



CAST

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|------------------|--------------------------|
| Moses | (Charlton Heston) |
| Ramses | (Yul Brynner) |
| Nefretiri | (Anne Baxter) |

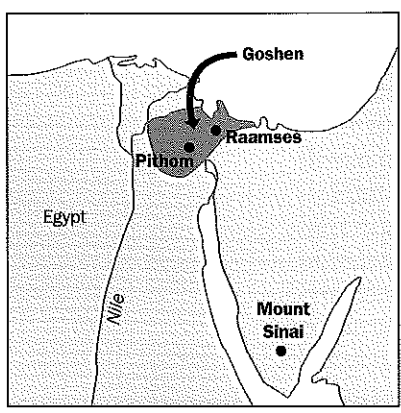
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Alan F. Segal

MOST SCREENWRITERS WHO TURN BOOKS into movies do a great deal of editing to transform even a short novel into a tight film narrative. The authors of the *Ten Commandments* screenplay found themselves in the converse position. Rather than providing too much detail and too many subplots, the Bible does not supply enough material even for a film. It tells us nothing, for instance, of Moses' youth between his entrance into the pharaoh's household and his later career as Israel's lawgiver.

In a personal prologue to the film (and also in the opening credits), producer/director Cecil B. DeMille

declares his intention to use Philo, Josephus, Eusebius, and the rabbinic commentaries of the midrash to complete the biblical picture. What DeMille fails to mention is that, because all these sources were written more than a millennium after the Exodus, scholars consider them irrelevant to the task of assessing the historical accuracy of biblical events. However much scholars may enjoy reading them and however relevant they may be to the time of Jesus (during which many of them were written), they have little to offer when it comes to ascertaining the truth of biblical history. (DeMille actually relied just as much on modern romances—including Dorothy Clarke Wilson's *Prince of Egypt*, J.H. Ingraham's *Pillar of Fire*, and A.E. Southon's *On Eagle's Wings*.)

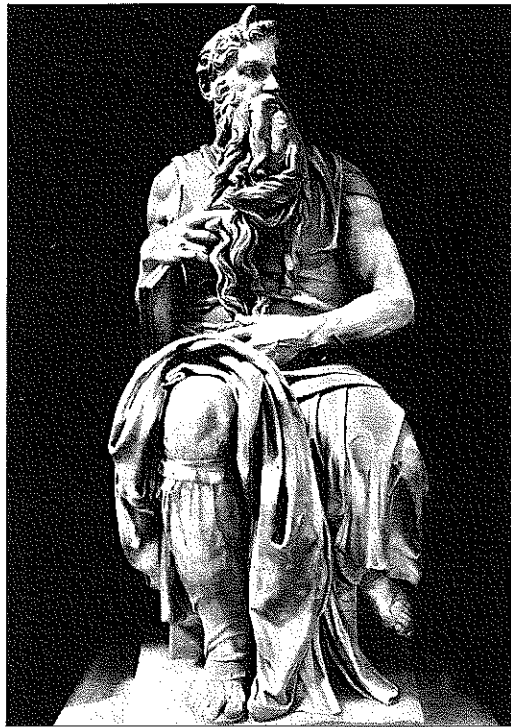


For this undertaking, we are left primarily with the Bible, which contains three types of material: myth, legend, and historical tradition. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are myth—everything from the Creation to the Tower of Babel and the dispersion of the peoples. The history of the Hebrews that follows, beginning with Abraham (Genesis 12) and ending with the arrival of the Hebrews in Israel (Judges), is mostly legend. This section includes the story of the Exodus, in which Moses leads the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt.

According to the Bible, the Israelites served in "hard bondage" in Egypt, building the "treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses" for the pharaoh. But there is little external verification of this story. Egypt is silent about the deliverance of the Israelites (although Egyptian chronicles are notoriously unreliable when it comes to describing events uncomplimentary to their pharaoh's dignity). Apart from the Bible, there is no direct evidence that any of the Hebrew personages existed or that the events of Exodus ever took place.

The oldest known reference to Israel outside the Bible appears on a stone tablet from the reign of Merneptah, the son of Ramses II. Its hieroglyphs suggest that by around 1215 B.C.E. the people of Israel had taken

