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The Message (1976) – A Landmark Film About Islam's Origins and Impact

The Message (Arabic title *Al-Risalah*), released in 1976, is a historical epic directed by Moustapha Akkad that chronicles the life of Prophet Muhammad and the birth of Islam. Notably, the film was made in two separate versions (Arabic and English) with an international cast – the English version stars Anthony Quinn as Hamza (the Prophet's uncle) and Irene Papas as Hind, while the Arabic version features Egyptian actor Abdullah Gheith and Syrian actress Mouna Wasef [1]. From its inception, *The Message* was envisioned as a bridge between cultures; as Akkad – a Syrian-American Muslim – explained, *"being a Muslim myself who lived in the West, I felt that it was my obligation, my duty, to tell the truth about Islam… [about] a religion that has a 700 million following, yet it's so little known"*, hoping the film could help *"bring this bridge, this gap to the West"* [2].

Despite (or perhaps because of) its ambitious subject, *The Message* sparked intense debate and faced significant hurdles upon release. Over time, however, it has come to be regarded as a cultural landmark in the Muslim world – a film that, four decades later, is **widely celebrated for its respectful portrayal of Islamic history** and its impact on Muslim audiences, even as it retains a unique place in global cinema.

Historical Setting and Story Overview

Set in the 7th century in western Arabia, *The Message* dramatizes the **formative events in early Islamic history**. The narrative covers approximately 23 years, from Muhammad's first divine revelations to the establishment of Islam in Mecca. In dramatizing this history, the film depicts many key moments and characters without ever showing the Prophet himself (more on that below). Major events and themes portrayed include:

- **The First Revelation and Early Converts:** Muhammad's encounter with the Archangel Gabriel and the beginning of his mission in Mecca, after which a small group of followers embraces the new faith despite persecution [3]. The film shows how Islam's message of monotheism and social justice attracted humble and oppressed Meccans, alarming the city's tribal leaders.
- **Persecution and Exile:** As the community of Muslims grows, they face hostility from the Quraysh (Mecca's ruling tribe). The film depicts the **boycott and oppression** of the early Muslims, including instances of torture of vulnerable followers. To escape harm, some believers migrate to Christian Abyssinia under the protection of its just king (portrayed in a memorable scene where the Muslim refugees recite Quranic verses about Jesus to prove their faith's kinship with Christianity) [4].
- **The Hijra to Medina:** Under mounting persecution, Muhammad's followers eventually undertake the Hijra (emigration) to Yathrib (Medina). There, they build the first mosque and form the nucleus of the **first Islamic community**, establishing a social order based on shared faith rather than tribal ties [5]. The film emphasizes the Prophet's role (unseen) in uniting the tribes of Medina (the Ansar and Muhajirun) and fostering principles of brotherhood, which laid the foundations of the Islamic polity.
- **Early Battles:** *The Message* also illustrates pivotal military conflicts arising from the Meccan-Quraysh opposition. It dramatizes the **Battle of Badr**, where a small Muslim force, against the odds, defeats a

larger Meccan army – portrayed as a vindication of the new faith's resolve. Conversely, the **Battle of Uhud** is shown as a harsh setback: the Muslims are routed after an initial advantage, and Muhammad's beloved uncle Hamza (played by Anthony Quinn) is killed in battle [6]. These scenes convey both the human cost of the struggle and the moral lessons learned (such as the dangers of disunity and disobedience, which led to defeat at Uhud).

- **Diplomacy and Triumph:** The film touches on the **Treaty of Hudaybiyyah** (a truce between Muslims and Meccans) and its aftermath. It shows figures like **Khalid ibn al-Walid** – initially a formidable opponent – eventually converting to Islam, signaling the turning of tides [7]. When the truce is broken, the Muslim army marches to Mecca. *The Message* culminates in the **peaceful conquest of Mecca**: the Prophet (unseen) grants amnesty to his former persecutors, pagan idols in the Kaaba are destroyed, and the call to prayer (adhan) is pronounced by Bilal – Islam's first muezzin – atop the Kaaba [8]. This moment, depicting the cleansing of the Kaaba, represents the triumph of monotheism in its holiest sanctuary.
- **The Farewell Sermon and Epilogue:** The film concludes with the Prophet's **Farewell Sermon** (delivered in the film via narration, since Muhammad is not shown), emphasizing core Islamic values of equality and unity. In an inspiring epilogue, footage of modern pilgrims circling the Kaaba is shown, as the voice of the adhan echoes around the world [9]. This ending visually connects the 7th-century story to the global Islamic community of today, underlining the film's message about Islam's enduring legacy.

