

DESERT ENLIGHTENMENT: PROPHETS AND PROPHECY IN AMERICAN
SCIENCE FICTION

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ABSTRACT

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In the narratives of *Dune*, *The Rise of Apocalypse*, and *Star Wars*, the desert plays a pivotal role in the development of the central characters. As prophets or heralds of their respective sources, Paul Muad'Dib, En Sabah Nur, and Anakin and Luke Skywalker enter the desert – either directly after their births or early in their formative years – and emerge as changed figures. Various elements and manifestations of the desert, such as the sandworms and the spice in *Dune*, affect each of these figures in unique ways. While the desert does have appreciable artistic value as an environment, the argument that its value is limited to that quality is flawed, especially as it is viewed by some of the characters in these stories as a too-harsh world. That unforgiving nature is central to the development of the prophets, as it forces them into a barrenness from which enlightenment originates.

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INTRODUCTION

Though some science fiction narratives do contain explicit elements of prophecy and religion, the lack of boundaries so fundamental to the genre can make the reader hesitate before labeling a character as a prophet. If a figure from a science fiction film or novel demonstrates precognition or some other fantastic ability, the assumption shifts towards the genre. Maybe he or she is an alien, or perhaps this is magic. Such assumptions have few barriers between initial thought and concrete certainty. In contrast, any exhibition of the inexplicable in the world around us often falls under the category of a miracle. Because our boundaries in reality are so well-defined, if something fantastic happens, we claim God as the source.

With this in mind, does prophecy even exist in science fiction? If so many characters and situations in the genre are instilled with mystical elements, then perhaps any leader or philosopher in a given narrative merely exercises their own will, and only claims a higher purpose. As a prophet's requisite to be the herald or messenger of something else demands that they not operate as an independent entity, how can a reader separate the mystically-guided from the imposter?

In the chapters that follow, I will examine three novels. In each of these narratives, a figure arises to shape the future of a people, either as messenger or protector;

philosopher or warrior. Though few surface elements are shared between them, all three are products of the desert. Whether having been born there or lived there for the majority of their lives, the desert tests them, shapes them, and births them as something different from those they encounter. The harsh environment draws a sharp contrast between the technologically-superior civilizations that surround it and the primitive peoples within.

Paul Muad'Dib, from the novel *Dune*, comes to the desert as a youth. Through the course of the novel, he transforms from the privileged son of nobility into Frank Herbert's fictional vision of the Mahdi. Operating from this perspective, Muad'Dib's prophethood is a divine one, fulfilling the prophecy of the Quran in a science fiction setting. Much like the biblical figure of the same name, St. Paul, Paul Muad'Dib enters the desert as one person, and leaves as a divinely-inspired agent of faith.

In *The Rise of Apocalypse*, the character of En Sabah Nur is abandoned in the desert of Egypt as an infant. Growing into manhood under the tutelage of a proud nomadic people, the man who comes to be known as Apocalypse relies on his genetic singularity as a mutant to fulfill the goals of his life, similar to Simon of Paraea, a slave-turned-revolutionary in ancient Israel. Instead of a divine source, En Sabah Nur's origin resides in the ever-evolving realm of nature. His actions are the message of natural order, educating humanity about the impending shift in the balance of sentient power.

Anakin and Luke Skywalker, icons of the science fiction genre, start their paths on the desert planet Tatooine. Unique in their essential nature, this father and son exercise a universal will as dual prophets of the Jedi. Though the established view of Anakin Skywalker - later known as Darth Vader - as the Chosen One of the Jedi order cannot be argued, he is only able to fulfill his appointed destiny through the equally

arduous efforts of his son, Luke. The Christ-story of Anakin Skywalker deepens through his trials in the desert, much like the biblical narrative of Jesus.

Though the purpose of the chapters here does contain the establishment of these men as prophets of their respective narratives, the focus remains on the desert. Although each of these figures is born with the genetic requirements of his role, his enlightenment comes as a result of his experiences with the desert. The manifestations of that environment in the novels are varied, but each of them ties back to the harsh and unforgiving setting. Especially through an examination of parallel figures from world scripture, the necessity of the desert for the prophet can be established.

CHAPTER I

“TO TRAIN THE FAITHFUL”: DESERT AND PROPHECY IN FRANK HERBERT’S

DUNE

The Desert of *Dune*

The setting for many of science fiction’s greatest messianic narratives, the desert is not the birthplace of prophecy because of the aesthetic qualities it possesses, but rather because one cannot live there without making sacrifices. In the desert, one must live brutally. Unlike the desert, temperate environments give ceaselessly to their inhabitants. They provide abundant game, a myriad of naturally-occurring fruits and vegetables, and - perhaps most noteworthy of all - water. Hiding from the oppressive sun during the day, to waste even the smallest measure of water or bit of food can mean death. That is the difference between life in a temperate environment and life in the desert; one is given, and the other is taken.

Is this ruthless existence the extent of the desert’s significance in prophetic science fiction? Certainly the harsh requirements for survival play an important role in revelation, but what else is there about the desert which is so conducive to enlightenment? John Chryssavgis, a Greek Orthodox scholar, argues that, “God is born

in barrenness, where there is an absence of pride, masks, illusions and false images. Paradoxically, God fulfills in emptiness. God appears when we are not too filled with other attachments and distractions, when we are not full of ourselves.” (147) The Christians who migrated from the densely populated Egyptian cities to the deserts in the early centuries of Christianity during their search for enlightenment sought relief from distractions. To remove one’s self from human civilization and reflect upon scripture requires silence. But the needs of the science fiction prophet go far beyond this. The science fiction prophet must be separate from everything, empty of the thoughts of the self, as the Desert Fathers, but also apart from the distracting elements of the temperate environment. This detachment, for the prophet, must be so complete that there can be no return to his former life, his former perspectives. For the science fiction prophet, only through the transformation of the self can the voice of God, the voice of new revelations, be heard and understood.

Religious history abounds with stories in which this sacrificial attitude is taken towards the desert. Christ Himself, shortly after His baptism in the river Jordan, journeyed to the desert to fast and meditate for forty days. (Blackwell 10) The Prophet Muhammad made journeys in the desert throughout His life between the cities of Mecca and Medina. (Gail 18) Moses trekked through the desert searching for the Promised Land. (King James Bible) His Holiness The Báb, during his dispensation, made a pilgrimage through the desert to Mecca. (Abdu’l-Baha 181) Each of these religious figures endured great hardships sacrifices during Their pilgrimages. This practice has transferred from these formative sacred scriptures to the realm of science fiction.

Because the major religious traditions' stories happened in the desert, it is not a

foregone conclusion that all prophetic stories must also occur there purely for the sake of consistency. Much more lies behind the choice than, again, any kind of artistic value; there is also a transformative component that pervades the experiences of the prophet in the wilderness. When Paul Atreides moved to Arrakis with his family, he was one person. When he fled into the desert after the Harkonnen attack on his city and was adopted into the Fremen tribe, he became someone else, someone divine. Though this transformation was not instantaneous, the losses of his father, his title as heir and future title as Duke, and the harshness of the desert all served to provide him with the circumstances that fueled his transformation from man to prophet. This reading of the source of transformation does not apply across the spectrum of *Dune*'s readers. John Dean claims, "the desert is important as background, as a prop," and "The independent, physical presence of a desert wilderness is... inoperative." (77) The content of *Dune* presents a great deal of evidence to dispute this. After all, what represents an independent physical presence more effectively than the sandworms of Arrakis?

Like John Dean, many readers believe that the Fremen people and the experiences had by Paul on Arrakis are the source of his prophetic identity. However, while those elements do play a role, the planet itself - that is, the desert environment and its various manifestations - is in fact the source of his transformation into the Fremen Mahdi. The use of the word "Mahdi" by Herbert is no coincidence; the actions taken by Muad'Dib, the civilization that explodes into the universe because of him, and the religion born from him all serve to illustrate his character as not only the messiah of the Fremen, but a new messenger of God, autonomous from the prophecies of both the Fremen and the Bene Gesserit.

