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A Genuine Messiah: The Erosion of Political Messaging in *Dune* 2021

Abstract: Frank Herbert's sprawling *Dune* epic critiques imperialism, colonialism, and the notion of a messiah figure. Herbert drew heavily on Islamic thought and culture, incorporating it throughout the books, while also interrogating the problematic structure of thinking that leads to messianic figures and their political and cultural power. The 2021 movie adaptation by Denis Villeneuve emphasizes Paul Atreides's uniqueness, his powers—the "specialness" that will enable him to become a messiah and cult figure. It leaves out the sinister tone, the critique that Herbert was levelling at Paul's choice to tread the messianic path. Instead, the film chooses another familiar path, the storytelling conceit of the "chosen one" that is uncritically replicated across Hollywood science fiction. In this paper, I will use close reading to illustrate how Villeneuve's adaptation fails to convey Herbert's most important point, the critique of charismatic leaders. Through seemingly small, even insignificant changes, the filmmakers erode Herbert's political arguments in favor of an audience-friendly focus on Paul Atreides as a young man on a hero's journey. The resulting adaptation also removes agency and depth from the Fremen characters. The Middle Eastern and Islamic influences of Herbert's worldbuilding are downplayed, leaving the film curiously whitewashed and more orientalist than the book. In the end, the film becomes the opposite of what Herbert intended to write: a hero's journey, focused on a white protagonist whose unique powers are a source of wonder rather than fear.

The deep engagement with Arrakis's ecology and culture are missing, leaving only a traditional Hollywood bildungsroman.

Keywords: *Dune*, science fiction, movie adaptations, orientalism, messianic figures, hero's journey.

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"[T]he difference between a hero and an antihero is where you stop the story" (Herbert and McNeilly, 48:09). So said Frank Herbert, in reference to *Dune* and its sequels, and it is a

remarkably apt quote to describe the 2021 movie adaptation of the first part of the book. Denis Villeneuve, the director, chose to cover only half the book in the movie, ending the movie as Paul Atreides and his mother Lady Jessica join the Fremen. Presumably Villeneuve wished to have the space to portray the vast sweep of *Dune*'s saga; unfortunately, in doing so, he fit *Dune* into the traditional Hollywood epic formula, stripping Herbert's more subtle critique of colonialism and charismatic leadership. In this article, I will demonstrate the changes between the movie and book that invert Herbert's cautionary tale to a more traditional Hollywood epic of the heroic journey, centering white perspectives and promoting individual exceptionalism over Herbert's complex philosophical critiques. While the original novel is not without moments of orientalism, simplifying the story for the screen highlights the orientalism and exoticization without the commensurate engagement with theology and philosophy.

Although the film was critically acclaimed, the philosophical underpinnings of the book—the main motivation for Herbert's creation as he saw it—do not make it unscathed onto the big screen. Whether intentional or not, the movie becomes a sci-fi spectacle of the first order, but fails to convey the nuances of Herbert's colonial and religious critiques. I will first discuss the epic qualities of the movie and book, move to discussing the messianic nature of Paul Atreides, and end by evaluating the critical themes and faults resulting from the adaptation's changes, including orientalism and incoherent politics.

The Hollywood Epic

There is no concrete definition of what makes a movie "epic," but there are a cluster of epic characteristics: impressive special effects, a long runtime, and mythic themes and archetypes, most especially that of the hero. Constantine Santas, in *The Epic in Film*, lists modern epic heroes including Luke Skywalker, James Bond, Superman, and Harry Potter, all part of a tradition of epic heroes with archetypal qualities. "As an archetypal figure," Santas writes, "the hero undergoes trials and ordeal in cyclical patterns that involve submersion, mystical death, and regeneration" (4), "progressing through various trials, achieving glorious feats, until they retur[n] victorious [...] it is their 'drawing' power as archetypes that make them such attractive screen personas" (5). This archetypal story formula connects the epic film back to its literary roots, while also proving to be a powerful force at the Hollywood box office. Santas remarks that the word epic has become more or less interchangeable with "blockbuster" (13) in the movies, because epic films tend to be expensive spectacles that are financially successful.

Speculative fiction movies often end up as epics; it is a proven formula for taking movies with large special effect budgets and making them financially viable. Indiana Jones, Star

Wars, and other classic sci-fi/fantasy movies have all followed epic structures: to quote Santas, “long, adventurous, action packed, suspenseful, with plenty of special effects, and always relying on a heroic persona to carry on a mission” (16). *Dune* comfortably fits most of those criteria, in either book or movie form, with the exception of the final criterion: the heroic persona. The book does center on Paul Atreides more than other characters, but it also presents the perspectives of Lady Jessica, Duke Leto, Stilgar, Liet Kynes, Thufir Hawat, Baron Harkonnen, and others, and not only when they are in Paul’s presence. Paul Atreides is the main character, but he is not a hero. The sequel to *Dune* was rejected for publication by John Campbell, in fact, because as Herbert put it, “his argument was that I had created an antihero in Paul [and] he had built his magazine on the hero” (Herbert and McNeilly, 48:10). Even in the first book, Paul’s decision making and interior monologue reveal him as not just a reluctant hero, but as not a hero at all. This conflicts with the traditional epic storyline. Juan A. Prieto-Pablos writes of Paul that he has “abilities superior to those of any other hero before him [...] But these abilities, which would be definite weapons against enemies in other narratives, are here the real sources of the crises” (68). Thus in the project of adapting *Dune* to the screen, it seems like the story fits perfectly within the Hollywood sci-fi epic format, with the crucial exception of Paul’s non-heroics, his powers that create problems rather than solve them. This exception is what makes *Dune* into something other than an epic, and is key to many of the philosophical themes of the text, which I shall explain further below. Paul’s tragic characteristics do not fit within what has come to be called epic within the mainstream Hollywood filmmaking tradition. Thus, filmmakers could keep Paul’s ambiguous character, or they could portray him as an epic hero, but not both.