Throughout these episodes, *The Message* balances historical drama with an educational tone – introducing non-Muslim viewers to Islam's tenets and key personalities (like Bilal, Hamza, Ali, and others) while reinforcing for Muslim audiences a sense of heritage. The **historical setting** is meticulously recreated, from the costumes and sets of **7th-century Mecca and Medina** to the battle sequences in the Arabian desert. While some details are simplified for narrative purposes, the film strives to cover the breadth of the Prophet's mission and the rise of Islam, making it function as both a cinematic story and a primer on Islamic history.

Production and Cinematic Production Details

Director Moustapha Akkad (left) on the set of *The Message*, speaking with actress Irene Papas (who portrayed Hind, a Meccan leader's wife) during filming. The film was an immense undertaking, shot on location in North Africa with thousands of extras and elaborate sets. In fact, *The Message* was an international co-production backed by resources from several Muslim-majority countries. **Akkad raised funding from nations including Libya, Kuwait, and Morocco**, ultimately assembling a then-hefty budget of about $17 million [10]. Filming began in 1974 and employed a crew of 300, along with some 40 principal actors (many roles had to be cast twice, for the English and Arabic versions) and over 5,000 extras for crowd scenes [10]. To recreate the city of Mecca as it looked in the 7th century, the production built a sprawling $700,000 replica of the Meccan town and the Kaaba near Marrakesh, Morocco [11]. Such attention to detail in set design and costuming gave the film an authentic, epic feel comparable to classic Hollywood biblical epics.

From the outset, Akkad filmed **two distinct versions of the movie** – one in English and one in Arabic – using the same sets and crew but different casts for each language [12]. This innovative approach was intended to ensure the film could speak directly to Western audiences and Muslim-world audiences alike. For the English release, seasoned Western actors were cast in key roles (Anthony Quinn as Hamza, Irene Papas as Hind, Michael Ansara as Abu Sufyan, etc.), lending the project international star power. Concurrently, an Arabic-language cast featuring well-known Middle Eastern actors (such as Abdullah Gheith as Hamza and Muna Wassef as Hind) performed the same scenes in Arabic [1]. This dual-version strategy was logistically complex, but it underscored the director's goal of making the story of Islam accessible across cultural and linguistic divides.

Cinematically, *The Message* was grand in scale and execution. Directed by Akkad (with veteran Hollywood filmmaker Andrew Marton credited as an associate director), the film employs the wide vistas and spectacle common to 1960s–70s epics. Battle sequences like Badr and Uhud were choreographed with hundreds of riders and infantry, achieving what **Variety** called "stunning photography" and "superbly rendered battle scenes" that give the film its visual sweep [13]. At the same time, intimate scenes – such as the Muslims' secret prayers in Mecca or Hamza's emotional rallying of the faithful – ground the epic in human drama. The **musical score** by Maurice Jarre (known for *Lawrence of Arabia*) blends sweeping orchestral themes with Middle Eastern motifs, further enhancing the atmosphere. Jarre's work on the film earned an **Academy Award nomination for Best Original Score** in 1977 [14], highlighting the film's high production values. *(The Message ultimately lost the Oscar to* Star Wars*, but Jarre's score has since become iconic for its stirring main theme.)*

Politically, the production of *The Message* had its own dramatic turns. Initially, filming was supported by the government of Morocco; however, partway through production, **pressure from Saudi Arabia (which objected to the project on religious grounds) led Moroccan authorities to withdraw their permission to film** [15]. Facing the loss of his sets and location, Akkad was forced to halt production – until Libya's leader, **Muammar Gaddafi**, stepped in to provide financing and new locations in Libya [12] [15]. With Gaddafi's backing, the team rebuilt sets in Libya and completed the film there. This intervention by Gaddafi was controversial (some saw it as the Libyan regime championing Islamic causes for influence), but it also saved the film from collapse. The multinational nature of the production – involving resources and actors from across the Middle East, North Africa, and even Hollywood – mirrored the film's pan-Islamic subject. In the end, Akkad managed to deliver a polished epic against considerable odds, though the financial investments meant *The Message* needed massive box-office returns to recoup costs (a goal it unfortunately did not meet, as discussed later).