The choice of the desert as the birthplace of prophecy and the location of the transformation or birth of the prophet is a common one in science fiction, and the perspective which views this as a purely artistic choice is not entirely without merit. The desert is a beautiful place, and offers silence in a world filled with unceasing noise. In *The Rise of Apocalypse* in Marvel Comics, the desert of Egypt is the birthplace of En Sabah Nur, the first of the mutant race. (Kavanagh) The desert serves this graphic novel well; the bright colors of the Pharaoh's court, the golden sand, and the bronzed skin of the villains and heroes are a pleasure to behold. Even so, these visuals are secondary to the purpose of the desert in the narrative. En Sabah Nur needs to be born in the desert because of its barrenness, because we cannot be permitted to know from where he comes, and because he needs to seem less human to prepare the reader for his essential nature. His status as a genetic singularity, the first of his kind, means that although we know - theoretically, based upon the biological origins of other mutants in Marvel Comics - that he comes from human parents, we must not be allowed certainty of this through empirical representation.

Star Wars also follows this leaning towards the desert for prophetic science fiction. In this narrative, however, we see a complete disregard for the aesthetic qualities of the desert. From a chronological perspective, our encounter with the desert planet Tatooine in the first film presents a world of dirty thugs which invariably turn out to be either thieves or gamblers. (*The Phantom Menace*) The only exception to this is the shining light of Anakin Skywalker, a child of virgin birth, and the messianic figure of the Jedi. When we return to Tatooine in the following films, the desert has not gained any measure of appreciation from the characters. The virgin mother of the desert prophet is

killed by desert natives (*Attack of the Clones*), and the son of the prophet, a new messianic figure himself, also spends his formative years on Tatooine, among the criminal inhabitants of the planet. (*A New Hope*) These negative perceptions of the desert operate differently than they do in either *Dune* or *The Rise of Apocalypse*. In *Star Wars*, the prophets do not go to the desert to seek enlightenment; they leave the desert after having been enlightened. As such, their journey to the desert does not play a role in their narratives. *Star Wars* occupies a middle ground between *The Rise of Apocalypse* and *Dune*, in that the prophets of the saga are brought to the desert in their infancy, somewhat highlighting the importance of the pilgrimage, which plays a more critical and formative role in *Dune* and *The Desert Fathers*.

The importance of the barrenness in *Dune* is the entrance into the environment from a place of fertility. The divinity of the science fiction prophet is not often the result of an instant revelation, an answered question, or a reflection of past experiences. Rather, for Muad'Dib, it comes about through a transformation of the self through his desert existence. This transformation can be viewed as an exchange; the human gives of himself and his loved ones, and the desert gives divine insight to the prophet. However, special attention must be focused on the circumstances – in every instance – which cause the transformation more so than the exchange. In the case of Muad'Dib, his revelation is not an ambitious act, but something that comes over him, something that shifts the foundations of his soul and his identity into a divine being. The prophet is not the same individual who first went into the desert.

***Dune* as Messianic Narrative**

Dune traces the life of Paul-Muad'Dib and the members of his noble family. Paul Atreides was born to Duke Leto Atreides and Lady Jessica and moved with his family to the desert planet of Arrakis at the age of fifteen. Shortly after their arrival, his family was shattered through a plot by their rival house, Harkonnen. Paul and his mother were the only two members of the family to escape with their lives. Now refugees in the desert of Arrakis, Paul and Jessica are adopted by the native Fremen people who view Paul as the Fremen Mahdi, their messianic savior. Throughout the narrative, Paul leads a Fremen uprising against the Harkonnen occupiers, going even further and taking the throne of the Padishah emperor for himself, establishing a new dynasty based on his religion as the Mahdi of the Fremen (Herbert).

Other factions and institutions play roles in the upbringing of the prophet. The Bene Gesserit, an order of women who act as advisors to the empire, created a breeding program that spanned many generations. This program began – and had its unforeseen culmination in Paul – in their pursuit of the Kwisatz Haderach, their prophesied messianic figure who would have the powers of prescience as well as the knowledge of all of his male and female ancestors, while the Bene Gesserit only have the knowledge of their female ancestors. Paul's status as a messiah is twofold in the narrative, as he fulfills both the prophecy of the Fremen and the Bene Gesserit.

The Origin of the Prophet

Although he was born with the destiny to be the Mahdi of the Fremen people,

Paul was not native to the planet Arrakis. The prophecy that foretold his dispensation on Arrakis included the fact that he would be born on another world and arrive on Arrakis to fulfill his divine mission. His foreignness is essential to the losses which he must endure in the desert. Had he been born to the desert as one of the Fremen and shaped his life according to their system of belief, he would not have been able to experience the environment of the desert as a system that changes the individual.

Growing up on the planet Caladan - the polar opposite of Arrakis - was necessary because it allowed Paul to initially adapt to that easier environment. As Paul claims in reference to his life on Caladan, "There existed no need on Caladan to build a physical paradise or a paradise of the mind – we could see the actuality all around us. And the price we paid was the price men have always paid for achieving a paradise in this life – we went soft, we lost our edge." (Herbert 255) The lush environment of Caladan dispelled any need of its inhabitants to practice conservation. Though it can be argued that the Atrides family had always maintained an outstanding level of discipline, the difference was in the environment in which that discipline was exercised. When an individual knows that there is a safety net beneath them, he pays less attention to the details because, while the end goal is still a worthy one, a second attempt in a hospitable environment is easily attained. In the desert, living by the Fremen "attitude of the knife" (Herbert 172), that second chance is rarely – if ever – found.

The predominant feature of Caladan was the vast oceans. With water covering a majority of the planet's surface, Caladan was more of an aquatic world than one of dry land. The planet did possess continents of fair size, however, and most of these were in fertile, temperate zones. As a result of living in such an environment, the Atrides family

spent their time unconcerned with matters of survival and hardship, and focused on intellectual pursuits and physical discipline. Paul's quote above in reference to the paradise of Caladan demonstrates the results of this complacency. Though you may develop skills suited to that safe area, your ability to survive without the benefits of the environment begin to lack; you lose your edge.

As a desert planet, Arrakis is not an enticing environment to foreign inhabitants. Covered completely in desert, pole-to-pole, there is no natural water anywhere on its surface. Though it possesses several native life forms that have adapted to its ecosystem, Arrakis has almost no sustenance to offer to its foreign inhabitants. In fact, the evolutionary path taken by the dominant sandworms of the desert have made water a corrosive toxin to them. At a particular larval stage of their development when this is not the case, they will block off this water from the adult worms and consume it. In this fashion, not only does Arrakis not provide sustenance to the human settlers, but the ecosystem actively repels the life-sustaining resource. That the Fremen have been able to exist on the planet for so long is a testament to their reverence towards water.

When Paul first encounters Stilgar, one of the Fremen leaders, the Atreides family learns of the importance of water on Arrakis. In return for an honorable courtesy made to him, Stilgar visits Duke Leto to speak further about their potential alliance. After they have sealed their agreement, Stilgar spits on the polished desk of the Duke. Astonished by this action – thinking that such a thing could only be an insult – the guards of the Duke are held back only when they understand that such an action is a token of respect. The sacrifice of the body's water is the greatest thing that a Fremen can offer. Most interesting about this exchange is not Duke's reaction, or even the worldview that

advocates such an action. Paul's reaction proves the most telling. Having wrapped his mind around the custom, "Leto sank back into his own chair, caught Paul's eye, a rueful grin on his son's face..." (Herbert 93) That Paul would show pity to his father for his lack of understanding of the Fremen custom only furthers the notion, introduced earlier in the novel, that Paul was born with the innate knowledge of the Fremen, and by extension, the desert. The Fremen prophecy of the Mahdi claims that "He shall know your ways as though born to them." (Herbert 110) Though Paul was not born on Arrakis, his time in the desert, brief though it has been at the point of this explanation of water's significance, has begun to unlock the innate knowledge of his prophetic self.