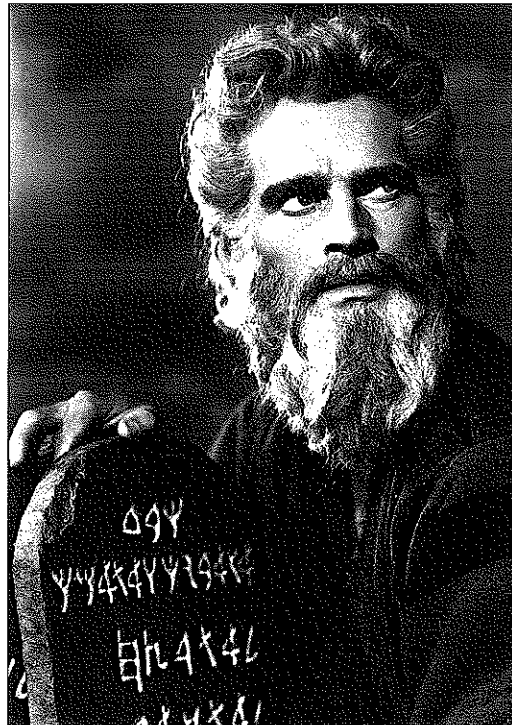
HISTORY



Michelangelo's statue of Moses

As is typical of biblical movie spectacles, the screenplay for *The Ten Commandments* treats each textual event literally, whether or not scholars have much confidence in it today. Notable in this category is the story of Moses in the bulrushes. This tale employs a common folkloric motif, that of the abandoned infant hero, found in numerous ancient traditions—among them the Greek (Oedipus, Herakles), the Roman (Romulus and Remus), and the Persian (Cyrus, founder of the Achaemenid empire during the sixth century B.C.E.). The most relevant parallel to the story of Moses may be that of Sargon of Akkad, the great twenty-third-century B.C.E. unifier of Mesopotamia, who claimed he was abandoned in the Euphrates in a basket of rushes and raised by the god Akki, the water-drawer, before becoming the consort of Ishtar.

HOLLYWOOD



Charlton Heston as Moses

In this, his last work as director, Cecil B. DeMille spared little expense, filming the story of the Exodus on a grander scale than many people imagined possible. He made particularly effective use of his well-publicized "cast of thousands" in the Exodus sequence, which employed twelve thousand people and fifteen thousand animals. Because they were stretched out over three miles, DeMille had to stand atop a crane and deliver orders through a public-address system.

DeMille chose Charlton Heston for the role of Moses because of his resemblance to Michelangelo's famous statue. "My choice was strikingly affirmed," DeMille recalled, "when I had a sketch of Chuck in a white beard and compared it to . . . [the] statue. The resemblance was amazing."



The Midrash

The Hebrew word *midrash*, meaning "exposition" or "investigation," refers to a collection of textual interpretations of the Bible. Although DeMille occasionally uses motifs found in later Jewish literature (not in the Bible), he generally takes a free hand in inventing stories intended mostly to further the plot and galvanize the interest of the moviegoer. In this respect, one might make the case that he is following the method of the rabbis who created the midrash.

These rabbis and their followers invented stories wholesale but always for a specific holy purpose: to explain a textual problem or to answer any number of questions that arose in later ages concerning the moral motivations of the biblical characters or the outcome of the story. The rabbis faced the same problem as DeMille's screenwriters: The Bible itself was entirely too enigmatic, refractory, and terse to answer adequately the questions of later generations. Of course, the screenwriters' additions were intended to pique the interest of moviegoers, while DeMille himself wanted to portray the tension between rule by God's law and rule by a dictator, as well as the conflict between totalitarian states and free souls.

up residence near Canaan. Their arrival might have been recent, because the Stela of Merneptah refers to Israel with the hieroglyphic symbol for a people, not a country, suggesting that they had not yet taken possession of the land. Following this analysis, Ramses II (reigned 1290–1224 B.C.E.) becomes the most likely candidate for the pharaoh of Exodus, which could plausibly have occurred sometime within half a century of 1250 B.C.E.

DeMille's *Ten Commandments* amplifies the biblical account by asserting that the Exodus indeed took place during the reign of Ramses II—consonant not only with the Stela of Merneptah but also with other evidence uncovered by modern scholars who have shown that Ramses II's father, Seti I (reigned 1305–1290 B.C.E.), moved the capital of Egypt from Thebes to the desolate city of Avaris, west of Lake Timsah in the land of Goshen. Remembered as a master builder, Seti made extensive use of forced labor. An egotistical Ramses later renamed the refurbished capital Pi-Ramses ("house of Ramses") and built Pr-Itn. These names suggest "the treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses" mentioned in the Book of Exodus, and they are located in Goshen, where Joseph's brothers were said to have settled (Genesis 47:27). Egyptian records note that a people known as *'Apiru* (the word *Hebrew* in Hebrew is *'ivri*) were used to construct these cities. However, scholars still debate whether these words are related.

Less convincingly, DeMille also makes use of a theme found only in the later commentaries, including those of Josephus: the prophecy that the Hebrews will produce a redeemer whose presence will be signaled by a star. (This folk motif is clearly more relevant to the time of Jesus and the infancy stories found in the Gospels.) The film's touching Passover celebration suffers from similar anachronisms, largely ignoring the lamb sacrifice of the ancient Passover celebration described in Exodus and instead concentrating on later rabbinic seder liturgy. The seder shown in *The Ten Commandments* was not part of First Temple Judaism, nor can we demonstrate that it was the custom of the Hebrews at the time of the Exodus; the practices depicted are, in fact, Hellenistic innovations that were possibly the basis for the Last Supper and continue today as much-cherished Jewish practices.