Respectful Representation and Religious Sensitivities

One of the greatest challenges in making *The Message* was how to **portray the Prophet Muhammad and his companions in accordance with Islamic religious sensitivities**. In Islam (especially in Sunni traditions), visual depictions of the Prophet are strictly forbidden, as is assigning his role to an actor [16]. Akkad, fully aware of this, devised a creative solution that became the film's defining feature: **Muhammad is never seen on screen, nor is his voice ever heard** [16] [12]. The Prophet is essentially a *hidden protagonist* – present in spirit but invisible to the viewer. Key moments (like the revelations or Muhammad's dialogues) are conveyed indirectly. For example, when the Prophet receives the first revelation, the screen shows only his point of view or the reactions of others; when he speaks, other characters repeat his words or respond to an unseen figure just behind the camera. **Not only is the Prophet absent visually, "you never even see his shadow,"** actor Anthony Quinn noted of the film's careful staging [17].

To signify the Prophet's presence without violating religious taboos, Akkad employed a few subtle cinematic techniques. In some scenes, the camera itself adopts Muhammad's perspective – we see events as if through his eyes, with characters looking directly into the lens when addressing him. At other times, a gentle musical cue (an evocative **"light organ" melody) plays** when the Prophet's character is implied to be nearby [12]. The dialogue is structured so that companions echo Muhammad's words for the audience's benefit. For instance, we hear someone ask, "Messenger of God, what shall we do?", followed by the character listening and then paraphrasing the Prophet's guidance to others, rather than the Prophet's voice directly. This method, while unusual for a film, **allowed the story to be told without violating Islamic aniconism**. Islamic figures like the Prophet's wives and the caliphs are similarly absent from the screen (they are referred to but not shown), and even revered early converts like Ali ibn Abi Talib are not depicted by actors – focusing instead on a subset of companions whose portrayal was deemed acceptable.

In developing the script, Akkad took **extensive precautions to consult religious authorities** and ensure the portrayal was respectful. A board of Islamic scholars from several countries (including Egypt's Al-Azhar University) reviewed and vetted the script **page by page** before production [18]. This advisory process led to certain changes – for example, the film's original title *"Mohammad, Messenger of God"* was deemed potentially problematic, so it was shortened to the more generic **"The Message"** to avoid offense in promotional materials [18]. The scholarly advisors initially approved the screenplay and the novel approach of non-depiction. Despite these precautions, the project remained controversial in the eyes of some conservative clerics. After the film was completed, **some scholars who had first supported it withdrew their endorsement and denounced the finished film as "an insult to Islam,"** objecting to the very idea of dramatizing sacred history on screen [19].

Conservative critics argued that even without showing Muhammad, the film might inadvertently trivialize his message or lead to unapproved imaginative visualizations. There were also objections to portraying any **holy figures or the Prophet's family and close companions** via actors. (For instance, while *The Message* avoids showing Ali, Fatima, or Aisha, it does show figures like Hamza, Bilal, and Zayd – which, to hardliners, was still too much.) Such reactions underscore the fine line Akkad had to walk in respecting religious norms. **In the Sunni Muslim world, sensitivities were especially high**, and some viewed the film as a potential slippery slope. However, many other Muslims – including notable Shia authorities – saw the film as a commendable effort to honor Islamic history. *The Message* even earned praise from the High Islamic Shia *ulema* in Lebanon, who officially lauded the film's depiction of Islam as respectful and accurate [20]. This divergence in reception often fell along sectarian lines: **Sunni institutions tended to be more wary** of any

media about the Prophet, whereas **Shia leaders were somewhat more open**, given a Shia tradition of religious passion plays and imagery (within limits).