Muad'Dib and St. Paul

That Paul's name and the name of the first Christian hermit, St. Paul, are the same deepens the parallel between them. Both men were raised in civilized regions, lost their fathers at the same age, and found a profound enlightenment in the desert. Quoted in *The Desert Fathers*, St. Paul, who had spent five years of his life in desert meditation says, "Then the desert held me: would that it had never let me go!" (Waddell 32) Though Muad'Dib went to the desert at an earlier age and for many more years than did St. Paul, his reflections after having emerged from it are similar. Whereas St. Paul removed himself from the desert, Muad'Dib removed the desert itself. In *Dune Messiah*, following his jihad across the known universe of humanity, converting countless followers to his new faith, Muad'Dib helps to fulfill the prophecy of the Fremen by beginning the conversion process on Arrakis from a desert planet to a temperate one. His regret in regards to this decision in the novels which follow, particularly in *Children of*

Dune, is a stark contrast to his revelations in *Dune*.

St. Paul and Muad'Dib both found enlightenment in the desert. This truth was not disseminated from a person, or from an experience had by either the prophet or the hermit; it came from the environment itself. St. Paul writes, regarding his time in the desert,

“I grew to dread even my cell, with its knowledge of my imaginings: and grim and angry with myself, would set out solitary to explore the desert: and whenever I would spy the depth of a valley or a mountainside or a precipitous rock, there was my place of prayer, there the torture-house of my unhappy flesh: and, the Lord Himself is witness, after many tears, and eyes that clung to heaven, I would sometimes seem to myself to be one with the angelic hosts.” (Waddell 32)

Muad'Dib's desert pilgrimage revealed a similar truth about the universe. He says,

“There is in all things a pattern that is part of our universe... You can find it in the turning of the seasons, in the way sand trails along a ridge, in the branch clusters of the creosote bush or the pattern of its leaves. We try to copy these patterns in our lives and our society... Yet it is possible to see peril in the finding of ultimate perfection. In such perfection, all things move toward death.” (Herbert 380)

Both of these quotations speak about the divine insights gained from the environment of the desert. In each passage, it is not in human conditions and practices that one finds universal perfection; indeed, in those realms, one only finds distractions. In the silent

barrenness of the desert God speaks to the science fiction prophet, allowing a glimpse of that world beyond material existence. Whether that next plane of existence is described as an angelic one or a realm of death is a semantic matter as both are descriptions of the spiritual domain.

The Brutality of the Environment

One of the more noteworthy quotes from Dune regarding the planet, “Arrakis teaches the attitude of the knife-” (Herbert 172), provides the ideal description of the setting. One must be able to make decisions, often violent, from moment to moment; “chopping off what’s incomplete and saying, ‘Now it’s complete because it’s ended here.’” (Herbert 172) The area of combat represents a field in which Muad’Dib only possessed theoretical knowledge prior to his arrival on Arrakis.

Paul encounters Jamis, a Fremen fighter, during his escape from the Harkonnen. Defeating him in their initial meeting, Paul does serious harm to the pride of the proud Fremen. After the tribe which has sheltered Paul and his mother reaches a place of safety, Jamis calls out Paul. He claims that his reasons for this are to test Paul’s role in the prophecy of the Mahdi, but pride is the deciding factor. Defeating Jamis again, Paul kills him, as required by the rules of the challenge. Never having killed a man before, Paul is shaken by the experience. More than the act itself, Stilgar’s reaction provides the greatest impact for Paul. Stilgar warns him that, in the future, if Paul tries to challenge him for leadership of the Fremen tribe, the fight will not be as quick and easy as this one. Jessica – Paul’s mother – “sensed the way her own words and Stilgar’s sank into Paul, doing their harsh work on the boy.” (Herbert 306) Further, she comes to appreciate that

“The mistake these people made – it served a purpose now.” (Herbert 306)

Stilgar and Jessica’s words caused the change in Paul, but the desert provided the combat. Fremen fights are to the death, not because of an innate brutal nature – though there is that – but because of necessity. The perspiration that comes from the physical strain of the fight is lost water, and on Arrakis, lost water can mean death. Chani – one of the other Fremen and Paul’s future wife – explains, “Combat water belongs to the winner. It’s because you have to fight in the open without stillsuits.” (Herbert 310) Because the Fremen stillsuit technology allows a person to recycle their own water, to lose water to perspiration during a fight is to lose it permanently. “The flesh belongs to the person, but his water belongs to the tribe...” (Herbert 310), an ancient Fremen maxim, spells out the direct link. Though not mentioned directly in the narrative, there can be only one explanation. The Fremen fights to the death are a form of punishment, rather than a tradition or practical measure. In a brutal environment where every last mote of resources is required for survival, to choose to waste water is not socially acceptable by any measure. Challenge combat, however, is a choice, and because it has ingrained itself so deeply into the Fremen tradition, the loss of water is known and is allowed to proceed. But the loss is not accepted. The punishment for water thieves on Arrakis is execution, and so the death requirement in the challenge combat is a manifestation of that execution. Choosing to commit water theft by entering into combat results in the death of one of the combatants, causing his water to then be harvested and recycled back into the tribe. This desert-driven necessity for death is one of the causes of transformation for Paul.

After his fight with Jamis, Paul receives his Fremen name. Until this point in the novel, he has been the same person, the same young ducal heir to his father. Killing

Jamis at the demand of the desert is the critical step along his prophetic path, and so he ceases to be Paul and becomes Muad'Dib. He is permitted to choose his own clan name, and selects the name of the desert mouse – “Muad'Dib”, a name from his prophetic visions. While a mouse on its own is not the most imposing or majestic of desert creatures - certainly not one most suited to be the inspiration for a messianic name - the practices of the mouse are what lie at the center of its choice as Paul's Fremen name. Paul's choice of the name Muad'Dib reflects his ability to live in the desert environment successfully. The desert mouse, unlike many of the other native animals of the desert, is not a scavenger or a blood-drinking predator; it lives as do the Fremen. Able to make its own water, the desert mouse and its way of life are, as Stilgar says, "a powerful base on which to build your life," (Herbert 307)

The Spice & The Sandworms as Separate Manifestations of the Desert

The spice is the material means through which the desert accesses the prophet. The most precious commodity in the universe of *Dune*, the spice is a dietary supplement that enhances the body and mind and is produced exclusively on Arrakis. Some of the communities and organizations in the narrative attain abilities through spice use that appear supernatural. Combined with specific dosage and practices, the spice grants the Bene Gessrit complete control over their metabolism and access to the memories of their female ancestors. Among the rarest of effects, the spice grants limited prescient abilities. For all humans, however, the spice grants increased health and a lifetime two or three times the norm.

Arrakis is the source of all the spice in the universe, literally infused with the

valuable resource. The spice is in the air, the food, the water; every human on the surface of the planet - regardless of class - has the "Eyes of Ibad" (Herbert 521), in which the iris of the eye becomes deep blue, a symptom of spice addiction. As a result, all of the inhabitants of Arrakis have large amounts of spice in their blood at all times - amounts that would cost a fortune off-planet. Only on Arrakis does one encounter this level of saturation, and only at this level of saturation does Paul begin to experience his prescient visions.

Spice points in the direction of the third and final manifestation of the desert; the sandworms. Unlike the brutal environmental manifestation of the desert and the spice, the sandworms are the very soul of the desert. Responsible for the arid landscape and the manufacture of the spice – which leads to the divine power of the Mahdi – the worms are the source of change in the universe. Gigantic sentinels hundreds of meters in length, the sandworms are worshiped as "Makers" by the Fremen. Their adoration of these creatures is such that they believe them to be the physical embodiment of God on Arrakis. Unlike most of the secular humans in the universe, the Fremen know that the worms are responsible for the creation of the spice, and they have created their own rituals to use the concentrated spice created by the death of a worm to unlock the memories of their ancestors. Only through his contact with the Fremen is Paul able to have access to this special source of spice.

Though the spice is the direct intermediary between the prophet and the divine source of revelation, the worms serve in a similar capacity. Herbert's choice to refer to Paul-Muad'Dib as the Mahdi plays an important role in his identity beyond simply being the title of the foretold spiritual figure in the Quran, and thus at his legitimacy as a

speaker of divine truth. One of the Prophet Muhammad's many titles was the "Seal of the Prophets", (Gail 24) a title that has many interpretations, the important one for Muad'Dib being that the prophets who follow will not be bound by the same codes. As the Mahdi represents a figure outside of the Adamic cycle, beginning with Adam and ending with The Bab (Effendi 80), the particulars regarding his divine mission were not fully explored in the divine scriptures of Islam. In the fictional account of the Mahdi in *Dune*, Frank Herbert illustrates the potential differences between a prophet under the banner of the Adamic cycle and a prophet as the first of a new divine dispensation.

