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Meek, Mystical, or Monumental?: Competing Representations of Moses within Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956 & 1923)

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Abstract

Auteur film director Cecil B. DeMille was a co-founder of Hollywood, a progenitor of Paramount Pictures, and a master of the American biblical epic responsible for the 1956 and 1923 versions of *The Ten Commandments*. The critical DeMille, film and religion literature was selectively reviewed, and these two watershed biblical epics were examined to reveal competing representations of Moses utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens. It was concluded that Theodore Roberts' mystical, wild-fire Moses differed significantly from Charlton Heston's monumental, warrior-king Moses, and that both portrayals eschewed the meek Moses of Judeo-Christian Scripture. Further research into DeMille studies, biblical epics, and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is warranted, warmly recommended, and already long overdue.

Keywords: Cecil B. DeMille, *The Ten Commandments*, Moses, Hollywood, biblical epic, religion-and-film, Theodore Roberts, Charlton Heston

Introduction: The Master of the American Biblical Epic

Cecil B. DeMille¹ (1881-1959), affectionately known as “CB” (see Figure 1) was a monarch of the movies, a film founder of Hollywood, and a progenitor of Paramount Pictures who helped turn an obscure Californian orange grove into a major movie centre that became *the* synonym for filmmaking worldwide (Birchard, 2004; DeMille & Hayne, 1960; Edwards, 1988; Essoe & Lee, 1970; Eyman, 2010; Higashi, 1985, 1994; Higham, 1973; Koury, 1959; Louvish, 2008; Noerdlinger, 1956; Orrison, 1999; Presley & Vieira, 2014; Ringgold & Bodeen, 1969). Not only did DeMille help institute “the Age of Hollywood” (Paglia, 1994, p. 12), but this pioneering “*auteur of auteurs*” (Vidal, 1995, p. 303) became the undisputed master of the American biblical epic with his iconic classics: *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and *The Ten Commandments* (1956). Because this Hollywood lay preacher utilized the silver screen as his sermonising tool, DeMille was subsequently tagged “King of the epic Biblical spectacular” (Finler, 1985, p. 32), the “high priest of the religious genre” (Holloway, 1977, p. 26), and the “arch apostle of spectacle” (Clapham, 1974, p. 21). Indeed, DeMille's lay preacher efforts prompted one anonymous Protestant church leader to proudly proclaim: “The first century had its Apostle Paul, the thirteenth century had St. Francis, the sixteenth had Martin Luther and the twentieth has Cecil B. DeMille” (Manfull, 1970, p. 357). And yet, his career as a movie pioneer, cinematic lay

¹ Many scholars have spelled Cecil's surname as “De Mille” or “de Mille” or “deMille” however, the correct professional spelling is “DeMille” (DeMille & Hayne, 1960, p. 6), which will be employed herein alongside “Cecil” and “CB” as appropriate.

preacher, and the “Golden Age of Hollywood summed up in a single man” (Mitchell, 1993, p. 17) is still grossly under-appreciated today.



Figure 1: Producer-Director Cecil B. DeMille (circa 1956)

The scriptural Moses is an indelible character within Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Coates, 1988) with a variety of feature films devoted to him, notably, *The Life of Moses* (1909-1910), *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Moses – The Lawgiver* (1974), *Wholly Moses!* (1980), *Moses* (1995), *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), *The Ten Commandments* (2006), *The Ten Commandments* (2007), and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014). Both of DeMille’s Moses movies in particular have left an indelible mark upon the popular consciousness (e.g., Orrison, 1999; Pardes, 1996; Shepherd, 2013; Wright, 2003). His 1923 version was a welcomed religious antidote to the salacious drugs, sex and murder scandals that threatened the very existence of 1920s Hollywood (Anger, 1981), whilst his 1956 version became the epitome of the biblical epic that earned an honoured place in the US National Film Registry (Library of Congress) for being culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant (Eagan, 2010). As such, both are worthy of closer examination of their central character, Moses.