Villeneuve and his cocreators choose the latter option. Mary Parent, a producer on the film, explicitly characterizes the movie as a Hollywood epic in an interview, saying about the greenlit sequel, “You can’t take anything for granted. Hollywood doesn’t make these kinds of films anymore, these big epics. [...] It was made in the tradition of old Hollywood” (*Deadline*). In another interview, Villeneuve says, “My dream was to stay very focused only on Paul” (*Empire*). The filmmakers understood their movie to be in the tradition of the Hollywood epic, focused on the journey of a heroic character, in this case Paul. Cutting the story where they did for the first movie was because, Villeneuve says, “we stuck at the right moment, where we finally feel that Paul has (gone) [sic] from being a boy to an adult” (*Empire*). The progress of the hero from talented child to an adult who has come into their powers is a traditional narrative for the epic in any format, fitting into the hero’s journey that Campbell promoted and Herbert flouted.

The question of whether the *Dune* film is or is not an epic is important because it signals a shift in focus that has huge consequences for the underlying themes of the narrative. Villeneuve does not mistake the novel for a heroic triumph—he characterizes the story as a “tragedy”, saying “We are following a boy that will lose all his privileges and more importantly,

lost all his friends and families. His universe will collapse around him and he will be stripped away from everything” (*KCRW*). Unfortunately, he also chooses to “make a more visceral adaptation to the book” (*Empire*) and focus on Paul. In prioritizing Paul and the visceral and emotional qualities of the story, the story’s implications shift. Herbert’s novel is a political, theological, and philosophical work, one which spaces its action scenes out with meditations on theoretical and ethical quandaries. It distrusts the outward emotional displays which make for visceral viewing, understanding that the inner thoughts and motivations of political actors may not match appearances. Focusing on visceral emotional storytelling risks de-emphasizing or even cutting the thoughtful, measured unfurling of Herbert’s intellectual project.

In a key scene, the fight between Jamis and Paul, we can see how the filmmakers cut away or changed details in such a way as to change the underlying messages. In the movie, this follows directly after Jessica and Paul encounter the Fremen in the desert; they fight for the right to stay with the tribe rather than be murdered. In the book, however, there is significant time passage between the first meeting and the fight, and at the first meeting Jessica uses her own fighting skills to overcome the leader of the tribe, Stilgar. He accepts their passage, but not their legendary status, until Jessica proves it by quoting lines from the Bene Gesserit teachings. She muses, “If only [Stilgar] knew the tricks we use! She must’ve been good, that Bene Gesserit of the Missionaria Protectiva. These Fremen are beautifully prepared to believe in us” (282). As they travel, Jessica asks, “Have I compromised your leadership by besting you, Stilgar?” (287). He assures her that while she has bested him, which is part of becoming the leader, since she did not call him out, he remains in charge. However, the next day, Jamis challenges Jessica’s status as prophesied leader, and demands single combat with Paul as a result—but the combat is not really about Paul. “He seeks by this tahaddi challenge to get back at me as well” (295), Stilgar says, for Jamis is angry about being overruled by Stilgar’s leadership. Stilgar tries to calm Jamis, but when he is unsuccessful, he allows the fight to happen because it is Jamis’s right to call for it, not because of supernatural influence or beliefs.

Just before the fight is another moment when small changes alter the themes; in this case by minimizing Chani’s influence. When Paul prepares for the fight, he is frightened, for his prescience does not show him anything about this fight. Chani warns him that Jamis is ambidextrous and will try to switch hands during the fight. It is due to this warning that Paul survives. Chani has, with her advice, saved his life and chosen Paul over Jamis, a choice with huge repercussions. In the movie, however, Chani gives him her crysknife—a huge gesture in a culture where outsiders who see crysknives must be cleansed or killed—and does not warn him. Rather, it is Paul’s visions which show him the hand switch and allow him to win the fight. The script directions note, “Chani looks at Paul with something like awe. The Fremen flock to Paul, congratulating him, touching him. Marveling at his skill” (132).

Stilgar, Jessica, and Chani are all secondary to Paul and his prophetic visions, and react with awe and admiration. The careful balancing of leadership that Stilgar and Jessica show in the book is reduced; Chani's agency in warning Paul is also gone—important in a movie where we mostly see her in Paul's hazy dream-visions that read almost like teenage daydreams. The movie Paul is not set up to succeed by those around him; he succeeds because of his great power.

Paul as a solitary hero rather than politically entangled figure echoes orientalist tales like *Lawrence of Arabia*. Some have accused the original novel *Dune* of being orientalist; such accusations are both warranted and yet mitigated by the depth of Herbert's engagement with the fictional Fremen culture and the real Middle East and North African (MENA) traditions it is based on. In the book, Stilgar, Chani, and other Fremen are complex and intelligent actors with their own agency, who are caught up in the sweep of the Kwisatz Haderach/Lisan al-Gaib myth without becoming gullible or unsavvy. While much of this takes place after the cutting point between the movie and its proposed sequel, not all of it does—the book holds a fair amount of time between Paul and Jessica meeting the Fremen and the knife fight with Jamis, all of which is cut from the adaptation. In the movie, Paul does not need help from any Fremen in order to take over their society with his prophetic powers. He is an outsider who passes tests based on singular strength and ability, not because of political maneuvering and assistance. Chani is reduced to a romantic interest in traditional orientalist style: first introduced to us through Paul's hazy visions of her close-up face, in life she proves enamored with his power, the outsider who is better than the rest.