The sandworms and Paul-Muad'Dib operate within a symbiotic prophetic cycle, and so the simple reading of *Dune* that places the worms in the role of mindless beast is flawed. Rather than being instinctual factories which produce spice, the worms are in fact the twin dispensary of Paul in the revealing of divine truths. This is not to imply that the worms themselves are sentient beings, but rather that they are the preparers of the prophet's environment, the makers - we later learn - of the very desert itself. As such, they occupy the station of both a manifestation of God and the gateway intermediaries of God and the Madhi. This is a relatively new perspective towards divine revelation, and is in keeping with the idea that the new spiritual messengers of God – following Prophet Muhammad – will operate within a new cycle of divine law.

Redefining the Wilderness

For these ideas to be understood, a new definition of the desert – apart from the traditional definition of readers like John Dean – is needed. The desert is not the Fremen; as newcomers - on a cosmic scale - to Arrakis', the Fremen are not responsible for the

desert environment, the sandworms, or the spice. Credit deserves to be granted to them, however, for the cultural education of the prophet Muad'Dib. Their traditions - again, not the desert, but of the desert - were certainly essential to Paul-Muad'Dib's social development. While for many this might give weight to the idea of the Fremen being the engines behind the prophet's insight, in actuality, the Fremen are merely observers - critical to the cultural development of Muad'Dib, certainly, and the other half of the genetic line that will forever shape human affairs following the birth of Paul - of events far beyond their power to affect.

The evidence that the desert does not represent a merely artistic choice by the author comes from more than a subjective preference, but from an observable trend in the genre. *The Rise of Apocalypse* does utilize some of the aesthetic qualities of the desert, but the narrative itself also relies on the barrenness of the desert for the inhuman entity of En Sabah Nur. In *Star Wars*, the desert planet of Tatooine does not serve any artistic purpose. The characters in the films constantly speak against the environment and its inhabitants, yet both of the prophetic figures of the saga grow up and are formed in the desert.

With these questions and examples in mind, what helps us to move beyond this simple reading of Paul-Muad'Dib's environment and its role in his revelation? Paul is the Mahdi of the Fremen, yes, but he is also the Kwisatz Haderach, the messianic figure of the Bene Gesserit. While both factions have arguable claims to his prophethood, the relationship of significance concerns neither of them. Muad'Dib and the desert are the requisite ingredients to create the hub of mankind. His birth as the prophet through the brutal environment and his contact with the potent spice from the worms shaped him. As

Alan Hodder notes regarding the wilderness of Earth, “Weasels, caribou herds, alpine meadows are all wonderful to behold, but these are *expressions* of nature’s wilderness not prescriptions for achieving it.” (Hodder 82) That term, "expressions" and its unifying effect centers the argument regarding Paul and the desert. These three elements: the harsh environment, the spice, and the worms, are inseparable. They exist not as three independent guides to Muad'Dib's identity, but as the singular, shaping power of the desert giving birth to the prophet.

CHAPTER II

THE HERALD OF NATURE: EN SABAH NUR IN MARVEL COMICS

Herald of the Species

In *The Rise of Apocalypse*, the biographical account of En Sabah Nur in Egypt, the reader is introduced to a figure who, while not quite a prophet by title, does, through his actions, herald a new race of beings. En Sabah Nur's grey skin, facial markings, and unrivaled physical power separate him from the rest of creation. Only through the circumstances that follow his birth – most notably, his rescue at the hands of Baal, his adoptive father – does En Sabah Nur maintain any connection to humanity. Existing on the other side of the spectrum from the benevolent science fiction prophets, En Sabah Nur's identity – both as an individual and as the living prophecy of his species' advent – is born through two connected elements. The culture of his father's tribe, the first of these two elements, is a response to the second; the desert.

En Sabah Nur, born to unknown human parents in the desert of Egypt, appears as a helpless babe. A warrior clan of desert nomads, the Sandstormers, finds him, initially seeing him as a sacrifice to nature, a “sacrifice we should finish, if we are wise.”

(Kavanagh 6) This reference to nature, especially at the beginning of En Sabah Nur's

life, reveals a connection to the specific kind of prophecy that he represents. Rather than a spiritual prophet, En Sabah Nur *is* the living symbol of mutantkind. This is not a shared trend with the other well-known science fiction prophets; En Sabah Nur has no message to spread, beyond those of nature's shifting priorities. Instead of a messenger, he works as a force of nature to herald a change in nature through action alone.

Much of the philosophy espoused by En Sabah Nur throughout the graphic novel can be linked to his identity as the first member of a new species. He does not view himself as a figure of salvation, as many of the other science fiction prophets do. Rather, consumed by his own superiority, En Sabah Nur presents the tyrannical hand of a dictator. Valuing mutant lives above those of humans, he is willing to work with members of his own species so long as they conform to his designs. In an event taking place millennia after his birth in Egypt, En Sabah Nur – at that point in his life known as Apocalypse – awakens to say, "...a plummet in global mutant capacity – has opened my eyes." (X-Men #181) In this particular instance, Apocalypse acts in the interests of the mutant community solely for the preservation of what he considers to be real strength. Indeed, on many occasions, En Sabah Nur has fought against other mutants for not sharing his vision.

Taking into account that En Sabah Nur has little interest in the welfare of others unless that welfare also serves his designs, the title of divine prophet cannot be ascribed to him in the same manner as other science fiction and fantasy prophets, such as Muad'Dib in *Dune* and Anakin and Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*. In those narratives, the prophetic figure works as the instrument of a greater universal design, while in *The Rise of Apocalypse*, En Sabah Nur exercises his will as a herald of the natural world.

Mutation in Marvel Comics

Popularized by Stan Lee in the 1960s, mutants have played a role in myriad comic publications over the decades. Generally viewed as the next step in the evolution of human life, mutants are a genetic offshoot of mainstream humanity. Possessing powers that humans view as almost supernatural, mutant abilities such as wingless flight, telepathy, energy manipulation, and super strength, among countless others, are a result of the mutant “X Gene” (Marvel Universe) that has developed over the course of humanity’s evolution as a species. Because of this continuing evolution, mutants can be born to mutant parents or to human parents, if their human parents possess the gene in a dormant state. While the powers already listed have no outward appearance in the comics, the random nature of the X Gene’s mutation is such that the affected mutant might be born with purple skin, rather than an advantageous ability.

En Sabah Nur was created retroactively by Marvel as the ancient mutant of Egypt. Marvel Comics had already published numerous comic series featuring mutants as both hero and villain by the time En Sabah Nur made his first appearance in 1986 (Marvel Universe). Though these other mutant groups depicted in the earlier comics already had developed narratives and histories, the creation of En Sabah Nur marked a chronological beginning for the mutant species. Because of the supernatural nature of the Marvel universe, which includes elements such as time travel and the willful manipulation of reality by nigh-omnipotent beings, many fans speculate as to which mutant was actually born first, as several do make that claim. However, Marvel’s choice of En Sabah Nur’s name – which, again, translates as “The First One” – would hint that he is in fact the first of his kind. This idea is further reinforced by the authoritarian attitude taken by En

Sabah Nur throughout *The Rise of Apocalypse* as well as the other comic series in which he has played a major role, such as *X-Men* and *X-Factor*.

The Culture of the Sandstormers

Unlike some of the other desert divines of science fiction literature, En Sabah Nur's identity as a prophet arises partially from the culture in which he was raised. Born to Akkaban parents, En Sabah Nur belongs to their tribe only in name. Abandoned at birth, his salvation comes at the hands of the Sandstormers clan. A most brutal collection of desert warriors, their first inclination to kill the infant fails only because of the intercession of their leader, Baal. Intent on what he sees as a spark of destiny in the strange baby, Baal goes so far as to execute one of his warriors who attempts to kill the child without his permission.

After this initial encounter with the child and the Sandstormers, En Sabah Nur's next appearance in the narrative comes years later, on the day of his seventeenth birthday. As part of the coming of age ritual for the Sandstormers clan, En Sabah Nur must fight against three other warriors of the tribe in a battle to the death.