In summary, Akkad's approach to depicting the **indepictable** was groundbreaking. It demonstrated that a reverent film about Islam's prophet could be made without showing the prophet at all – a solution that one Islamic scholar, Khaled Abou El Fadl, praised as "genius" for bringing Muhammad's presence to life while *"respect[ing] the fact that most Muslims don't want the prophet to be personified by an actor"* [21]. This innovative narrative technique set *The Message* apart, though it also became a focal point for controversy and misunderstanding, as seen next.

Initial Reception, Controversies, and Censorship

Upon its release in 1976–1977, *The Message* encountered a **mixed and often tumultuous reception**, especially in the Muslim-majority world. While many ordinary Muslims were eager and curious to see the film, several governments and religious bodies moved quickly to ban or restrict it. **In a number of Muslim countries – including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt – the film was outright banned** from cinemas, largely due to religious objections and fear that it violated Islamic norms [22] [23]. These bans reflected the influence of conservative clerics who argued that the sanctity of the Prophet and his companions could not be upheld by any cinematic portrayal, no matter how indirect. In Saudi Arabia (home to Islam's holiest sites and a very strict stance on depictions of prophets), authorities not only prohibited the movie domestically but also exerted pressure abroad (as seen in their intervention during production in Morocco). Egypt's Al-Azhar, after initially advising on the film, ultimately refused to approve its showing. As a result, *The Message* struggled to get screens in the very regions whose history it depicted.

Beyond official bans, there was significant **grassroots controversy**. Rumors swirled in some communities that the film might contain blasphemous elements. One persistent false rumor claimed that actor Anthony Quinn actually portrayed Prophet Muhammad on screen, which provoked outrage among those who believed it. This misinformation had deadly consequences in the United States: in March 1977, as *The Message* was set for its U.S. premiere, a militant offshoot of the Nation of Islam (the "Hanafi" group led by Hamas Abdul Khaalis) **stormed three buildings in Washington, D.C., and took 149 hostages** [24]. The gunmen **demanded that *The Message* be destroyed and its release halted**, calling the film sacrilegious under their mistaken belief that it depicted Muhammad [24]. The standoff – known as the Hanafi Siege – lasted 39 hours and led to the deaths of a young radio reporter and a police officer, with many others injured [25]. This tragic incident, though sparked by a misunderstanding, demonstrated the charged emotions surrounding the film. As Akkad later lamented, *"the film's American box-office prospects never quite recovered from the unfortunate controversy"* [26]. Indeed, the U.S. distributor, fearful of further violence, pulled the movie from many theaters; *The Message* ended up with only a limited run in the United States, severely undercutting its commercial success.

The Hanafi Siege and the bans in various countries gave *The Message* a reputation as a "controversial" film, and it took years for these perceptions to mellow. **Conservative Islamic clerics in several countries harshly criticized the film**, even though Akkad had gone to great lengths to avoid offensive content. Some of the strongest criticism came from clerics in Saudi Arabia and South Asia, who issued fatwas against watching it. Governments like that of Pakistan also initially refused to import the film. Ironically, most of the early condemnations came from people who *had not actually seen the movie* [27] – the idea of it was enough to provoke censure. Akkad and supporters of the film argued that this backlash stemmed from a broader

"cultural weakness" or insecurity: some Muslim leaders feared any novel representation of Islamic history, even a pious one, might erode traditional norms [28].

On the other hand, *The Message* also received **positive feedback and curiosity** from many Muslims at the grassroots level. In countries where it was not officially shown, bootleg copies circulated, and people held private viewings. In Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and others, audiences who managed to see the film often praised its earnestness and educational value. As noted earlier, Shia authorities were generally supportive – Iran's post-revolution state TV eventually aired the film under the title *Mohammad, Messenger of God*, and it became well-known to Iranian audiences [29] [30]. In some secular or moderate Muslim-majority nations (like Turkey, Indonesia, or the former Soviet Central Asia), *The Message* was screened and garnered appreciation for bringing Islamic heritage to the big screen in a dignified manner.