Research Task and Methodology

DeMille’s two biblical epics were closely examined to reveal competing representations of Moses played by Theodore Roberts and Charlton Heston respectively, which were compared to the biblical Moses.² The critical DeMille, film and religion literature was selectively reviewed and integrated into this text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour) utilizing textually-based humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens (Bywater & Sobchack, 1989, pp. 24-47). This frequently under-utilized film analysis methodology is applicable to all genres ranging from science fiction (Telotte, 2001, pp. 35-38) to literary autobiography (Johnson, 2007). It assumes that audiences are cultured, accept the cinema as fine art, and have seen the movie(s) under discussion. Its main pedagogic function is to identify noteworthy incidents and foster critical commentary rooted in primary and secondary sources (e.g., the nominated movie(s), memoirs, autobiographies, film books and journals); and especially the tracking of themes, motifs, symbols, and other construction secrets, tropes and topoi. This analytical focus is thus tailor-made for the writer’s research task.

² DeMille infused his 1956 *The Ten Commandments* with Judaic, Christian and Islamic elements (see Calabria, 2015).

The Quintessential Problem of Casting Moses in the Movies

A major production problem for biblical filmmakers is finding actors who could portray the human and holy qualities of a foundational religious figure like Moses—the holy hero of the Old Testament. Let alone satisfy biblical prescriptions, Judeo-Christian-Islamic theology, and public expectations conditioned by two millennia of Church teachings and art (Flynn, 1990), plus a century of Moses movies (Britt, 2004; Chattaway, 1999, 2014; Homan, 2007; Wright, 1996). A lack of authentic images and specific scriptural facts exacerbates the problem as filmmakers are forced to make *explicit* what may only be *implicit* within the sacred text *before* disentangling the various conflicting representations, myths, political reformulations, and narrative accretions within history, legend, and art. For example, Moses has been depicted in various media as an Egyptian prince, conquering general, monumental architect, Hebrew slave, mystic, traitor, murderer, disgraced exile, outlaw, social outcast, humble shepherd, faithful husband, devoted family man, good businessman, horned Devil, and the burdened receiver of God's holy laws—the Ten Commandments (a.k.a. the Decalogue; the Ten Words).

Moses was also the front man for the Sinai covenant, the ambassador of God, the possessor of great supernatural power, an astute tactician, a stammerer, a weak and fearful man, a liberator of slaves, the Hebrew deliverer, a violent man, a harsh judge, the recipient of God's punishment, the instrument of God's punishment, and a patient but frustrated desert wanderer burdened by his fickle people. Furthermore, Moses was an emotional, wrathful, and self-doubting human being (i.e., *not* divine) who grew from abandoned baby to pampered prince, from desert holy man to cosmic saviour, from national leader to cultural hero via his mystic, liberator, and lawgiver roles. And yet, despite leading the Exodus and his decades of suffering and sacrifice before and after it, he was not permitted to enter the Promised Land (Deut. 34:4). This is a challenging task for any actor whilst it dealt with a watershed moment in Hebrew history that changed civilisation forever. Indeed, for Jews, it is the Exodus rather than Creation that defined them (Shapiro, 1994, pp. 3-4).

The Four Phases of Moses' 1956 Film Career

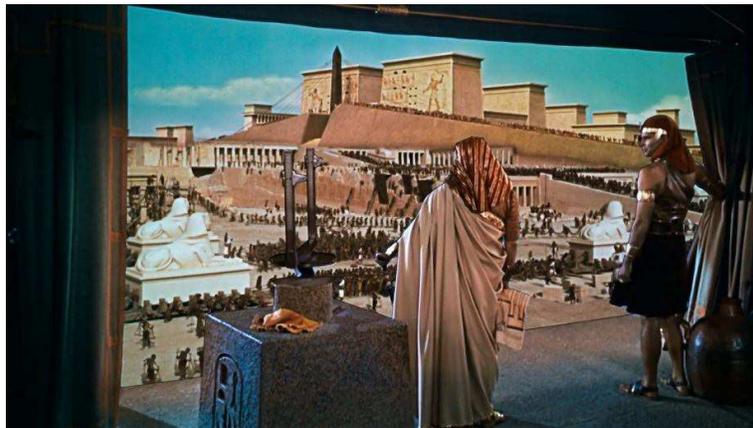
It is tempting to think that DeMille was more interested in archetypal imagery than biblical veridicality and so distorted the “real” Moses; yet, he was not that far off the scriptural mark, especially in his 1956 version wherein he tracked the following four phases of Moses' career.