The initial reaction to this tradition can be one of confusion. In a land that tests the individual not only through environmental conditions, but also through nearly constant warfare, it seems wise to have a strong collection of fighters on hand. Why, then, would a ritual performed on the seventeenth birthday of a tribesman call for the death of at least one – if the initiate loses – if not three? Does this not weaken the tribe? Certainly in the case of En Sabah Nur, an exception must be made for his vast power, thereby legitimizing the death of any other three fighters. What does it imply beyond

him, though? Even if the exception is made for him, the rituals of the tribe and its culture still have an effect.

Several parallels can be drawn between the Sandstormers tribe and the Fremen tribes in *Dune* by Frank Herbert. Both live in the harsh environment of the desert, and both have tribal rituals that involve battle. In the latter comparison, battle plays a similar role, though in *The Rise of Apocalypse* it possesses a greater severity simply in terms of the number of the potential dead. In *Dune*, the Fremen fight to the death during a challenge, absorbing the water of the slain opponent back into the tribe because of the scarcity of that resource.

When En Sabah Nur defeats the last of the three opponents in combat, he makes a statement over his corpse. He says, “Perhaps in the next life, weakling... You will save your strength for the fight.” (Kavanagh) This statement links the necessity of combat to the Fremen tradition. Strength, like water in the desert, serves as a resource. Only a reverent approach to a finite resource can ensure survival for the individual. Just as the Fremen use stillsuits to conserve the water of their bodies, so does En Sabah Nur refrain from engaging in the psychological elements of combat. While his opponents are wasting their time and attention on the cutting phrases they send his way, En Sabah Nur is concerned only with ending their lives as quickly as possible.

This attitude towards conservation does not necessarily follow En Sabah Nur throughout his life. Rather, his choice to conserve strength during originates from his survival of the fittest mentality. The rite of passage battles that the younger warriors of the Sandstormers must go through also conserve the resources of the tribe for those who are most fit to participate in the nomadic warrior culture.

Desert Brutality as Sculptor

Closely connected to the culture of his tribe, the brutality of the desert plays its own role in the shaping of En Sabah Nur's prophetic identity. The desert possesses a profound place in the world's religious scriptures. Moses, Christ, Muhammad, and The Báb all spent a great deal of time in the desert, either traveling or in meditation. These religious figures, while enduring different trials in the desert, all have a divine source for their prophetic identity. Even Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker, arguably two of the most famous science fiction desert prophets in popular culture, have their destiny linked to a universal design that can easily be interpreted as divinely inspired.

Now that there is a clear definition of En Sabah Nur as a herald of nature, his experience in the desert can be compared comfortably despite the lack of divine origin. The mutant that became Apocalypse did not go to the desert to meditate. In fact, unlike the Prophets of scripture mentioned above, En Sabah Nur never references the desert as a place of value in *The Rise of Apocalypse*. His experience there is a functional thing, a circumstance that exists simply because it is the place of his birth. Had En Sabah Nur been born in the jungle or on the plains, he would still, genetically, be the same entity. However, his identity as nature's herald would be drastically different.

The scarce resources and the drive for conservation – again, two elements that play a large role in the culture of his upbringing – have shaped En Sabah Nur into a particular kind of herald. Instead of possessing the benevolent disposition that he might have had if he had been born in an environment of plenty, the requirements of survival in the harsh desert shaped his views of survival in the larger world. The competition for resources drives the need for battle, and the need for sustenance demands a compromise

of preference. Instead of deciding to view these elements as characteristic of his native environment, En Sabah Nur brings the necessary mindset for them through the ages.

One of the crucial scenes that define the brutality of the desert occurs when En Sabah Nur journeys with his father Baal to a tomb in the desert to see the stone tablet that prophesizes his birth. Because of the battle that occurs before this journey through the catacombs, Baal succumbs to mortal wounds while in the crypt. However, before he dies, he succeeds in showing En Sabah Nur the stone tablet heralding his existence. Starving and still far from the exit of the catacombs, En Sabah Nur takes the blood of a scarab from his father. Calling it, “A fertile omen in this barren tomb” (Kavanagh), Baal likens it to the desert in which they live, which is the very essence of barrenness. En Sabah Nur takes what he needs from the insect, compromising taste for survival.

Not Truly a Villain

Though he is born En Sabah Nur, after the rejection of Nephri he renames himself Apocalypse. While this name symbolizes evil in the comics, En Sabah Nur is not merely another comic book villain bent on destruction. Marvel editor Bob Harris states, “To his own mind he wasn't evil... he believed he was doing the right thing. He was ensuring evolution.” (Callahan) This statement, while revealing a part of En Sabah Nur's personality, addresses his prophetic path. If the other major science fiction prophets such as Darth Vader and Muad'Dib have a right to exercise their intentions and purposes as they see fit, then why does En Sabah Nur not? Both of these other prophets do arguably have a more divine source than he, but that does not exalt their rights above his. After all, whether the source of purpose is God or nature, the prophet is no less a means of

philosophical dissemination, required in some way to exercise his or her purpose.

It is true that Apocalypse was the leader of the Alliance of Evil, a mutant organization that carried out agendas against what could be seen as the common good. (Marvel Universe) Though the name of this group represents a serious issue for defending the actions of its leader, the makeup of that group first needs to be understood. Apocalypse did not recruit these members because they were evil; his message does not preach evil. Rather, it is that his uncompromising stance towards the supremacy of strength is, among members of the mutant community in Marvel Comics, most attractive to those members who wish to harm others.

Another prophetic figure draws an ideal contrast to the aims of En Sabah Nur. Professor Charles Xavier, himself a mutant of extraordinary telepathic abilities, preaches the unity of humans and mutants. Much like En Sabah Nur, Xavier has assembled a group of followers that represent perhaps the most famous comic book organization in American popular culture; the X-Men. As members of the mutant community – in different capacities – each of these two characters has a direct interest in the promulgation of mutant rights and the safeguarding of their species. While Xavier favors a more dialogue-driven approach, En Sabah Nur, as in the ritual combat of his youth, sees speech as secondary when it comes to advancing his vision for his species.

This difference in approach certainly comes from the trials that each visionary has endured in his life. Xavier, while experiencing hardship in his own way, had a life founded in the same appreciation of debate and mediation that his philosophy espouses. Also, Xavier's particular mutant abilities do not change his outward appearance at all; his form is that of a bald human. En Sabah Nur, in addition to the harsh desert environment

in which he was born and raised, was not as fortunate as Xavier to have the same appearance as the humans around him. With his gray skin and facial markings, En Sabah Nur was viewed by all but his adoptive father Baal as a monstrosity. This prejudice that he faced from humans was overwhelming and serves as one of the motivational contributions to his methods of carrying out his survival of the fittest agenda.

In comparing the prophets from the major world scriptures to those from the Marvel Comics universe, the need for solely altruistic intentions must be forgotten. Especially in the case of En Sabah Nur, the prophetic destiny ordained through his genetics finds its source not in a divine influence, but in the need of nature to push forward an ever-advancing evolutionary path. If the more traditional prophetic role of guide and paternal figure is sought by the reader, it can be seen in the praise of strength that En Sabah Nur consistently displays throughout the series. Following an event in which the vast majority of the mutant population becomes human through a malevolent act, En Sabah Nur awakens to help protect the dwindling mutant population. En Sabah Nur greatly desires the survival and advancement of his species, but only if the members are strong enough for the role nature intends for them.

En Sabah Nur and Simon of Paraea

Through an investigation of En Sabah Nur's identity as a prophet, a parallel can be seen between him and the person of Simon of Paraea, a Jewish slave in 4 BC. According to the writings of Flavius Josephus,

“Simon, one of the servants to the king, relying upon the handsome appearance and tallness of his body, put a diadem upon his head also; he also went about with

the company of robbers that he had gotten together, and burnt down the royal palace that was at Jericho, and many other costly edifices aside, and procured himself very easily spoils by rapine...” (The Wars of the Jews)

The passage in *The War of the Jews* goes on to detail the end of Simon’s life at the hands of Gratus, the captain of the king’s guard. Late in the 20th century, a stone was found that, according to scholar Israel Knohl, directly addresses the story of Simon of Paraea. The script of the tablet would suggest that Simon’s role was that of a prophet. The discovery of the stone tablet in the buried crypt in the Egyptian desert in *The Rise of Apocalypse* further links these two figures together, as En Sabah Nur’s existence was also prophesized.