Herbert's stated intent with *Dune* was to analyze how the messiah phenomenon might actually transpire; how something as dangerous as a religious-political leader might be created. Core to this venture is that the Fremen are not gullible or savage, and they are not flattened stereotypes—otherwise, Paul's status would be simply explained by the Fremen's poor critical thinking skills. Herbert's refusal to allow Paul to ascend to power purely through his own means is integral to his themes of political change—Haris Durrani writes, "Power structures, the novels suggest, exist only because people believe in them. Thus, Paul and the Fremen are equally at fault in his rise to power [...] The fact that Paul is a colonizer renders him no different from the Fremen he reforms and oppresses" ("Salafist"). While the notion that the Fremen are complicit in their own oppression is a challenging one, it does mean that they are granted agency in their cultural and political decisions. Agency entails sometimes making the "wrong" decisions, a privilege often withheld from romanticized versions of nonwhite cultures. The white savior myth requires the people who are saved to be unable to make decisions of their own, unable to choose their own form of political and cultural leadership. In the book, Paul enters into a society threaded through with myth, but also one engaged in serious political projects, including terraforming, smuggling, theological argumentation, and more. In the movie, Paul steps into a society with a hole in the center for him, the white savior.

Multiple moments in the book push back against the white savior myth. Liet-Kynes, in the book a white imperial ecologist, dies in a moment that Herbert considered a “turning point” (1965 interview) for the book, where “swallowed by a sand formation even he cannot control, the ecologist realizes his hubris as the archetypal ‘Western man’” (Durrani, “Islamic influences”). Liet-Kynes is subject to the forces of Arrakis, and Paul cannot become a central figure on Arrakis without the consent and assistance of the Fremen and the Bene Gesserit (through his mother). The critique of the white savior narrative that is implicit here—i.e., white men are not in fact better than the cultures they try to inhabit and reform—is missing from the movie, through the erasure of Fremen agency, and the complete transformation of Liet-Kynes’ character. Rather than a white imperial ecologist man, in the movie Liet-Kynes is a Black woman who is fully committed to the Fremen’s freedom and who dies in an act of simultaneous sacrifice and pathetic violence, stabbed by a Sardaukar, the emperor’s soldiers, while trying to assist the Atrides escape. Durrani points out:

The casting choice presented an incredible opportunity to explore how even subjugated people can participate in the oppression of others—a core theme of Herbert’s saga. Instead, the movie both inverts and reduces the ecologist’s character, simplifying Herbert’s critique of empire and cultural appropriation. It rests on an implicit premise: All dark-skinned people necessarily fit into an anti-colonial narrative, and racial identity easily deflects a character’s relationship to empire. The novel didn’t rely on such easy binaries[.]

Ironically, in what was surely an attempt to bring some diversity to the movie, the casting ends up erasing a critique of colonialism and imperialism. It is particularly ironic in light of how few people of MENA backgrounds were involved in the movie, either on screen or behind it. Herbert said of the moment of Liet-Kynes’ death, “the very fact that Kynes, who is the Western man, in my original construction of the book, sees all these things happening to him as mechanical things, doesn’t subtract from the fact that he is still a part of the system [...] Western man has assumed that [...all] you need for any problem is enough force, power, and that there is no problem which won’t submit to this approach” (1965 interview). Herbert used white and imperial characters to leverage a critique on the rationalist thinking that undergirds imperial structures from within. On the other hand, power, especially individual heroic power, is the preferred solution to most epics and epic films. It is this individual power, rather than collective power, that fuels the white savior myth, and that seems to distinguish the movie version of Paul Atrides.

The Movie Messiah

Herbert's primary focus in *Dune* was to trace the formation of messiah figures – not because they were desirable, but because he deeply distrusted charismatic leadership and considered the blending of political and religious power to be a dangerous combination. Although the apotheosis of his warning tale does not come until the sequel, fittingly titled *Dune Messiah*, *Dune* is full of ominous foreshadowing. Whenever Paul comes closer to the path that will lead him to become the Lisan al-Gaib, the Fremen's prophesied messiah, the narration is uncompromisingly dark. Even before the spice causes Paul to awaken to his full prescience, he learns that he has been trained to be a Mentat. His father asks if he will continue the Mentat training:

There was no hesitation in his answer. "I'll go on with the training."

"Formidable indeed," the Duke murmured, and Paul saw the proud smile on his father's face. The smile shocked Paul: it had a skull look on the Duke's narrow features. Paul closed his eyes, feeling the terrible purpose reawaken within him. *Perhaps being a Mentat is a terrible purpose*, he thought.

But even as he focused on this thought, his new awareness denied it. (46)

The "formidable" powers of the Mentat, which go completely unmentioned in the movie, are also "terrible" and bring about a "skull look"—hardly the warm promise of future heroism. And yet as Paul's awareness knows, the Mentat training is only part of the problem. However, it is made ominous by Herbert deliberately, as the Mentat training is part of what grants Paul inhuman powers.