Figure 2: Bithiah Finding Baby Moses

Phase One: Baby Moses, played by Charlton Heston's son, Fraser Clarke Heston (see Figure 2) matched the Bible's description of "a goodly child" (Exod. 2:2),³ "a proper child" (Heb. 11:23) who "was exceeding fair" (Acts 7:20). In other words, this baby was not deformed, ugly or sick and so was a delight to his parent's eyes. DeMille's barren Egyptian noble woman, Bithiah (Nina Foch), found the deliberately abandoned baby placed in a reed basket floating upon the river and considered "this beautiful boy" (subsequently named Moses) to be "The answer to my prayers" (as presumably Fraser was to his parents, Charlton and Lydia Heston).

Phase Two: DeMille's adult Prince Moses was similar to the scriptural Moses who was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds" (Acts 7:22) having skilfully won victories over Ethiopia (see Figure 3). DeMille's Bithiah had foreshadowed these accomplishments when baby Moses was pulled from the river and she predicted: "You will be the glory of Egypt my son. Mighty in words and deeds. Kings shall bow before you. Your name will live when the pyramids are dust."

**Figure 3: The Mighty Prince Moses****Figure 4: Prince Moses Revealing Pharaoh Sethi's Treasure City**

Even DeMille's Pharaoh Sethi (Cedric Hardwicke) acknowledged Moses' learning by saying: "We have heard how you took ibis from the Nile to destroy the venomous serpents used against you

³ The Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV aka AV) will be employed because it was frequently favored by DeMille (Higashi, 1994, p. 180) whilst Qur'an verses come from the Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhsin Khan (npd) translation.

when you laid siege to the city of Saba.” Moses’ reputation for wisdom was also encoded within Egyptian mythology because the above reference to ibis is linked to the ibis-headed man, Thoth, the Egyptian “god of wisdom, writing and invention” (Barrett, 1992, p. 135) and the putative “god of learning” (Barrett, 1992, p. 136). DeMille’s learned Moses successfully built Sethi’s city (see Figure 4), whereas his “brother,” the cruel, abusive, and stiff-necked Prince Rameses (Yul Brynner) failed this very same task.

Phase Three: DeMille’s Moses was considered “hunky” (Brenner, 2005, p. 69), all “beef-and-brawn” (Gilbey, 2005, p. 88), but also an Egyptian outlaw. He subsequently became a shepherd, a husband and a father, just like the scriptural “stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons. And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush” (Acts 7:29-30), which DeMille dramatically rendered onscreen (see Figure 5). That divine encounter simultaneously evoked within Moses, muted fear, awe and reverence.



Figure 5: Moses-the-Shepherd Before the Burning Bush

Phase Four: The scriptural Moses received his divine commission, became the lawgiver-cum-Hebrew patriarch, and was a “hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated” (Deut. 34:7). DeMille’s Moses was similarly “very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh’s servants, and in the sight of the people” (Exod. 11:3), before and after his holy mission, and thus authentically mighty as an Egyptian prince, before Pharaoh, at the Red Sea, receiving the cosmic Ten Commandments, smashing the tablets on the Golden Calf, and wandering in the wilderness “forty years” (Num. 14:33) before delivering his exilic people to the Promised Land and then passing on into Eternity upon Mt. Nebo (Deut. 34:1-5) to subsequently become a religio-cultural legend.

The Youthful, Stone-faced, Old Moses

Whilst situated upon Mt. Nebo, DeMille’s lawgiver handed over the five books of Moses to Eleazar (Robert Carson), the son of the high priest, Aaron (John Carradine), for placement in the Ark of the Covenant. Since the natural forces of the 120 year-old Moses was *not* abated (Deut. 34:7), DeMille was justified in portraying him at that end-time as a strong, regal, warrior-king (see Figure 6), even if Charlton Heston’s acting was criticised for being “a pontificating bore, a one-note stentorian mouthpiece for the God of Vengeance” (Thomas, 2006, para. 16), and a “stone-faced Hebrew” whose “every move and line reading could be mistaken for granite” (Wilson, 2005,

p. 80). Nevertheless, his Mt. Rushmore version of Moses (i.e., minimally expressive, but visually impressive) was “an unbending paragon of morality, strength, and wisdom” (Hunter, 2005, p. 326).



