjective account of the origin of Islam. Akkad manipulates facts to present a story that is engaging, and apparently realistic, but subtly misleading at crucial points. Occasionally, his cinematic tone becomes sanctimonious. Beginning with the depiction of Bilal and his punishment (or “correction”), the physical persecution of Muslims in Mecca is magnified, culminating in a fictitious scene involving the torture, death and imprisonment of unprotected followers, a scene perhaps inspired by the death of the mother of Ammar ibn Yasir. Directorially, Moustapha Akkad applies artistic license in amounts varying from subtly modifying an actual event to virtual fabrication of mass persecution in order to convey to audiences the drama of early Islam.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Karen Armstrong:124.

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