Beginning with the identity of the prophet before the act of revelation, En Sabah Nur and Simon share many commonalities. Though Simon was presumably born into slavery, En Sabah Nur’s upbringing, while brutal, did not become that of a slave until he ventured to the City of Kings to seek his vengeance against the court of the pharaoh. Both figures rise from their positions of servitude, viewed as saviors of the people. In truth, both En Sabah Nur and Simon were acting out of self-centered motivation; Simon for ascendancy and En Sabah Nur for revenge against the pharaoh for taking his father and his home.

In Josephus’ text, Simon is classified as having a superior physical form. These genetic gifts supported his claim to power, allowing him to carry out his will to impressive length. En Sabah Nur’s narrative relies primarily on his physicality. His identity as a herald of nature ties directly to the genetic differences between him and the humans around him. Much like Simon, En Sabah Nur’s physical form allows him to

carry out his plans for vengeance, though not through the image or inspiration derived from his body. As previously discussed, En Sabah Nur's mutant abilities allow him to single-handedly defeat the forces of Rama-Tut, without the need for any assistance from an armed force, such as the soldiers of Simon.

The company kept by each figure is another element that contains common features. Simon was said to have an army of robbers which helped him attempt his ascension. With these men, he carried out actions that many would agree were brutal. Similarly, En Sabah Nur was surrounded by men vicious in nature. His Sandstormer clan, while not necessarily thieves by strict definition, does not shy away from slaughter. The surface difference between the followers of these prophets is the time in which they were among these savage men. Though Simon only assembled the host of thieves to carry out his coup, and the Sandstormers were killed before En Sabah Nur executed his vengeance, that both figures were willing to be associated with them marks a connection between them.

The outcome of each man's designs is similar as well. Vowing vengeance upon Rama-Tut and his court, En Sabah Nur single-handedly vanquishes the pharaoh's host, destroying the means by which he traveled to this point in time. Simon of Paraea burns down the royal palace of Jericho, the symbol of Herod's power, before returning to the valleys of the desert, where he was ultimately defeated. These successful campaigns against the ruler in each narrative mirror each other, in that the symbol of each monarch is destroyed, a symbolic victory for Simon and a tangible one for En Sabah Nur.

In following the story of En Sabah Nur past the narrative contained in *The Rise of Apocalypse*, a similar fate to Simon's also occurs for the prophet of nature. En Sabah

Nur, five millennia after his birth, suffers defeat at the hands of a warrior hero fighting on the side of order. Simon, following the destruction he wrought in Jericho, flees to the desert valley with his army of robbers. There, Gratus kills him along with the city guard. His passage back to the desert mirrors the actions of En Sabah Nur after his fateful encounter with the X-Men. Escaping to his home sands in Egypt, Apocalypse dies at the hands of Cable, another mutant, in a prophesized battle.

Much like the Christ story of *Star Wars* and the prophecy of the Mahdi in *Dune*, considering the identity of En Sabah Nur in the context of an established scripture is helpful. When the comparison echoes in a manner this closely, it can help redefine the nature of the character. Especially considering the common fate of resurrection between these two men, En Sabah Nur's narrative can be read as science fiction's interpretation of a compelling scriptural story.

An Autonomous Prophethood

While it is true that En Sabah Nur acts in the interests of nature, heralding a new species, his unique nature is autonomous from any outside influence. In several scenes throughout the novel, a figure appears to him that he views as the goddess Osiris. Though many readers might view the presence of this figure as indicating a divine influence in the actions of En Sabah Nur, an important fact to remember about the universe of Marvel Comics is that many entities viewed as deities by ancient human religions are, in the comics, not gods at all. Rather, they are beings of great – but rarely omnipotent – power which play different roles in the world. As such, Osiris, while viewed by the Egyptians in *The Rise of Apocalypse* as a god, is really only an observer.

Those times in *The Rise of Apocalypse* when En Sabah Nur speaks with Osiris, no

confirming occurrences, such as the acknowledgement of a character other than En Sabah Nur, indicate that these visions are anything more than hallucinations, especially since they occur in the presence of other characters, and usually while En Sabah is fatigued or wounded. The words offered by Osiris, too, are not tactics and commands, but rather how she thinks En Sabah Nur should act. In this way, the figure can be viewed as a manipulator rather than an originator of prophecy.

Particularly in the setting of Marvel Comics, in which mutants and evolution play such a critical role – not just in the X-Men issues, but also across the spectrum of publications – prophethood cannot be restricted to those figures associated with religions of the real world. Beings such as Osiris are numerous in the fictional setting and, while God does exist in Marvel Comics in a fashion, the machinations of lesser beings of power play a much greater role in the narratives.

En Sabah Nur represents uncompromising strength, not evil. The readership of the character to this point has assumed that to kill is to be evil, to be absolute is to be tyrannical. Though the latter is true to a point concerning En Sabah Nur, his goals and nature's must be viewed in the same light to be understood. From that more open perspective, the being known later as Apocalypse possesses no more evil than a lion eating a gazelle that was too weak to escape.

CHAPTER III

STAR WARS MESSIAH: JEDI PROPHECY AND THE DESERT

A Messianic Narrative

Since its premier in 1977, the *Star Wars* franchise has captivated a diverse audience. The most famous space opera to date, it contains action, romance, and philosophy. In the realm of iconic, though outdated, representations of good and evil, however, *Star Wars* knows no equal. Darth Vader, arguably the pivotal antagonist of the original trilogy, a huge masked man armored in black plate and wielding an energy weapon the color of hellfire, epitomizes the blackguard. Luke Skywalker, an athletic youth with blonde hair and a sword as blue as his eyes, represents truth and benevolence.

Many scholars see the parallel between the figure of Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) and Christ. Both were men born of virgin mothers, both were prophesized before their birth, and both were intended to be the saviors of a people. A Christ figure is also seen in the character of Luke Skywalker, a man who resists the temptations of an evil figure and leads the battle against him.

Another common area of these three figures is their place of birth. Christ's pilgrimage to the desert for forty days is a well-known Biblical story. The meditation and

fasting that He performed there led to his revelations and message to humanity. Both Anakin Skywalker and Luke, like Jesus, were born in another location before coming to the desert. While the third film of the prequel trilogy, *Revenge of the Sith*, finally reveals the birthplace of Luke Skywalker, his father Anakin's place of birth is never revealed. However, George Lucas goes to great lengths to make sure the audience knows that Tatooine is not his origin.

What is the purpose of this narrative measure by Lucas? If, in *A New Hope*, the audience encounters Luke as a teenager on the desert planet, raised by his family, certainly it can be assumed that he was born there. Similarly, encountering Anakin as an even younger child – a slave – on the same world, why would the audience ever assume that he comes from another place, another world? The answer lies in the journey, the pilgrimage to the desert.

Lucas, much like Frank Herbert, the author of *Dune*, creates a prophetic protagonist who, while not technically born in the desert, goes there at a young age to receive his revelation. Doubtlessly, a difference in these figures does exist. While in *Dune*, Muad'Dib came to the desert as a fifteen year old youth, in *Star Wars* both Anakin Skywalker and Luke Skywalker arrive on the planet at such a young age that they have no memories of ever having been anywhere else.

The need for this can be described by John Chryssavgis, a Greek orthodox scholar when he says, "God is born in barrenness, where there is an absence of pride, masks, illusions and false images. Paradoxically, God fulfills in emptiness. God appears when we are not too filled with other attachments and distractions, when we are not full of ourselves." (147) God, not life, comes from that barren place, the desert planet of

Tatooine. George Lucas chose for Anakin and Luke Skywalker to come to the desert from other places for the same reason that several scenes from the *Star Wars* films depict individuals staring off into the desert sunset; it is a place away from those human constructs and distractions. There, a Jedi can listen to God.