Figure 6: Charlton Heston's Youthful 120-Year-Old Moses



Figure 7: Theodore Roberts' Moses with Youthful, Muscular Arms

DeMille was also theologically right to have his greying, white-haired Moses (with non-white moustache) look strong and youngish, despite criticism from DeMille's makeup man, Harry Thomas (2005), who testily claimed:

I put the beard on him and colored his hair gray [sic] for that scene. I wanted to add some wrinkles to his face and make him look really old, but DeMille didn't want me to touch Charlton Heston's face. "He has to look handsome," Demille [sic] said. So I just put the beard on and grey in his hair. I think the scene looked silly. Charlton Heston with a grey hair and a beard, but a young face. I tried to tell Demille [sic], but he just wouldn't listen (online).

The writer argues that DeMille-the-true-believer⁴ *did* listen, but did *not* act because he knew better; his non-wizened Moses was faithful to Holy Scripture, not a make-up man's unscholarly musings. DeMille made a similar true-believer decision when his 1923 Moses (Theodore Roberts) had very muscular, youthful arms to visually verify his vitality in a different artistic way (see Figure 7). Regrettably, DeMille frequently encountered similar scriptural ignorance wrapped inside misplaced pride, pomposity, and phoney piety directed against him, but which only elevated his reputation as Hollywood's preeminent lay biblical scholar.

The (Missing) Horned Moses

Although DeMille modelled his 1956 Moses upon Michelangelo's famous statue, he did *not* reproduce its horns (see Figure 8) because that sculpture feature had erroneously resulted from a translation error between *facies coronata* (the countenance illuminated by a corona) and *facies cornuta* (the horned countenance) (Ahl, 1991, p. 48). Furthermore, when Moses returned from the

⁴ Concise hyphenated compound terms will be used throughout to help disentangle DeMille's various roles and avoid needless explanation, repetition, or reader boredom.

mountain top, the skin of his face shone (Exod. 34:29, 30, 35) and so he subsequently veiled his face (Exod. 34:33, 35).



Figure 8: Michelangelo's Horned Moses



Figure 9: *Moses and the Tablets of Law* by Jose de Ribera

For centuries, artists have (erroneously) depicted Moses with either horns, horn-like hair, or various light shows suggestive of horns. For example, there were two tufts of hair in Rembrandt's *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law*, two spurts of white light in Gustave Moreau's *Moses Sheds his Sandals in Sight of the Holy Land*, two strokes of white light in Tintoretto's *Moses Striking the Rock*, two thin shafts of white light in Peter Paul Rubens' *The Brazen Serpent*, two mini tornado-style horns that merged with the murky background in Tintoretto's *Moses with the Pillar of Fire* (see Bernard, 1988, pp. 78, 83, 79, 80, 72, respectively), and two spurts of white light in Jose de Ribera's *Moses and the Tablets of Law* (see Figure 9). Explaining this translation error featured in DeMille's PR documentary *Behind the Scenes of The Ten Commandments* (1956), which generated consumer interest, enhanced his lay preacher reputation even further, eliminated the need for a horned Moses on-screen, and which had five desirable consequences. Namely: (a) it avoided fact fights and artistic battles over the horn's representation; (b) it avoided costly time, horn special effects, and continuity problems; (c) it avoided audience incredulity by not depicting Moses as a human torch; (d) it avoided tagging Moses as a Devil-figure (and Jews as Satanic evil); and (e) it avoided feminising Moses with a veil, thus weakening his scripturally documented virility. Overall, DeMille simply (and correctly) avoided the "horns" altogether.