Still, the **immediate legacy of controversy** took a toll. The film's producers had hoped for a grand premiere and widespread release in the Arab world and the West. Instead, they found themselves doing damage control. In a few cases, edits or disclaimers were added – for instance, some prints included an introduction clarifying that the Prophet is not depicted and that the film was made under scholarly guidance. Over time, the furor subsided, and the bans were gradually re-evaluated (as discussed below), but in the late 1970s the controversy around *The Message* served as a cautionary tale about the perils of tackling religious subjects on film.

Sunni and Shia Community Responses

Because of the religious sensitivities involved, **Muslim community reactions to *The Message*** were not monolithic and often differed between Sunni and Shia audiences and authorities. In broad terms, **Sunni Muslim institutions were initially more critical or cautious**, whereas **Shia Muslim leaders showed more openness to the film** – though ordinary Muslims of both sects eventually came to appreciate it.

Sunni Perspective: In Sunni-majority countries, the prohibition on depicting the Prophet (and, by extension, certain revered figures among his companions and family) is very strict. Sunni scholars feared that even an indirect portrayal might violate this norm or encourage future filmmakers to push boundaries. As a result, leading Sunni religious bodies like Al-Azhar (Egypt) and the Council of Senior Scholars (Saudi Arabia) did not endorse the film. The official Sunni line in the 1970s was that *The Message* was at best unnecessary and at worst a possible sacrilege. This stance influenced governments (hence the bans in places like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, and even Malaysia). Sunni clergy also objected to the portrayal of **Hamza, Abbas, Abu Sufyan, Hind,** and other companions by actors, considering it disrespectful to their memory. Some extreme voices even condemned the use of any religious stories for entertainment, fearing it could trivialize sacred history. These attitudes trickled down to portions of the Sunni public; for a time, many devout Sunnis avoided the film on the advice of their scholars.

However, it's important to note that **Sunni public opinion was not uniformly negative**. Outside the official circles, curiosity and praise for the film grew. Many Sunni Muslims who watched *The Message* found it inspiring and were relieved that it honored the Prophet without any direct depiction. Over the years, as the film became available on home video, it turned into a beloved resource for Sunni families to teach children about early Islam in an engaging way. For instance, in places like the Indian subcontinent or Nigeria (both with large Sunni populations), *The Message* eventually gained a strong positive reputation through word of mouth, even if it was never shown in theaters initially. In some Sunni-majority countries, the film was later broadcast on television during religious holidays (with tacit approval), signaling a softening stance. By the

2000s, many Sunni scholars acknowledged that Akkad's work, while initially contentious, had been *"done with good intentions and maintained proper reverence."* The gradual acceptance in the Sunni world is perhaps best exemplified by Saudi Arabia's change of heart in 2018, when it finally permitted the film's public screening (after having banned it for decades) [31] – a significant moment discussed in the Legacy section.

Shia Perspective: In Shia Islam, while depictions of Prophet Muhammad are also generally avoided, there is a somewhat more relaxed approach to religious representation in certain contexts. Historically, Shia communities have performed passion plays (ta'ziyah) about the Prophet's family (especially the martyrs of Karbala) and have used portraits of Imams in devotional art. This may have contributed to a more receptive attitude toward *The Message* among Shias. Indeed, upon release, the film **won praise from Shia authorities in Lebanon and elsewhere**. The High Islamic Shiite Council of Lebanon formally commended the movie's depiction of Islam as reverent and beneficial [20]. In Iran, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, *The Message* was aired on state television and became quite popular; it was known as *"Mohammad, Rasulullah"* (Muhammad, Messenger of God) and viewed as a halal portrayal since the Prophet was never shown directly [30]. Grand Ayatollahs did not object to it. In fact, Iranian director Majid Majidi cited *The Message* as an inspiration when he undertook his own 2015 film about the Prophet's childhood [16] [32]. Shia viewers appreciated that *The Message* highlighted figures like Ali, Ja'far (the Prophet's cousin who leads the group to Abyssinia), and Hamza in a positive light, and that it underscored the familial and spiritual links important in Shia understanding (though the film itself doesn't delve into any Sunni-Shia theological differences, given it stops at the Prophet's life).