Prophet of the Jedi

Despite the clear connections between Christ and Anakin Skywalker, their mutual title as prophet represents a less opaque bond. While they were both born of a virgin birth and destined to save a population from a darker influence - the Sith for Anakin and the inherent temptation and corruption of humanity for Christ - only one of them had a message that went hand in hand with that destiny. The man who would become Darth Vader, despite his vast power and path, led a life often confused as to purpose. He knew what he was supposed to do, what he was meant to do, but was unclear as to how that destiny would ultimately unfold. Christ, on the other hand, while certainly possessed of - depending on the individual's perspective - even greater agency than Skywalker in a universal sense, also possessed a lesson for humanity. Through education, Christ - as read in the Bible - taught people about their own inherent abilities to overcome instinct and rise to be better servants of each other as well as God.

So how is Anakin a prophet when he does not bring prophecy, but is the result of it? Is he from a divine source as Christ? To begin to answer these questions, much as in the case of other science fiction prophets, a new definition of prophethood must first be reached. In the case of *Dune*, Muad'Dib represents more than just the fulfillment of the Bene Gesserit prophecy of the Kwisatz Haderach; he is also the Madhi, a fulfillment of

the Quranic prophecy. On the other end there is En Sabah Nur, a prophet who brings a message of change through his very existence and actions. Anakin rests in the middle of these two opposites.

The prophecy that foretells the coming of Anakin Skywalker claims that he will, "bring balance to the Force." (*The Phantom Menace*) The Force, for those who are unfamiliar with the Star Wars mythos, is a binding field of energy that connects other sources of energy, such as living matter. The Jedi are a monastic order of warriors who have learned to harness this energy for a variety of effects. While some Jedi possess a greater inherent mastery of the Force than others, each member of the order is able to perform extraordinary feats, such as telekinesis and mind control. While the Jedi represent those spiritual individuals inclined to use the force for benevolent purposes, there also exists an order with a different agenda.

The Sith are, much like the Jedi, a group of warriors with an inborn talent to manipulate the energies of the Force. Unlike the Jedi, who do not believe in the pursuit of personal ambitions, the Sith view the Force as an ideal tool to achieve their own ends. While these goals are not necessarily evil in nature, at their core they dismiss the greater good of the galactic community.

As a field of energy that operates on extreme sensitivity, the Force, when used for these opposing reasons, can shift in its balance. The Jedi seek a perfect balance of the Force, believing that to be the most beneficial state for all people. However, they know of the presence of the Sith, who dismiss balance for opportunity. Their prophecy dictates that there will be a man born from the Force who possesses the ability to defeat the Sith practitioners and restore balance.

The middle ground that Anakin Skywalker occupies is that he is from a divine source - as the universal binding energy, obviously sentient from its desire for balance, the Force can be viewed as a deity, if not a manifestation of God - as Muad'Dib, but that he only fulfills his destiny through action, as En Sabah Nur.

Some readers might see a lesson from Anakin Skywalker. Using the traditional definition of a prophet when examining his character, a message can be interpreted. If the Force does possess a living will, capable of taking measures to ensure its balance, then its creation of Anakin to seek that balance represents a message to all the users of the Force alike that it prefers a state of balance to one of ambitious chaos. That it uses Anakin to facilitate this action only further establishes him as a science fiction prophet by drawing a clear parallel between his life and the life of En Sabah Nur in *The Rise of Apocalypse*.

Another critical area in which these two figures are connected is in their place of origin. While En Sabah Nur was born and raised in the desert, Anakin was only raised in that environment. The planet Tatooine, a desolate world inhabited by a sparse and harsh population, is covered, like Arrakis in *Dune*, by desert. In the *Star Wars* films, not a great amount of attention is paid to Tatooine. Some of the formative events of *The Phantom Menace* narrative occur there, but most of the dialogue regarding the planet does not complement it.

That very lack of focus on the desert only heightens its essential role in the prophecy of both Anakin Skywalker and his son, Luke Skywalker. Both men are born in unknown places and then come to the desert to be raised. Especially in the case of Luke, whose twin sister was adopted into a life of complete comfort and provision, the choice

of his guardians to place him into the hands of his relatives on the desert planet has no purpose if not that the desert itself, and not only the people there, would play a crucial role in his character.

Dual Prophets: Father and Son

The Jedi prophecy mentions the role of Anakin Skywalker, but it says nothing of Luke. In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, George Lucas, in reference to Anakin, says, “He wasn’t what he was supposed to become. But the son could become that.” (Edwards) As depicted in both *Return of the Jedi* and the novels of the Star Wars universe that follow, Luke Skywalker possesses the power to match – and eventually overcome – his father. As Vader was incapable of overcoming the corruption of the emperor on his own and fulfill his destiny, Luke Skywalker plays a central role in the salvation of the galaxy.

Other than their linked destiny at the end of the final film, father and son have very little in common. Whereas Anakin was formally trained in the Jedi temple, Luke had to receive what little training he did from Yoda on a backwater world. Anakin, despite this training, lacks the emotional and spiritual resilience to resist the temptation of the emperor. Luke’s fortitude in this regard does not fail. The single realm in which the experiences of father and son are similar is on the planet of Tatooine.

Though Anakin was raised as a slave and Luke as a farmhand by his uncle, both left Tatooine to follow their dreams after a tragic moment. Anakin, his mother still a slave, experiences a painful moment of separation when he leaves the planet, unlikely to return. Similarly, Luke loses his aunt and uncle, causing him to accept Obi-Wan’s

invitation to leave the planet. Although both men eagerly embark on their journeys, they leave from a place of loss, marking a dark origin for their respective destinies.

The reason for each character's return to Tatooine represents another commonality. A friend is stolen from both; Anakin's mother is kidnapped by the Tusken raiders, and Han Solo is brought to Tatooine by Boba Fett for the gangster Jabba the Hutt. Both Anakin and Luke spare no expense in the retrieval of their friends. Anakin slaughters an entire settlement of the Tusken who kidnapped and tortured – to the point of death – his mother. Luke, while giving Jabba a chance to release Han Solo, knows that he will ultimately have to resort to violence. Jabba's entire organization is subsequently destroyed.

The Desert of Tatooine: Homeland of Saviors

Throughout the *Star Wars* franchise, the comments that are made about the desert planet do not speak well of it. In the audience's first exposure to it as the home of Luke Skywalker, the character cannot leave soon enough. When Luke returns to rescue Han Solo from Jabba the Hutt, both he and Solo remark that Tatooine is not a good place to die. In the prequel trilogy, Tatooine is introduced as a place of scoundrels and thieves, a world where slavery is still legal. The main characters in those films cannot wait to put any amount of distance between themselves and the desert world. What is it, then, about the desert environment that gives rise to the two men who will shape the future of the galaxy?

New research has added depth to the nature of Tatooine as designed by Lucas in the films. Dr. Stephen Kane, a professor of astrophysics at Caltech, claims, "If one were

to calculate the (habitable zone) boundaries for the Tatooine system based on film footage, there's a very real possibility that the planetary system as depicted is unphysical." (Grossman) Referring to the idea that such a life-sustaining world would be incapable of existing in a twin sun star system, Kane suggests a perspective perhaps wholly unrealized even by Lucas himself, as, he further claims in the article, "This would not be a big surprise, since the film was produced far before any of this kind of research took place." (Grossman) Now, whether or not Lucas was cognizant of the realism – or lack thereof – in his depiction of the home of the messianic Jedi figures remains secondary to the impact of such a creation within the film. Especially relating to what John Chryssavgis says about barrenness as the place of God, such an impossible environmental scenario is critical to the prophecy of the film. In a universe of supernatural practices – such as the Force using monastic orders of Jedi and Sith – a second step back from realism is required for the revelations of the prophetic figures. Only on a planet that is impossible within an already impossible universe can the Jedi develop those traits that take him even further from the rest of his kind.

The same article references the inhospitable environment that would exist on a planet such as Tatooine, if such a planet were somewhere within the cosmos. The first line of the article reads, "If creatures exist on planets with twin suns, they would have to be extremely adaptable." (Grossman) This claim by Lisa Grossman links the desert environment in *Star Wars* to that of both *Dune* and *The Rise of Apocalypse*. En Sabah Nur was by his very nature a creature of adaptation. Born with the mutant ability to alter his very cellular structure, En Sabah Nur was able to survive circumstances which humans could not. In *Dune*, Muad'Dib's is able to grow accustomed to the Fremen diet,

with sheer willpower allowing his body to adapt to a lower concentration of water and mass.