DeMille's Down-playing of the Meek Moses of Scripture

DeMille's focus on a monumental, warrior-king Moses in his 1956 *The Ten Commandments* helps account for his downplaying of the scriptural Moses who was "very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3), that is, timorous, uncertain, lacking in self-confidence, as opposed to being bewildered at discovering his Hebrew heritage or in stunned awe before the Divine at the burning bush (see Figure 5). As Jim Wallis (1997) argued:

...Moses is no Charleton [sic] Heston, who performed the role of Moses in Hollywood so many years ago (or at least the larger-than-life hero that Heston made him out to be). No, Moses was more like us. He didn't feel up to the job, he didn't feel self-confident, he didn't want to be a hero. "Please God, send somebody else," he kept saying. Moses is not a good superhero role model. Moses is a better example of how extraordinary things can be accomplished through ordinary people—like us (online).

However, Jim Wallis' claims are flawed for the following four reasons. **One:** Heston's Moses was a "larger-than-life hero" and "a good superhero role model" in accordance with scriptural trajectories as God's agent who became extraordinary (regardless of his humble origins). **Two:** Moses lived a "hundred and twenty years...his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated" (Deut. 34:7), which is very unusual. **Three:** Moses' life was *not* ordinary. He avoided infanticide, was raised as an Ancient Egyptian royal, rejected wealth, position, and power, saw God face-to-face, was a divine deliverer and holy lawgiver, performed miracles, survived incredible personal and sociocultural pressures, lived exceptionally long, and was a successful murderer who on-screen admitted to Sephora: "His name is Joshua. I once killed that he might live." **Four:** The Bible is silent on Moses' formative years in the Egyptian court (as was DeMille), but the "Koran contained certain reference material that indicated Moses had become an Egyptian general, then had been unmasked as a Hebrew and made into a slave" (Jessie L. Lasky Jr. in Wagner, 1975, p. 158).

In essence, Wallis got the argument back-to-front. Moses *is* the great liberator and deliverer; his Godly deeds did *not* spring from his own energies or charismatic personality. The immensity of the salvation deed via God's guidance should *not* be confused with the puny nature of the person God employed. DeMille's Heston-Moses is more truthful than Jim Wallis would argue, if only due to his "elemental force and dignity. His massive physique, orotund voice, and granitic sobriety have true monumentality. His external performance, which matches DeMille's own methods, has surprising range and integrity" (Hirsch, 1978, pp. 104-105). Overall, DeMille knew exactly what he was doing, as further attested by Heston's Moses being "the most famous film icon of Judeo-Christian culture" (Sultanik, 1986, p. 238) that still stands up very well today and has yet to be cinematically surpassed, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) notwithstanding.

Moses Meekness versus Weakness

However, the authenticity of DeMille's non-meek Moses is contingent upon the definition of meekness, for one must *not* confuse "meekness" with "weakness." Meekness can be either: (a) a personal trait-cum-psychological defect or (b) a form of willing, applied weakness (i.e., self-control demonstrating patience, humility, gentleness, and imposed upon submissiveness). If normal, non-defective meekness, it can be a behavioural trait cultivated for religious or violence control reasons. Therefore, could not Moses' meekness be that form of deliberate self-control as he atoned for his past murderous volatility, and his new need for self-control as God's mouthpiece with onerous leadership burdens? After all, Moses had cunningly killed an Egyptian for smiting a Hebrew (Exod. 2:11-12), which prompted his fearful flight from Egypt (Exod. 2:14-15), and later, "Moses' anger waxed hot" (Exod. 32:19) against the Golden Calf violators resulting in the execution of "about three thousand men" (Exod. 32:28), but which DeMille demurred in showing onscreen by allowing God to do the destroying via lightening, fire and earthquake (see Figure 10).

Alternatively, as "a meek person, he recognized that he was a mere human, with imperfections and weaknesses. He did not push himself forward as Israel's invincible leader. He

expressed, not fear of Pharaoh, but an acute awareness of his own limitations” (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania/International Bible Students Association, 1988, pp. 435-436). In short, Moses was meek because he submitted his own will to the greater will of God. Nevertheless, DeMille’s Moses is a larger-than-life hero, a seasoned leader of men, a man among men, a stalwart, and a winner with commanding power, as evidenced earlier by Prince Moses’ triumphant win over the Ethiopians, the impressive booty he secured, and the valuable allies he enlisted (see Figure 11), and as evidenced later by effecting the Exodus and delivering his people to the Promised Land.