It's worth noting that *The Message* carefully **avoided topics that might inflame sectarian sensitivities** – for example, it does not depict or explicitly discuss the succession to Muhammad or issues like Fatima and Ali's roles after the Prophet's death, which are points of Sunni-Shia contention. Akkad focused on the universally shared early history of Islam, which likely helped the film be palatable across sectarian lines. As a result, *The Message* came to be one of those rare pieces of media that Sunni and Shia audiences could both enjoy for its core story and message.

In summary, while **initial clerical reactions differed**, the long-term effect is that *The Message* has been embraced across the Muslim world's spectrum. Sunni and Shia Muslims today often regard it as a proud representation of their common heritage. The film's ability to obtain such cross-sectarian acceptance is notable, considering how divided interpretations can be on religious matters – it speaks to the film's generally careful and respectful approach that it eventually won over doubters.

Critical Reception and International Impact

Beyond the Muslim world, *The Message* had a more subdued but not insignificant reception internationally. **Western critics** in 1976–77 gave the film mixed reviews. Some reviewers appreciated its earnest attempt to bring an important story to the screen and noted the echoes of Hollywood's classic religious epics. For instance, **The Sunday Times** (UK) critic Dilys Powell remarked that *The Message* felt like a Western crossed with an early Christian epic, and she argued that avoiding the depiction of Muhammad was "absolutely right" both artistically and religiously [13]. **Variety** praised the film's technical qualities – citing its *"stunning"* cinematography, large-scale battle scenes, and *"strong and convincing"* cast – although it found the latter half of the movie less compelling and a bit *"anticlimactic"* once the major battles were over [13]. Other critics singled out Anthony Quinn's performance as dignified and strong (Quinn, as Hamza, essentially provides the charismatic center of the film in the absence of the Prophet's presence). The **Los Angeles Times** noted that Quinn's *"dignity and stature"* carried the role well and that the battle scenes were "spectacularly

done" [33]. Many Western viewers, for whom the story of Islam was new, found the film informative; some drew favorable parallels to biblical epics like *The Ten Commandments* or *Ben-Hur*, which similarly dramatize scripture with reverence and grandeur.

On the flip side, a number of prominent critics found *The Message* dramatically uneven or uninspired. The **New York Times** critique by Richard Eder famously described the absence of the main character (Muhammad) as an *"awkward"* void at the center of the film – likening the experience to *"one of those Music Minus One records,"* where the lead instrument is missing from the recording [34]. Eder also felt the acting was on *"the level of crudity of an early DeMille Bible epic"* and that the pacing was too languid [35]. Similarly, **Gene Siskel** gave the film only 2 stars out of 4, calling it *"a decent, big-budget religious movie. No more, no less,"* implying it broke no new ground beyond its subject matter [36]. Some reviewers who were not particularly interested in religious epics to begin with were frankly bored by the film's didactic style (as much of the dialogue is explanatory). The Guardian's critic at the time, Derek Malcolm, simply criticized *The Message* for its excessive length, which approaches three hours [37].

The box office performance in Western markets was modest. In the **United States**, plans for a wide release unraveled due to the Hanafi hostage crisis; ultimately the film earned only about **$2 million in the U.S.** during a very limited run [38]. European markets were a bit kinder – the film found audiences in the UK and some European countries, with roughly **$5 million worldwide gross** in its initial run [38]. However, this was far below the break-even point for a $17 million epic, making *The Message* a commercial flop by 1970s Hollywood standards. In fact, it later featured in books about expensive movie flops of the era [39]. Akkad himself acknowledged that the controversies essentially "doomed" the film's commercial prospects in the West [40].

That said, *The Message* did achieve a level of **recognition and esteem internationally over time**. Its Oscar nomination for Maurice Jarre's score in 1977 gave it a certain prestige [14], marking it as a film of serious artistic effort. In subsequent years, as home video emerged, the film quietly gained a following among students of religion, history buffs, and the Muslim diaspora in Western countries. For many Muslim families living in Europe or North America, *The Message* became a treasured film to show their children, since it was (and remains) one of the very few high-quality films about Islamic history produced with Hollywood-level production values. Universities and interfaith groups sometimes screened it to foster understanding of Islam's story.