A final anachronism that creeps into the film from these later commentaries is Moses' final gift to his supporters: At the end of *The Ten Commandments*, as Moses climbs Mount Nebo to his final resting place, he hands over to Joshua the five scrolls of the Pentateuch. This scene confirms the notion, which arose much later and now has become widely accepted throughout the West by Jews and Christians alike, that Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch. In fact, the Bible itself makes no such claim.

Even more interesting than these matters of provenance, however, is the characterization of gender roles in *The Ten Commandments*, especially the romance between Moses and the Egyptian princess Nefretiri, good for the box office but entirely absent from the biblical account. Nefretiri is captivated by the young Moses and much less impressed by Ramses.

When Moses is banished, she marries Ramses and ascends the throne but still longs for Moses. The torch of romance burns even after Moses returns with his Midianite wife, Sephora, though it slowly turns to hate as Moses ignores her. (The movie makes clear that Moses ignores both women in favor of his vocation, as would any good American tending to his business during the 1950s.) In a very real sense, the most terrible of the plagues—the slaying of the firstborn—symbolizes God's reprisal for the manipulating and underhanded cruelty of a scheming woman scorned, because it is Nefretiri who hardens Ramses' heart.

The cliché of the woman scorned as the source of all evil may offend modern gender sensibilities, but it also makes Nefretiri the only really interesting character in the film. Everyone else, Moses especially, is imprisoned by the language of the Bible—or worse, by biblical-sounding dialogue. But Nefretiri, historically a wife of Ramses but otherwise fabricated from the gender conventions of the 1950s, is free to be evil—and tragic.

What is so hard for modern readers of the Book of Exodus to appreciate is the extent to which the biblical story is written as a contest between the true God of Israel and the pharaoh, or false god, of Egypt. That is why the usually terse biblical text goes on at length about the plagues and how the pharaoh is only very slowly convinced to allow the Israelites to leave. Each time he does so, God hardens his heart, and the pharaoh's recantations bring terrible, punishing reprisals. That is also why the biblical text takes such glee in exaggerating the details of God's strength: turning the most powerful man on earth into a puppet, robbed by a ragtag group of pastoralists who purloin vast quantities of gold and silver as spoils from the wealthiest nation in the Ancient World and then escape punishment because God drowns the world's most feared military machine in the Reed (not Red) Sea.

The legend of the Exodus is a tale of wish fulfillment of the sort that inevitably arises when a small people with limited power suffer for a long period and then escape political domination. Theirs being an ancient wish, it is a difficult one to depict understandably on the modern screen. Yet the subplot of the vengeful Egyptian princess Nefretiri at least allows DeMille to make the biblical contest meaningful to modern audiences.

Background Reading

Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea: Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts* (Yale University Press, 1971)

Werner Keller, *The Bible As History* (Morrow, 1981)

Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (Schocken, 1966)

1956/USA/Color

DIRECTOR: Cecil B. DeMille; **PRODUCER:** Cecil B. DeMille; **SCREENPLAY:** Aeneas MacKenzie; Jesse L. Lasky, Jr.; Jack Gariss; Frederic M. Frank; **STUDIO:** Paramount; **VIDEO:** Paramount; **RUNNING TIME:** 219 min.



Engraving from a fifteenth-century Bible

Later...

In DeMille's epic, created by and for a modern age, the contest between Moses and the pharaoh evokes the many conflicts between faith and science. Into Ramses' mouth DeMille places the same sort of pseudo-rational scientific explanations of the plagues that became so popular in technologically sophisticated America after World War II: red soil washed into the Nile caused fish to die, leading to a proliferation of insects, which caused skin infections, and so on. These and other explanations (an earthquake caused the sea to part) were offered in vain attempts to shore up the credibility of the biblical text, mostly by well-meaning apologists who wanted to bring science and the Bible into harmony.

On the other hand, the screen Moses champions the more sympathetic position (in the context of the film): that the miracles are produced directly by the power of God. As it does in the Bible, this emphasis on faith helps explain God's dogged pursuit of the pharaoh, followed by His otherwise incomprehensible hardening of the pharaoh's heart. God wanted to make an example of the pharaoh to demonstrate the power of faith—not only over reason but over might as well.

This victory of faith, however, troubled the rabbis, who perceived and tried to explain a different moral problem, one omitted entirely by DeMille in his film's blockbuster ending. The midrash invents a dialogue at the sea between God and the angels, who have joined Moses and Miriam's song of triumph after the drowning of the Egyptians. God silences the angels and says: "How can you sing when my creatures are drowning?"