Figure 10: God’s Destruction of the Golden Calf Idolaters



Figure 11: Moses’ Ethiopian Allies

Even DeMille’s Pharaoh Sethi acknowledged Moses’ uniqueness when he said: “I loved you, reared you, set you before my own son—because I saw in you a worth and a greatness above other men.” DeMille’s commitment to a strong, virile, heroic Moses prompted him to creatively re-interpret the scriptural Moses who was fearful of his murder being discovered (Exod. 2:14) and fled from Pharaoh (Exod. 2:15); instead, DeMille’s Moses is no fearful coward but defiant while chained before the royal court and personally standing up to Pharaoh Sethi (see Figure 12).

Consequently, the reluctant Sethi officially renounced his formerly favourite Prince of Egypt who was subsequently cast into the Shur desert to die under the arrogant auspices of Prince Rameses, Moses' romantic, political, ethnic, and religious rival. This biblical plot change was acknowledged by DeMille who argued: "I don't think that I have digressed too much though I have gone from the literal lettering of the Bible, which says he ran away. It says he fled before the face of Pharaoh" (DeMille, 1958, p. 7). Here, DeMille-the-Scripture-scholar gave way to DeMille-the-dramatist for DeMille-the-businessman.



Figure 12: A Defiant, Chained Moses Before Pharaoh Sethi

Given DeMille's commitment to a white-hat biblical hero, he did not accentuate the scriptural Moses' unsavoury side involving sexual slavery (Num. 31:18) and the killing of women and children (Num. 31:17), but which helps explain why DeMille's Nefretiri (Anne Baxter) grabbed her young son (Eugene Mazzola) during Moses' rods-into-snakes incident and said: "Nothing of his will harm you my son" (implying a good-to-children Moses). DeMille-the-Scripture-scholar had given way to DeMille-the-white-washing-Christian-apologist, unlike Robert Dornhelm's *The Ten Commandments* (2006) wherein the throats of men, women, and children were graphically (and gleefully) slit under Moses' (Dougray Scott's) command (see Figure 13).



Figure 13: The Moses-Ordered Massacre

Even if the film censors allowed such gruesome violence in DeMille's day, he would *not* compromise his family focus, profit desires, or pro-Christian goals by indulging in it; instead he

adopted a no-bloody-violence policy akin to his no-explicit-sex policy, namely: "An orgy Sunday school children can watch" (Curtis, 1999, p. 106).



Figure 14: The Mortally Wounded Simon

And so, when Simon (Francis McDonald) is murdered in the mud pits by Pharaoh's guard (uncredited), we see the guard throw his axe, we see Simon injured and falling (see Figure 14), but we do not see the precise killing blow itself (i.e., edited out), followed by a non-gory wound barely revealed afterwards.



Figure 15: The Mystical Moses (Theodore Roberts)

Theodore Roberts versus Charlton Heston:

Mystical versus Monumental

The 1923 Moses (Theodore Roberts), with his long windswept beard and hair, blazing eyes, and strident gestures was a wildfire prophet with a mystical mien (see Figure 15). He was supposedly "introduced as an old, hoary man, full of power and for the most part completely unresponsive behind a ponderous beard" (Gardner, 2000, p. 380), and is "so anti-heroic that one concludes that De Mille has difficulty matching the Jewish and the heroic" (Babington & Evans, 1993, p. 39). Part I of the 1923 *The Ten Commandments* only depicted the adult, God-commissioned, Hebrew Moses, that is, no baby incidents, Egyptian upbringing, or outlaw-shepherd adventures to fill out his character history.

Conversely, the 1956 Moses (Charlton Heston), with his non-ethnic patrician looks is more dominant in a monumental way in keeping with a heroic man of the ancient world (see Figure 16); albeit, variously perceived by critics as “solemn” (Kermode & Macnab, 1995, p. 62), “dignified” (Kitchin, 1957-58, p. 149), and a “stalwart” (Morsberger, 1981, p. 2435). Given the epic film’s epic length, DeMille depicted his Moses from abandoned baby to commanding warrior, from mud-caked prince to bearded prophet, from plague-bringer to burdened lawgiver who could exude apocalyptic splendour, anger, patience, and long-suffering when required as God’s warrior-king-cum-exilic front man. Even Heston-as-actor considered that his Moses was extra special and had claimed that: “The Cid [of *El Cid* (1961)]...however heroic a figure, was at least a man, but as Moses I had to try desperately to inhabit some of the stature of a biblical prophet, with God’s thumbprint on his forehead” (Heston, 1962, p. 16).