Before Paul has the vision of the jihad that is carried out in his name, with the Atrides banner prominent, his father again forebodingly points out the symbol:

"To hold Arrakis," the Duke said, "one is faced with decisions that may cost one his self-respect." He pointed out the window to the Atrides green and black banner hanging limply from a staff at the edge of the landing field. "That honorable banner could come to mean many evil things." Paul swallowed in a dry throat. (107)

The Duke, who possesses no powers of prescience other than his knowledge of statecraft, understands the risk of rule—the degradation of the self in pursuit of further power. These two moments, wherein Duke Leto warns (either on purpose or through the narrative description) Paul against his future path, are also missing from the movie. They are minor moments when it comes to plot, but important to establish that the danger of Paul's path is not wholly mystical. His involvement breaks through the myth and mysticism surrounding Paul and the Bene Gesserit plans—it does not take prescience or genetic manipulation to

understand that power can be corrupting. The absence of these moments (and other similar ones) from the movie means that Paul's choices feel wholly mystical, destined in the way one might expect of a great hero or messiah. In the book, Duke Leto comments directly on the Lisan al-Gaib myth, saying, "they call you 'Mahdi'—'Lisan al-Gaib'—as a last resort, you might capitalize on that" (107). He recognizes the myth for what it is: a tool of statecraft to be used only when nothing else is available.

In the movie, Duke Leto encourages Paul to take on the mantle of leadership instead of warning him about its dangers. When Paul expresses an uncharacteristic doubt in his own abilities ("What if I'm not the future of House Atreides?"), Leto comforts him, saying, "I told my father I didn't want this either [...] My father said, a good man doesn't seek to lead. He's called to it, and he answers. [...] In their memory, give it a try" (13). This is a Leto whose vision of statecraft is much softer, and is much more in line with the typical heroic fantasy narrative; leadership is a burden that the qualified and destined come to assume, because they are called to it through their natural superiority. Part of the function of charismatic leadership is to make it seem as if the charismatic leader was always supposed to be a leader.

It is not only Duke Leto who recognizes the artificiality and danger of leadership; in the book, Paul himself shows an awareness of what he is choosing. There are too many examples to list of foreboding feelings, anxiety, and other narrations from Paul's perspective as he contemplates his path. In one epigraph from "Collected Sayings of Muad'Dib", aka Paul, readers are advised, "The person who experiences greatness must have a feeling for the myth he is in. He must reflect what is projected upon him. And he must have a strong sense of the sardonic. This is what uncouples him from belief in his own pretensions [...] Without this quality, even occasional greatness will destroy a man" (128). Only a little over one hundred pages into the book, barely a fifth of the way through, Paul's voice comes from the future to warn readers of the necessity of not buying into the myth being constructed around him.

In the movie, Paul comes to realize his place in the Kwisatz Haderach and Lisan al-Gaib myths suddenly, in the tent he and his mother are sheltering from the desert in. He says, "there's something awakening in my mind," and then describes the vision he is seeing:

Holy war. Spreading across the universe like unquenchable fire. A warrior religion that waves the Atreides banner. Fanatical legions worshipping at the shrine of my father's skill. A crusade. In my name. My name. That's the future. It's coming. [...] You did this to me! You BENE GESSERIT. You made me a freak!
(85–86, emphasis original)

It is an emotional scene where the entirety of the destiny the Bene Gesserit have set up for him dawns upon him, and he is horrified. However, in the book, this awareness allows him to see far more: multiple potential futures, multiple paths. He thinks, "*I have another kind of sight. I see another kind of terrain: the available paths.*" The awareness conveys both

reassurance and alarm” (195, emphasis original). He does have an emotional moment, but he has yet to commit to the path that creates those fanatical legions. That choice is important. Paul’s choices lead him to the messianic path, as well as the choices of those around him; it is not fate, or inevitability, as it might be with a traditional hero. Herbert’s warnings against charismatic heroes are only useful if it is possible to avoid becoming or following those kinds of leaders. The cynicism of Paul’s parents, and his own doubts, demonstrate the off-ramps where the disastrous future could be prevented, and another path followed.

There is one moment in particular, close to the end of the first half of the book, where Paul deliberately steps onto the messianic path, all the while telling himself he is not. When Stilgar asks him what he would like to be called among the Fremen, he chooses the name Muad’Dib:

And again he remembered the vision of fanatic legions following the green and black banner of the Atreides, pillaging and burning across the universe in the name of their prophet Muad’Dib.

That must not happen, he told himself.

“Is that the name you wish, Muad’Dib?” Stilgar asked.

“[...] Could I be known among you as Paul-Muad’Dib?”

“You are Paul-Muad’Dib,” Stilgar said.

And Paul thought: *That was in no vision of mine. I did a different thing*. But he felt that the abyss remained all around him. (305, emphasis original)

Here Paul has an option to choose a different path from the one he has foreseen leading to jihad. He knows the name Muad’Dib is one that is shouted by the legions of warriors, but when Stilgar asks him to confirm he wishes to be known by that name, Paul confirms it, telling himself that because he has not seen the precise moment of his naming, it will not lead to that future. But the juxtaposition clearly shows the reader that Paul’s analysis is dubious. This naming scene is after the cut-off point for the movie, but is just one example, albeit a striking one, of Paul continuing along a path he senses might lead to catastrophe. The movie cuts off before the most externally-visible example of his conflicting desires, which is part of the problem—the filmmakers choose to cut the movie before Paul’s full character is revealed, creating a three-hour long movie that paints a rosy picture of Paul’s relationship to his own myth.