While it is true that – among the three planets of these three different narratives – Tatooine is the only one that possesses three suns, that by no means discounts the connection between these places of prophecy and revelation. The impossibility of its existence, as discussed earlier, only serves to highlight the character-building developments that occur there. The real connection between these worlds rests solely in their inhospitable nature. Referencing the various environments in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, writer E. Lee Zimmerman notes, “...it was as if Life Itself was forever closing in around our heroes, threatening their very survival and existence.” (Unreality Mag) Nowhere is this more true than on Tatooine. Within the *Star Wars* franchise, there exists not a single visit to Tatooine in the films that does not include a harsh and uncompromising death. Though never explicitly stated by the characters, the audience remains aware that on that planet, only the most fit and adaptable survive.

Tusken Raiders: Desert Natives

Among the many savage beasts native to the desert of Tatooine, none possess a greater aura of mystery than the Tuskan Raiders. Treated as little more than common vermin by the “civilized” population of the planet, the raiders and colonists have developed a relationship of kill on sight. At first glance, this can be a confusing dynamic. Granted, there are violent alien races that abound in the *Star Wars* universe, but they all seem to fit in at least some niche within the greater galactic community. The raiders, despite the clear evidence of sentience – uniform clothing, cultural beliefs, and the

utilization of pack animals for sustenance and labor – do not participate in this community. Certainly, their almost constant criminal activity does not help to instill trust in the greater community, but, at least in the films, there is an unspoken question always on the edge of any scene that includes this violent and reclusive people; what is different about them?

The presence of a native desert people is also a trend in the realm of science fiction prophecy. In both *Dune* and *The Rise of Apocalypse*, native tribes live in the desert by a strictly survival-of-the-fittest mentality. However, unlike the raiders in *Star Wars*, the Fremen in *Dune* and the Sandstormers in *The Rise of Apocalypse* possess philosophies well-known by the other inhabitants of the planet. Indeed, especially in *Dune*, the native tribes trade freely with the colonial inhabitants of the planet.

The central difference in the prophetic narrative of *Star Wars* concerning the native people resides with the interaction between them and the prophet. In *Dune*, Muad'Dib's positive experiences and inclusion with the Fremen people play a foundational role in his prophetic identity. Similarly, in *The Rise of Apocalypse*, En Sabah Nur is raised by the Sandstormer desert natives and, as a member of their tribe, relies heavily on their perspectives and philosophies to guide his life. On the opposite end of the experiential spectrum lies Anakin Skywalker. His experience with the raiders shapes him arguably as much as the other science fiction prophets, but in a way completely counter to them.

Returning home to retrieve his mother, Anakin learns that the raiders have kidnapped her from her new home. Determined to save her, Anakin searches the desert for their camp. Finding them, he discovers his mother has been tortured and is near

death. Able to speak to and embrace her one last time before her death, Anakin holds her in his arms as she dies from the wounds inflicted upon her. Naturally, this fills Anakin with a great deal of grief and rage. He steps out into the open area of the raider camp and proceeds to massacre the entire tribe.

That Anakin forsakes his training as a member of the Jedi order in this particular scene is one of the largest steps that he takes towards becoming a Sith. He completely disregards the discipline of detachment espoused by the order, using his colossal powers to seek vengeance rather than peace. This scene in *Attack of the Clones* reflects not only upon Anakin's frustration with his lack of supernatural options – something to which he readily admits – but also upon the uncompromising nature of the desert. Despite all of the progress that Anakin has made towards becoming the Chosen One, the desert – manifested here by the Tusken Raiders – does not relent in its testing and shaping of the prophet.

Darth Vader and Christ

To confine the messianic narrative of Anakin Skywalker to the virgin birth fails to take into account the temptation and redemption of the prophet. In the examination of the dual prophets of Anakin and Luke Skywalker, a combination of each character's failures and triumphs creates the Christ story of *Star Wars*. A Manifestation of God who travels to the desert to meditate, Christ resists the temptations of the devil, whereas in *Star Wars*, Anakin submits to the will of the Emperor in exchange for what he believes to be the power to save his wife. This contradiction to the pure will of the prophetic figure will stop the investigation wholly if not for the character of Luke.

In the story of Jesus, He is destined to be the savior from birth. Luke, however, has no such preordained destiny. Even Yoda, the grandmaster of the entire monastic faith of the Jedi, doubts Luke's ability at several times throughout the films. This doubt is not a doubt of the youth's power; indeed, as observed in the films, Luke's strength in the Force equals that of Anakin before he was crippled. Rather, it represents a doubt as to the prophecy as a whole. Having placed so much faith in the power of Anakin Skywalker prior to his descent, the Jedi are all but destroyed by the machinations of the Emperor, who uses Anakin as his weapon against them.

If Anakin's succumbing to temptation and Luke's lack of destiny make them both into ill-constructed science fiction representations of Christ, then where is the successful messianic narrative? Many readers discount the dark fall of Anakin when he throws the Emperor down the shaft of the Death Star, viewing this redemptive act as a kind of proof that Anakin has always had purity within him. What of Luke's role in this redemption? Is it limited to the son who reminded his father of love? Such a perspective undermines the training undertaken by Luke, his possession of the same Force powers of his father – the powers of the Chosen One – and his resistance of the Emperor's offer to become his protégé. When Luke throws down his lightsaber, after having defeated his father, his denial of the Emperor is the parallel to the story of Christ giving His ultimate denial to the devil. The Chosen One lies broken behind him, and the title of prophet could not be clearer in him.

Destiny plays a role again immediately following Luke's denial. The wrath of the Emperor would have vanquished him, were it not for Anakin's moment of redemption. As he casts down the Emperor, he fulfills the ultimate goal of the Chosen One, destroying

the Sith and bringing balance back to the Force. None of that, however, would have been possible without Luke. A clear – though apparently not to the Jedi – part of the prophecy's universal equation, Anakin can only be the savior of the Jedi and the galaxy in tandem with the equal power of his son.

A New Perspective on an Old Story

As discussed, the surface elements of Anakin Skywalker's character reflect some elements of the story of Christ. Those features do contain profound meaning, if only to cause the reader to examine the character further. However, beyond the virgin birth and the identity as a savior, the time spent in the desert for both Anakin and Jesus serves as the watershed moment for the individual.

Anakin fell to temptation more than once. While the climactic moment in the chamber of the Emperor sealed his future as a Sith, he forsook the purity of his training long before that event. Joseph Samarakone writes, "Especially after his desert experience, Jesus broke away from the religious establishment." (131) Similarly, when Anakin chose to slaughter the raiders in the desert, his pursuit of vengeance utterly disregards the Jedi religion's established teachings. Members of the order are not supposed to use their powers in pursuit of their own passions. The immortal words of Yoda from the original trilogy, "hate leads to suffering" fill this part of Anakin's narrative. Certainly, Christ's breaking with religious tradition did not carry any negative connotations, save the reactions of those opposed to his messianic role. However, that a desert experience is what set Him on his path draws a clear parallel for the Chosen One of the Jedi.

Only after the release of the prequel trilogy did audiences at large have a firm

grasp on the destiny of Anakin Skywalker. Prior to that, Luke was the only hero. Certainly, Vader's defeat of the emperor and reconciliation with Luke was a high point for his character and endeared him to the audience to an extent, but Luke was the man who brought Anakin from the darkness and facilitated the downfall of the empire. Especially when considering the powers of Luke and their comparison to those of Anakin, is he not part of the prophecy?

Lucas himself states that Luke possesses the ability to be what Anakin was intended to be. In the end, however, Anakin does fulfill his destiny and balances the force. If that was to be the outcome all along, as the prophecy foretold, then why does Luke have the same potential as his father? Looking into the novels of the *Star Wars* universe that initially followed the films, it becomes clear that the Sith are not completely vanquished, and that Luke, as the leader of the new Jedi order, spearheads the fight against them, the fight to balance the force. How is this destiny different than his fathers? After all, the prophecy of the Chosen One was not for the defeat of the emperor, but of the Sith. If that fight continues, then the role of the Chosen One must continue as well.

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