Internationally, outside the West, the film had varying fates. In the Soviet Union, interestingly, *The Message* was reportedly shown because it was seen as an anti-imperialist story (Arabs throwing off oppressors) and it aligned with the USSR's outreach to the Arab world. In countries like **India**, *The Message* was dubbed into local languages (Urdu/Hindi) and released in the late 1970s; it faced some calls for bans from radical groups, but prominent Muslim scholars in India approved it for viewing, noting it contained *"no objectionable scenes"* and handled the material appropriately [41]. Thus, South Asia got to see the film in theaters by the 1980s, where it enjoyed success among Muslim audiences. China even dubbed the film for educational purposes about Islam for its Muslim minority. In predominantly Christian or secular countries, *The Message* remained relatively obscure – often remembered only by film enthusiasts or those interested in religious epics.

Overall, the **critical legacy** of *The Message* in cinematic terms is mixed: it's not usually celebrated in mainstream film canons (unlike, say, *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Ben-Hur*), but it has a certain cult status. **For**

Muslim audiences globally, however, the film's importance far outweighs its cinematic flaws, which is a key point when assessing its impact.

Long-Term Legacy and Cultural Impact in the Muslim World

Over the decades since 1976, *The Message* has undergone a reappraisal and has secured an enduring legacy as arguably **the most significant Islamic historical film ever made**. What was once controversial has become, for many, a source of cultural pride. In the Muslim world, the film today enjoys a status akin to a classic; it's often the first (or only) film about the Prophet's era that people have seen.

Cultural Ubiquity: *The Message* eventually found its way into widespread circulation across Muslim-majority countries. By the 1980s and 1990s, even where the film wasn't officially released, pirated VHS tapes and later DVDs were **circulating in countless homes** [42]. It became common for families to watch the film during Ramadan or Eid, as a way to reinforce religious history in an engaging manner. In places like the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, many Muslims can recall watching *Al-Risalah* (*The Message*) on television or at community events. **It became "a staple in many Muslim households across the world,"** as one report noted [43]. This grassroots embrace turned the film into a shared reference point: scenes like Bilal's call to prayer in Mecca, or Hamza's brave stand at Uhud, have been etched into the collective memory of a generation of Muslims who grew up with the film.

The film's dialogues and scenes are sometimes quoted in Islamic gatherings; for instance, the eloquent speech by Ja'far in the Abyssinian court (where he explains Islam's teachings to the Christian king) is often admired for conveying Islam's spirit of tolerance and continuity with Christianity. Such cultural penetration is remarkable for a film that was once banned in some of the very countries where it is now cherished.

Impact on Perceptions: As a cultural landmark, *The Message* also subtly influenced how Muslims visualize their own history. Since it was made with significant input from historians and had high production quality for its time, the costumes, sets, and character depictions in *The Message* have informed the popular imagination. For instance, it's not uncommon to find artwork or later TV portrayals of companions that resemble the look given in Akkad's film (e.g. the way Bilal or Hamza were costumed). The film offered a visual vocabulary for early Islam that had been largely missing in popular media. In that sense, *The Message* helped **standardize a respectful way of depicting Islamic history onscreen**, proving that it was possible to do so without causing offense (when done carefully).

Evolving Official Stance: In later years, some of the initial official hostility toward the film softened. The most dramatic example is Saudi Arabia. For decades, Saudi's strict religious establishment kept the ban on *The Message*. But in **June 2018, Saudi Arabia finally allowed *The Message* to be screened publicly**, as part of a general modernization push that included lifting a 35-year ban on movie theaters [31]. Remarkably, *The Message* thus became the **first Arabic-language film shown in Saudi cinemas** after movie theaters re-opened, and it was released in a newly restored 4K digital version [31]. The screening was timed during Eid al-Fitr festivities in 2018, symbolically underscoring the film's acceptance and even celebration in the heartland of Islam [44].