Paul does express doubt about his own potential in the movie, asking “in disbelief” if he could be “the One” (31), and saying “They see what they’ve been told to see,” (36) when the Fremen hail him as the Lisan al-Gaib, long before he meets them in the desert. Leto confronts him about being the Lisan al-Gaib, saying “It troubles you.” Paul responds, “*Legend* is a

pretty word for a *lie*” to which Leto responds, “I think you’re afraid it might be true” (66, emphasis original). This doubt works in the opposite direction in the context of the greater story, however—familiar with the reluctant hero who finally grows into greatness, we understand Paul’s hesitation in the movie to be a necessary story beat of the hero’s journey, the refusal of the call. In the book, Paul is reluctant but rarely directly demurs his destiny, and does not “refuse the call” in any meaningful sense. Rather, he is accepting but actively cynical about the role he plays in the story, and about his myth as a whole—but never so skeptical as to discourage others from believing in him.. Julia List describes Paul: “He never comes to believe in the myths his Fremen followers build around him, remaining cynically detached from their devotion. At the same time, he does not discourage his followers from believing in his divinity” (34). This is shown through Paul’s interior monologue, as he strategizes how to make use of the myths that surround him, and even how to encourage their growth. John Casey emphasizes, “Herbert takes pains to ensure that we do not too readily ascribe mystical charisma to Paul” (517) whereas in the movie, we only see the awed reactions of the other characters, who appear to indeed be subject to mystical charisma.

The removal of out-of-character narration means we can only believe in what we see, putting the audience in much the same position as the Fremen: able to perceive only the apparent evidence of mystical power. Casey and List both point out that the religious beliefs implanted in Fremen society by the Missionaria Protectiva “present [Paul] with an opportunity to command rather than emancipate” (Casey 517), “of which he takes full advantage, pursuing his own self-interest despite his concern for the well-being of the Fremen” (List 37). In the movie, he appears to not believe or want to believe in the power he holds; in the book, he chooses to wield it without buying in. When, later in the movie, Paul moves to accept the mantle of messiah, it seems as if he is simply moving to the next step on the hero’s journey, “answering the call,” rather than making a calculated political decision.

The omniscient narration shows another perspective on Paul’s power: it is constructed actively by the people around him, especially by his mother. She relies on Bene Gesserit training to decode and activate the latent religious beliefs set down by the Missionaria Protectiva, and in doing so, commits both herself and Paul to the path of the Lisan al-Gaib. When the Shadout Mapes confronts her, in both the book and movie Jessica says the right thing, the thing which convinces Mapes that the time of the prophecy is at hand. Only in the book do we see Jessica’s thought process: “Here’s the reason this Fremen has taken service with me, to ask that one question. My answer could precipitate violence or... what? [...] She’s getting restive. I must answer now” (55, emphasis removed). She starts a sentence with “It’s a maker—”, receives Mapes’s reaction, and does not finish the rest of the sentence that she had intended, because Mapes’ reaction demonstrates that “The key word was ... *maker*” (55, emphasis original). Through the narration, Herbert shows that Jessica is guessing her way through, using her training to try and pull some kind of favorable reaction. But in doing so,

she is affirming Mapes' belief in Jessica and Paul's divinity, though her goal is mostly to make it through the "deadly crisis" (58), i.e. Mapes' threatening her with a knife, not to perform a religious miracle. Later, after passing the test Stilgar administers to confirm if she and Paul are the prophesied outsiders, her interior monologue is far from devout or optimistic: "And she felt a cynical bitterness at what she had done. *Our Missionaria Protectiva seldom fails*" (291, emphasis original). She knows that she has cemented a religiously significant place among the Fremen for her and her son, because it was the only way she could think to secure their safety for the time being. In these moments and others, it is Jessica and the Missionaria Protectiva who truly set up Paul as the Lisan al-Gaib and Mahdi. Paul Q. Kucera explains that Jessica's manipulation "has the added effect of more thoroughly entrenching the repertoire's hold over both, for both rely upon it to attain their respective ends: its demonstrated 'truth' to the Shadout makes her an even more fervent adherent to the prophecy; Jessica can only continue her hold by entering further into the text of the myth" (236). Although the form of the conversation is a religious exchange, both women have motivations that led them to seek out that exchange, and both simultaneously pursue those ends and find themselves further embroiled in the myth. Nonetheless, it is a moment that is not about Paul at all—it is about Jessica, the Shadout Mapes, and their choices and positioning. Their voices, literally and metaphorically, are creating the myth around Paul, regardless of Paul's own actions.

However, the agency and influence of others is consistently taken away in the movie, and their actions attributed to Paul. We have already covered the erasure of Chani's advice in the knife fight between Jamis and Paul. In the movie, Paul decides to rescue, and coordinates the rescue of, the workers from the spice mining operation—in the book it was his father (120–126). In the movie, it is Paul who uses the Voice to free himself and Jessica from the Harkonnen soldiers—in the book it was his mother (170–173). In the movie, after the fight with Jamis, Stilgar invites them to the Fremen, Jessica protests and tries to leave for offworld, but Paul decides to stay, appearing to believe in his own myth—in the book, Jessica uses this moment to declare both of them holy. At least twice, Paul quotes the O.C Bible, which Dr. Yueh gave to him, and it is taken as miraculous wisdom (110, 309) by both the Fremen and Jessica—but in the book, we know due to the narration that he is quoting, not coming up with his own sayings. The lack of narration in the movie once again conceals the truth of the matter.