Figure 16: The Warrior-King Moses (Charlton Heston)

Critics acknowledged Heston-as-hero then variously belittled him as a “frontier marshal in a typical Western” (Hatch, 1956, p. 507), “a mixture of superman and Daniel Boone” (Cox, 1962, p. 34), and “the thinking man’s Conan, the muscle-man’s Moses” (Durgnat, 1995, p. 24). His acting was rated as no better than “a cardboard Moses” (Dever, 2003, p. 9) or “a Sunday-school coloring book caricature” (Brown, 1975, p. 48). Furthermore, Heston was supposedly a disconcerting choice to “personify Jewish heroism” (Bernheimer, 1998, p. 46) because Heston and his wife “are Protestants” (Funt, 1979, p. 211), thus making his Moses “about as kosher as a pork chop in the Vatican” (Fox, 1972, p. 53). Consequently, this led critics to claim that: “Theodore Roberts steals the [1923] film with his virtuoso performance as the fiery, self-righteous Moses, putting Charlton Heston’s stolid piety in the 1956 De Mille remake of the story to shame. Roberts looks like the image of God’s stuttering, reluctant leader as depicted in Renaissance art: a white-haired patriarch charged with indignation” (Frank, 1982, p. 1100).

The Michelangelo-Heston Mirroring

Heston’s Moses was modelled upon Michelangelo’s statue of Moses located in the Chapel of St. Peter in Chains, Rome (see Figure 17), which exudes power, authority, and solemnity. Why so? Because Heston physically resembled it (DeMille & Hayne, 1960, p. 380); particularly the broken nose that Heston got playing football (Parkinson, 1975, p. 111). DeMille is reported saying: “If it’s good enough for Michelangelo, it’s good enough for me” (Heston, 1970, p. 262); yet, his actor choice caused critics problems because it generated “a kind of aesthetic and psychological

dissonance by telling the story of a lawgiver as if he were a warrior-king” (McConnell, 1979, p. 54), especially if they wanted a weak Moses, not DeMille's macho Moses.



Figure 17: Michelangelo's Moses and Charlton Heston

Given DeMille's own macho-man persona (Kozlovic, 2008), some critics claimed that: "Heston's Big Mo was a vision of the annoyingly Caesarean Cecil B. DeMille, a bald tyrant who stomped around movie sets in jodhpurs and cavalry boots like some sort of Crimean War general about to order the Light Brigade to charge. He believed in the principle of absolute authority—his own—and he directed with the subtlety of a man carving an angel out of a lump of coal with a chisel" (Hunter, 2005, p. 326). The writer agrees with this claim; especially since DeMille regularly coached Heston for the Moses role in his own home on Sundays (Webb & Nichols, 1987, p. 152).

Heston was "the living icon of a peculiarly masculine aesthetic, the symbol of the machismo" (Hawkins, 2000, p. 20), which the macho-DeMille enhanced extra-cinematically on the cover of *Hollywood Reporter*. When DeMille complained that Moses' engraving was not sufficiently forceful, Milton Epstein shouted back over the telephone: "All right...we'll put more silver in Moses' hair!" (Goodman, 1961, p. 67) then hung up. Today, biblical scholars consider Moses, David, and Samson to be the ancient world equivalents of "macho men" (Davis, 1998, p. xix), and so the description of Heston's Moses as "a swashbuckling, arrogant-but-noble, muscular, hero-type prince" (Hearn, 1956, p. 164) is not that far off the scriptural mark. Heston's Prince Moses certainly fits the "swashbuckling" bill, especially alongside Prince Rameses (see Figure 18).



Figure 18: Prince Moses and Prince Rameses

Furthermore, DeMille did not dwell upon Moses as a burdened, reluctant Prophet (Exod. 3-4), unlike Dougray Scott's Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (2006) who ended up damaging respect for the man when "burdened" translated into dummy-spitting temper tantrums that involved shouting, blubbering, swooning and dramatic ripping of robes.