Audiences in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, attending the historic 2018 screening of *The Message*. Over 40 years after its debut, the film received approval from Saudi censors and was shown in a restored form, indicating a significant shift in cultural policy [31]. The event was seen as a homecoming of sorts for the film, and it drew nostalgia from older viewers who had seen it abroad or on video, as well as interest from younger Saudis experiencing it on the big screen for the first time. This change highlights how *The Message* gradually won institutional acceptance; what was once viewed with suspicion is now officially recognized as a respectful telling of Islamic history.

Influence and Imitation: The legacy of *The Message* can also be measured by its influence on later projects. For a long time, no one attempted to make a comparable film – partly because *The Message* was seen as having set a high bar and partly due to lingering fear of controversy. Moustapha Akkad himself wanted to continue making epic films about Muslim history (he later directed *Lion of the Desert* (1981) about Libya's anti-colonial hero Omar Mukhtar) and even planned a film about the great Sultan **Saladin** [45] [46]. Tragically, Akkad's life was cut short in a terrorist bombing in 2005 [47], and the Saladin project was never realized. Nonetheless, Akkad's pioneering work opened doors. In the 2000s and 2010s, there were talks of remaking *The Message* with modern techniques – for example, producer Oscar Zoghbi (who worked on the original) announced a remake titled *The Messenger of Peace* in 2008, though it has yet to materialize [48] [49]. Meanwhile, other filmmakers took inspiration: the Iranian film *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* (2015), directed by Majid Majidi, is perhaps the most notable successor, focusing on the Prophet's childhood and similarly avoiding showing his face [16]. That project, which became Iran's most expensive film, explicitly followed Akkad's model of respectful representation (even employing elaborate lighting techniques to symbolize the Prophet without showing him) [50] [51]. Additionally, television series in the Muslim world – such as the Arabic TV serial *Omar* (2012) about Caliph Omar – have cited *The Message* as a reference point for how to handle religious characters (in that series, they portrayed many Companions but still avoided showing Muhammad). In essence, *The Message* carved out a path for visual storytelling about early Islam that others could build on, demonstrating that fidelity to religious sensibilities could coexist with cinematic narrative.

Legacy in the West: While *The Message* is foremost a phenomenon in the Muslim world, its legacy in the West shouldn't be overlooked. It has become a tool for **interfaith understanding**. Many non-Muslims who seek to learn about Islam's origins have turned to this film, especially since it's accessible and dramatic.

Over 40 years on, it's not unusual for *The Message* to be screened at churches, mosques, community centers, and universities as part of dialogue events. The film's existence itself is an important cultural statement: it asserts that the story of Islam is as worthy of epic cinematic treatment as the stories of Moses or Jesus. In an era when negative stereotypes of Muslims were common in media, Akkad's film stood out as a dignified and humanizing portrayal. This was part of Akkad's mission – as his son Malek Akkad noted, **Moustapha Akkad sought to create understanding between Islam and the West through film** [52] [53]. In hindsight, Akkad is now revered by many as a cultural **hero and pioneer** for this accomplishment [54]. His work on *The Message* has entered the history books as a groundbreaking effort to bridge cultures, and its continued resonance is a testament to its success in that regard.

In conclusion, *The Message*'s journey from a **controversial 1970s experiment to a beloved classic** reflects the evolving dynamics between religion and art in the Muslim world. The film's **cultural, political, and religious impact** has been profound: it challenged taboos, survived backlash, and ultimately won a place in the hearts of millions. Politically, it demonstrated an early form of pan-Islamic collaboration in cinema and even got entangled in geopolitical currents (with Gaddafi's patronage and the diplomatic pressures around it). Culturally, it gave Muslims a cinematic narrative of their own beginnings to celebrate, in an industry that had long ignored such stories. Religiously, it provoked important discussions on what is permissible in representing faith – discussions that continue to this day, but which have become more nuanced thanks to Akkad's bold example.

Today, one can fairly say that *The Message* endures as **a milestone in Islamic cinema and a touchstone in modern Muslim pop culture** [42]. Its long-term legacy is visible not just in film history, but in the very real inspiration it continues to provide to viewers who see in it the values of faith, courage, and unity. As the adhan sounds in the film's final moments and the screen fills with worshippers from around the world, *The Message* affirms a sense of shared heritage that remains its most powerful gift to Muslim audiences – and an invitation to understanding extended to everyone else.

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