It is not only Paul or Jessica who carry the book's themes, and whose character changes in the movie alter the underlying themes—Liet Kynes also is a thematically important character in the book who is a mere side character in the movie. In one crucial scene, Liet Kynes is deciding whether or not to help the Atreides. In the movie, Paul appears to read Liet Kynes' mind, saying, "I know you walk in two worlds and are known by many names. I know your dream. As Emperor, I could make a Paradise [sic] of Arrakis with a wave of my hand." He asserts his authority as the Lisan al-Gaib and as the future emperor to convince Liet-Kynes to

assist them. In the book, Liet-Kynes is unsure, and asks Paul about the Imperial Ecological Testing Station they stand in, “For what would you use such a place, Paul Atrides?” When Paul responds, “To make this planet a fit place for humans,” Liet-Kynes thinks, “Perhaps that’s why I help them” (220). Paul also claims his status as Lisan al-Gaib and imperial ruler, but the narrator shows that the motivation of Liet-Kynes is less the myth and more their shared dream of terraforming Arrakis. On the outside, Liet-Kynes appears to be bowing to the religious power of the myth; in reality, he is moved by Paul’s ecological goals. In fact, it is Liet-Kynes’ ecological dream that prompts Jessica to think later: “This was a dream to capture men’s souls, and she could sense the hand of the ecologist in it. This was a dream for which men would die willingly. It was another of the essential ingredients she felt her son needed: people with a goal. Such people would be easy to imbue with fervor and fanaticism” (317). Liet-Kynes and his father before him have paved the way just as much as the Bene Gesserit, albeit with a different purpose.

In fact, Liet-Kynes occupies a curious position in *Dune*: not only gatekeeper to the Fremen, but a kind of foil or alternate messiah figure. “Liet” is spoken of secretively by the Fremen; the Atrides know he is some kind of religious group leader, but Paul only puts together the truth long after Liet-Kynes is gone. In Peter Herman’s article, “The Blackness of Liet-Kynes: Reading Frank Herbert’s *Dune* Through James Cone,” Herman uses James Cone’s black theological framework to posit Liet-Kynes as a more “authentic messiah”, who “represents a man who has died to whiteness and been reborn into blackness in order to become such a messiah” (7). Though a full explanation of Cone’s concept of dying to whiteness and being reborn into blackness is beyond the scope of the paper, it involves here Liet-Kynes’ willingness to work with the Fremen against the goals of the empire, to actively aid their goals and refuse to be a bystander in situations of oppression. Paul does not have any interest in oppression or liberation: “Paul/Muad’Dib seizes the Padishah Emperor’s throne and initiates another dynastic reign. In this reign, Fremen are not freed [...] Paul/Muad’Dib’s liberation is not subversion of their exploitation. It is a simple inversion of an exploitative power structure” (9). This is because “For Herbert’s novel, the messiah who comes does not bring subversion, liberation, or transvaluation. He brings only a different emperor for the same empire” (10). While Cones was writing to explore what a genuine messianic mission might entail, Herbert was writing to expose the dangers of the whole notion. Hence the “genuine” messiah, Liet-Kynes, dies in the desert, hallucinating his father. As Liet-Kynes dies, his father, who was the initiator of the Arrakis terraforming project, lectures him about the power of religious fervor (“An act of disobedience must be a sin and require religious penalties. This will have the dual benefit of bringing both greater obedience and greater bravery” (273)) and its danger (“No more terrible disaster could befall your people than for them to fall into the hands of a Hero” (274)). Needless to say, all of this content, with its complicated orientation toward messiahs and empire, is missing from the movie. The movie Liet Kynes is Fremen, but does

not have the complicated relationship to the empire, to Arrakis, and to the terraforming project that the original Liet Kynes does, and therefore cannot serve as a similar complex foil to Paul or as the critique of imperial and scientific power.

I catalogue these differences between the book and movie not out of devotion to adaptational fidelity, but to underscore how seemingly small changes alter the message of the novel. They are the kind of changes unlikely to bother many fans: the movie still uses the terms “Kwisatz Haderach” and “Bene Gesserit”; we still hear the Litany Against Fear; the names of the principalities, lineages, and concepts all remain the same. The trivia is unchanged. Villeneuve, an avowed fan, does not commit the kind of errors that would raise the ire of his audience, such as changing names or big plot points. Nonetheless, these changes too small to show up on any trivia quiz are core to building the story and its themes. Roxana Hadadi’s review of the movie for Polygon summarizes one effect of this:

[T]he Fremen characters in *Dune: Part One* lack the interiority they need to come across as something other than stock types. And so the film, through erasure, still ends up engaging in the Orientalism Villeneuve seemed to be trying to avoid. The motivations of Stilgar, Zendaya’s Chani, and Golda Rosheuvel’s Shadout Mapes are all murky, and their relationships with Paul aren’t narratively clear because so much of their belief system and identity is left nebulous. They are noble, exoticized others[.]

The film appears measured, even thoughtful, because it has many wide-angle shots and some eccentric sound design. Aesthetically, it is remarkable. But the story itself is emotionally and thematically thin. Herbert not only wanted to warn people against trusting messianic or heroic characters; he wanted to warn people about the Western tendency to think in absolutes, and encourage them to think differently by “Showing them the consequences of violence. Displaying alternative forms. Showing them how the old patterns repeat themselves” (Waldentapes interview). His engagement with Islamic and MENA culture was one way of avoiding repeating old patterns; while he may not have been perfect, he did engage deeply with cultures that the West has typically dismissed. In the final section, I will discuss how the movie’s decision not to engage as deeply left the resulting product more orientalist than the original, with problematic implications about the cultures referenced in *Dune*.