The DeMillean Downplaying of the Tongue-tied Moses

Nor did DeMille dwell upon the speech-impaired Prophet who variously complained to God: "I am not eloquent...I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (Exod. 4:10), "I am of uncircumcised lips" (Exod. 6:30), and with God acknowledging Aaron as the better speaker of the two brothers (Exod. 4:14). Indeed, the Holy Qur'an also had Moses asking God to "loose the knot from my tongue" (Surah 20 Ta-Ha:27) and had him saying that Aaron "is more eloquent in speech than me" (Surah 28 Al-Qasas:34). DeMille tried "bringing in the impediment without calling it an impediment" (DeMille, 1952, p. 4), but as Henry Wilcoxon reported, DeMille "finally decided that an audience couldn't sit through a four-hour movie with a prophet of God that couldn't talk" (Orrison, 1999, p. 10). In short, DeMille-the-biblical-scholar gave way to DeMille-the-storytelling-pragmatist, but for very good religious reasons.

Despite the minor verse transgressions-cum-downplaying of the impediment trait, DeMille's warrior-king conception of Moses was eminently acceptable because even if Moses was meek and had a speech impediment (with no scriptural indication of this at birth or during his major years of divine service), it was *not* just Moses who spoke. God used Moses as his mouthpiece: "And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth?...have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say" (Exod. 4:11-12). God made Moses "a god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet" (Exod. 7:1), therefore, Moses-the-righteous patriarch *should* speak authoritatively under God's guidance, especially when commanding: "Let my people go" (Exod. 8:1; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Having God, via Moses with a speech impediment, would be inappropriate for such divine events (and anathema to both DeMille-the-Christian-apologist and DeMille-the-macho-man); therefore, DeMille's Moses-as-warrior-king is *also* valid during the post-Exodus years as Moses-the-meek-but-spirit-filled-warrior-king-of-God.

Conclusion

DeMille was a far more accomplished biblical filmmaker who took Holy Scripture to heart, more often and more deeply, than previously appreciated. His two Moses depictions reflected the age he worked in, the length he had to tell his sacred stories, the technological sophistication of the day, and the life-long accumulation of DeMille's own biblical knowledge and insights tempered by a dramatist's eye and a businessman's heart. So it is not too surprising to note that Theodore Roberts' mystical Moses differed significantly from Charlton Heston's monumental Moses, and that both eschewed the meek Moses of Scripture, but still managed to convey scriptural truths nonetheless. Overall, as movie mogul David O. Selznick confessed to fellow movie mogul Louis B. Mayer:

However much I may dislike some of his [DeMille's] pictures from an audience standpoint, it would be very silly of me, as a producer of commercial motion pictures, to demean for an instant his unparalleled skill as a maker of mass entertainment, or the knowing and sure hand with which he manufactures his successful assaults upon a world

audience that is increasingly indifferent if not immune to the work of his inferiors. As both professionally and personally he has in many ways demonstrated himself to be a man of sensitivity and taste, it is impossible to believe that the blatancy of his style is due to anything but a most artful and deliberate and knowing technique of appeal to the common denominator of public taste. He must be saluted by any but hypocritical or envious members of the picture *business*. But there has appeared only one Cecil B. DeMille (Behlmer, 1972, p. 400).

Further research into DeMille studies, biblical epics, and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue

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Filmography

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- El Cid* (1961, dir. Anthony Mann)
- Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014, dir. Ridley Scott)
- Moses* (1995, dir. Roger Young)
- Moses – The Lawgiver* (1974, dir. Gianfranco De Bosio)
- Samson and Delilah* (1949, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
- The Prince of Egypt* (1998, dir. Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner & Simon Wells)
- The King of Kings* (1927, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
- The Life of Moses* (1909-1910, dir. J. Stuart Blackton)
- The Ten Commandments* (1923, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
- The Ten Commandments* (1956, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
- The Ten Commandments* (2006, dir. Robert Dornhelm)
- The Ten Commandments* (2007, dir. Bill Boyce & John Stronach)
- Wholly Moses!* (1980, dir. Gary Weis)

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