

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

A WALK THROUGH 7th CENTURY ARABIA

Joseph A Islam

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EXCERPTS FROM MY TRAVEL BLOG

Many are familiar with the epic 1977 motion picture, *The Message*. Directed by Moustapha Akkad and starring Anthony Quinn (as Hamza), Irene Papas (as Hind) and Michael Ansara (as Abu Sufiyan), it attempts to capture the provenance of the Quran's message in the Arabian peninsula and the Prophet's life in a 7th century setting.

The site chosen by the film-makers had always intrigued me as they had attempted to capture the environs of 7th century Makkah.

"...The new Mecca of course in Saudi Arabia now has skyscrapers and the modern changes that we could not shoot it there. So we searched for a place that resembles that Makkah ..."

Moustapha Akkad, Producer Director - *The Message*. Source: *The Making of an Epic*

"Ait Bou Chennt is a small village in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains about 15 km from Marrakech. The setting and the scale of the village were perfectly in keeping with 7th century Mecca. But Mecca itself was a very wealthy town set at the crossroads of the major caravan routes of Arabia. So for the film, a splendid superstructure indicative of an entirely different economic status was literally grafted onto the foundations of the existing buildings. The bewildered inhabitants, suddenly found themselves living on the ground floor of houses suitable for the wealthiest merchants of Mecca. They were encouraged to remain in residence, to give natural life to this artificial city. As extras, they people the picture, and as labourers they were recruited to help with the construction of this dream that was resolving into a kind of reality around them"

Source: *The Making of an Epic*



Source: The Making of an Epic (1970's)

"...This ancient world was recreated in the course of 4 and a half months around the inhabitants of Ait Bou Chennt. But Islam is their living faith, and distant Mecca is the focus for their daily prayer, and when they realised that this symbol, the Kaaba, was now standing in their own village and that the village itself had been transformed into ancient Mecca, their astonishment turned to awe. The arrival of camera, crane and lights, restored the balance between illusion and reality, in favour of illusion..."

Source: The Making of an Epic

The drive proved adventurous and somewhat arduous through the remote villages and off the beaten track to the town of Ait Bou Chennt, Morocco. It certainly seemed much further than the 15km from Marrakech that I had expected, based on the information extracted from the film's making.

I wasn't expecting to find much, bar the location of the village that was once chosen as a site for the film. I wanted to feel 7th century Arabia and what the environs would have seemed like in the day of the Arabian Prophet, Muhammad. ^(pbuh) I certainly didn't expect to find any vestiges from the 1977 motion picture.

I had no idea what was to greet me. To my utter amazement, the remnants of the set from 1977 were still largely in tact. The absence of 'camera, crane and lights' transported me back to a time slice of history that wreaked havoc on my senses and one where the boundaries of reality and illusion once again became morphed.

Having visited the Holy city of Makkah as a pilgrim on many occasions, I was now standing in front of a mock, seemingly to scale Makkah sanctuary and one which appeared to be a perfect 7th century setting.

It dawned on me that the Prophet would have most likely been familiar with the kind of setting that I was witnessing as opposed to modern day Makkah with all its modernisations.

I stood absolutely mesmerised.

As I walked through the mock houses of the wealthiest merchants of Arabia, I couldn't but feel the grand opulence and the power that the Quraish would have exercised in their heyday.

Many verses of the Quran also found renewed resonance. For example, whilst finding easy access to other dwellings by navigating from the rear aspect of the houses, I recalled a verse:

002:189 (part)

"...and it is not righteousness that you should enter the houses at their backs, but righteousness (is one) who guards (against evil - and fears God). And come (to) the houses by their doors and be careful (of your duty) to God, that you may be successful"

Albeit, the Quranic verse had a context and a specific purpose, I couldn't help but feel part of a period that the Quran was narrating. It was certainly an illusion, but one that was being successfully translated into depicting an actual reality.

My visit here was to prove to become, one of my most unforgettable experiences from my list of escapades, which often attempts to feed my insatiable desire for wanderlust.

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Mock Makkan sanctuary environs



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Mock Kaaba



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Mock Quraishi dwellings



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