Islamic and Colonial Themes

Though many people have written on the cultural and religious references in *Dune*, Haris Durrani has provided the most concentrated and thorough examination of *Dune*’s Islamic themes. He writes, “I am of the theory that if one is Muslim, or otherwise intimately aware of

Muslim traditions, that person's experience of *Dune* differs vastly from any other reader's" ("Muslimness of *Dune*"). That experience goes far beyond recognizing the superficial desert set-dressing, Herbert's use of Arabic and modified Arabic, or the arc of Paul's prophethood. Durrani elaborates:

Dune is orientalist and conservative, but also, and sometimes frustratingly at the same time, thoroughly Muslim. Its Muslimness is not only a function of its Arabic words; its quotations and paraphrases from the Qur'an, prophetic teachings, or Muslim authors; or its references to Muslim histories. More so, its Muslimness reflects a serious engagement with those sources and histories, a conversation with their underlying ideas and affects that surpasses exotic aesthetics, easy plagiarism, cheap appropriation, the assumption of unchanging religion or language, and even scintillating references.

While Herbert was a white man from the United States, he nonetheless engaged deeply with Muslim and MENA history and ideas. As Durrani points out, "Herbert directly situated *Dune* as a critique of T.E. Lawrence and other instances of 'western exploitation' of 'the avatar power'" ("White Savior"). Herbert clearly prefers the actions and culture of the pre-Paul Fremen, and sees Paul's influence as a loss for the Fremen, a reverse white savior narrative wherein the white savior brings ruin rather than salvation. In an unpublished interview, Herbert explains his use of Arabic-derived vocabulary "to signal to the reader that they are 'not here and now, but that something of here and now has been carried to that faraway place and time'" (qtd. Karjoo-Ravary). Islam is pervasive throughout the universe of *Dune*, as are Arabic terms and other non-Western influences. In fact, the O.C. Bible, the canonical (and only) religious text for the entire human race, is heavily influenced by Islam—out of its ten primary tenets, "half are overtly Islamic" (Karjoo-Ravary). Durrani posits that "The novels perform that delightfully powerful trick of refusing to cater to ideas of Islam in popular discourse. The saga is not reactionary but a conversation with itself about how Muslims have and will continue to interact with one another, other faiths, and their oppressors" ("Muslimness of *Dune*"). Islam is central to the intellectual project of *Dune*.

Durrani also writes about the 2021 movie adaptation, in a review which can be summarized by the lines, "Herbert's editors initially asked him to tone down the 'Muslim flavor' of his book. The latest adaptation, directed by Denis Villeneuve, does just that" (*Washington Post*). The first immediately noticeable change is that the word "jihad" has been swapped for "crusade". The audiences of the 2020s certainly have a different association with the word jihad than Herbert's original 1960s audience, and it seems that the filmmakers wanted to avoid the terroristic implications of "jihad". But unfortunately, "crusade" is also not a neutral word—it is associated with the Crusades, the series of military ventures led by European Christians in an attempt to "retake" the holy land in what is now Palestine and

Israel. Other forms of MENA and Muslim influence are swapped in the film for Christian imagery: “The obvious Ottoman inspiration behind the Padishah Emperor’s Janissary-like military force, the Sardaukar, is absent. Instead, the imperial troops (who speak what is perhaps meant to be modified Turkish or Mongolian) are depicted with Christian imagery, bloodletting crucified victims. Meanwhile, the Bene Gesserit bear headscarves that look European Christian (with the exception of a beaded Orientalist veil)” (Durrani, *Washington Post*). It may seem progressive, even, to ensure that the imperial oppressors are associated with whiteness, Christianity, and Europeanness, but it obscures the degree to which Herbert envisioned Islam to have penetrated the entirety of his future culture, from the emperor to the Bene Gesserit to the Fremmen, and beyond. It reduces the future’s Islam to a small local belief system, confined to just the Fremmen, who are conveniently also desert-dwelling warrior people: a construction plenty familiar from other orientalist texts.

One might think that it would be impossible to use the word “jihad” in a movie today without conjuring Islamophobic imaginings of terrorists. However, the use of jihad in the original text was also supposed to be striking. Ali Karjoo-Ravary writes, “Herbert’s nuanced understanding of jihad shows in his narrative. He did not aim to present jihad as simply a “bad” or “good” thing. Instead, he uses it to show how the messianic impulse, together with the apocalyptic violence that sometimes accompanies it, changes the world in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways”. Herbert was dedicated to avoiding absolutist thinking; jihad is a term that is complex in the book, both something to be feared (as all violence is) and something that is not inherently bad, and certainly not because of the place of its linguistic origin.

The filmmakers of the 2021 film did not see Herbert’s use of MENA and Islamic cultural artifacts as challenging binaries or engaging authentically, however. Durrani writes:

While many embrace *Dune*’s Muslim influences, there is a strong contingent of readers who, I believe, have misunderstood them as linguistic costumery or, at most, intriguing non sequiturs largely irrelevant to the series’ substance. From this perspective, they are seen as orientalist garnishes. For instance, one of the 2021 film’s screenwriters, Jon Spaihts, stated that Herbert’s use of such terms was little more than exotic corsage. (“Muslimness of *Dune*”)

He further summarizes:

There has been much critique of the lack of MENA casting in each of the *Dune* adaptations, including the forthcoming film. I wholeheartedly agree. But just as egregious is the paucity of Muslim and MENA creatives behind the cameras. Spaihts, one of the 2021 film’s screenwriters, admitted that no such creatives participated in the making of the film. As described at the start of this

essay, Spaihts and one of the film's conlangers, Peterson, have admitted that they sought to dilute the Islamic and MENA references in the film, in order to remove the novel's purportedly orientalist aesthetics [...] Specifically, Jon Spaihts stated that the purpose of *Dune's* Islamic and MENA themes was to be "exotic," which "doesn't work today" when "Islam is a part of our world": "Dipping into Islam and the Arab world was sufficient to make it exotic in 1960s, but not today—we need to go further to get the exotic element and show transformation... You would need to invent more and borrow less [from Islam/MENA]."

This collection of comments shows that the people behind the 2021 film failed to understand the importance of MENA and Muslim cultures to the book they were adapting. Durrani questions, "Why attempt to eliminate a "race problem" by eliminating people of color from its cast, director's chair, and writers' room?" and there is not an answer other than the discomfort experienced by white people in face of racially coded content. Furthermore, it is telling that Spaihts believes that Islam is only there to be exotic, and that it is now part of the world, but was not part of the world in the 1960s.

The film's race problem extends to casting, scriptwriting, and beyond, even to the soundtrack. Hadadi notes, "it's unintentionally telling that Hans Zimmer's score loads up on MENA folk music traditions (so many women ululating!), but that no actors of MENA heritage have speaking roles among the Fremmen" (Hadadi). The Fremmen who do speak are played by actors of other races, as if that might avoid accusations of orientaling the actors themselves. However, because it is necessary for the plot, the film still takes place in the desert, still features an imperial side and a scrappy warrior side. Thus, "the signs presented are very often related to an orientalist semiotic system, which was not fully decolonialized in 1965, and, considering the new film, not in 2021 either" (Jacob, 65). By trying to avoid the "exotic" element (or by choosing to invoke exoticism elsewhere? Spaihts' intent is unclear), the filmmakers actually scrape the depth from the setting and leave only the surface, the orientalist signs of deserts and warrior savages.

Conclusion

When making an adaptation in any format, one must consider what it is about the original that should be adapted: the story? the themes? the aesthetic? In the 2021 film, minor changes to all three end up creating a major shift in the overall work. The story is changed from one of anti-messianism to a hero's journey focused on Paul. The themes are subverted or excised. The aesthetics are changed, whether problematic in the original or not, to a Christian- and European-ized version of Herbert's universe. Kucera boils down the *Dune* story to a striking tale wherein "while our attention is diverted by the reprehensible behavior

of the Harkonnens, the Atreides are all the while engaged in their own machinations. Our admiration for the Atreides—both Paul and Leto—seduces us, much to our consternation when we finally see what our hero Paul Muad'Dib leads us to" (232). However, that tale does not work when one believes that Paul is in fact a hero, even a tragic one. Kucera cites Susan McLean's assertion that Herbert "deliberately evokes the power of our repressed fantasies to demonstrate the danger of allowing such desires to guide our actions" (145), and explains, "These desires are not only for power or of submission, but also for credulity, for absolutes" (232). We desire to believe in Paul, to trust in his power and that he is good, or attempting to be good. But to actually fall into that desire is to miss the entire point of the novel. It is entirely possible that the filmmakers mean the first movie to "seduce" the audience into believing that Paul is a hero, and then a second movie will show the flaws of his leadership. But Herbert foreshadowed these flaws from the beginning, perhaps because he wanted to avoid the issues that the two-part movie raises: the audience's sincere belief in Paul is established first, and might prove unshakeable in the face of future plot, just as the Fremen are not swayed from their beliefs despite Paul's failures.

Unfortunately, not only is Paul's leadership destined to end in jihad and the death of millions, but also it ruins Arrakis's ecology and the culture of the Fremen. Tara B. M. Smith reminds us that the greening of Arrakis is in fact responsible for fragmenting the Fremen and almost causing the sandworms to go extinct. Smith theorizes that "In Herbert's utopia, Arrakis would remain waterless and arid, with sandworms roaming free, and the Fremen being the vital culture they were meant to be" (72). It seems that in Villeneuve's vision, the tragedy is that "[Paul is] a human being that wants to embrace a culture, but that will, by the end, find himself the instrument of colonialism" (*KCRW*). Paul does not find himself the instrument of colonialism. He actively participates in it. Although he cares for the Fremen as a group and individually, he does not care enough to reject the leadership they offer him, though he can see where it will lead.

Ironically, Villeneuve's adaptation illustrates the mistake that Paul makes, the mistakes of Western man that Herbert was trying to illuminate. It is a mistake of hubris, of thinking that power is an acceptable thing to strive for, and that the mistakes of those in power are forgivable, because they are human. In the movie, Paul seems to be trying his best to do well in his predestined role. In the book, we see that while there are indeed forces that conspire to place Paul into this role, he himself accepts it, encourages it, even embraces it, despite knowing the consequences, because he believes more power will allow him to avoid the inevitable outcomes. His choices are not mistakes because he does not realize their effect; they are ethical mistakes, failures of character. Villeneuve's adaptation is sympathetic to the troubles of those burdened by greatness, but Herbert wrote, "The mistakes of superheroes involve too many of us in disaster" (qtd. Durrani, "White Savior", from Waldentapes interview). In focusing on the superhero, the adaptation—and the cultural attitudes that fuel it—neglect

the human costs, and the deep complexity of the people who are not superheroes, but are crushed under the weight of the hero's mistakes.

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