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# The Movie Mogul, Moses and Muslims: Islamic Elements in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956)

## **Abstract**

Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 film, *The Ten Commandments*, has come to define the genre of the biblical epic. It has earned a permanent place in American culture due to its annual airing on television during the Easter and Passover holidays. Most viewers are unaware, however, that DeMille had sought to make a film that would appeal to Jews, Christians *and* Muslims at a time when their common *Abrahamic* ancestry had yet to be articulated, and interreligious dialogue was all but unheard of. To this end, Henry Noerdlinger, DeMille's researcher for the film, consulted the Qur'an, and screenwriters incorporated Islamic references into the script. This article explores the social and historical context for the film, Noerdlinger's published volume of research (*Moses and Egypt*) and examines those parts of the script with explicit references to the Qur'an and Muslims.

## **Keywords**

DeMille, Ten Commandments, Qur'an, Islam, Muslims

## **Author Notes**

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## I. Introduction

Although often criticized for its stylized theatricality, Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 film *The Ten Commandments* has nevertheless earned a permanent place in American cinematic history. The American Film Institute places it in the top ten American epic films (as no. 10),<sup>1</sup> and in its top 100 most inspiring American films (no. 79).<sup>2</sup> Even by today's inflated standards, it epitomizes the "blockbuster" film with its unprecedented production costs (\$13.2 million),<sup>3</sup> all-star cast, grandiose sets, on-location shots, elaborate costumes, thousands of extras, and thrilling (for their day), Oscar-winning special effects. Although DeMille's last film, it was his crowning achievement in a career as director that spanned over four decades. Within just three years after its release, *an estimated 98.5 million people had seen The Ten Commandments*.<sup>4</sup> Since 1973, the ABC television network has aired the film annually to coincide with Easter and Passover. In the past seven years alone (2007-2014), over 54 million people tuned in to watch the nearly four-hour biblical epic. It remains the sixth highest-grossing film of all time, when adjusted for inflation.<sup>5</sup> Even with all its grandiosity *and* its flaws, one author writes: "for many it is a very moving, even spiritual experience,"<sup>6</sup> enhanced by Elmer Bernstein's rousing and inspiring musical score.

It was, of course, not DeMille's first telling of the Exodus story. He had directed a silent film by the same name in 1923. In that version, however, the biblical story lasts a mere fifty minutes, serving as a prologue to a modern story that dramatized the consequences of ignoring God's Law. Throughout his career, DeMille periodically returned to biblical themes. Four years after the first *Ten Commandments*, he directed *The King of Kings* (1927), followed by *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), and *Samson and Delilah*

(1949) before returning to the *Ten Commandments* (1956). DeMille explained that *The Ten Commandments*, *The King of Kings* and *The Sign of the Cross* comprised a kind of trilogy: “*The Ten Commandments* (1923) had been about the giving of the Law, *The King of Kings* was the story of the Interpretation of the Law. *The Sign of the Cross*... would tell of the Preservation of the Law.”<sup>7</sup>

By all accounts, DeMille was a deeply religious person, although he did not regularly attend religious services. His father, Henry Churchill DeMille, had studied theology and church history as a candidate for the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, but was never ordained, instead taking up a career in theatre as an actor and playwright. It was in theater that Henry DeMille met aspiring actress Matilda Beatrice Samuel, born into an English-Jewish family that had immigrated to the United States in 1871. In anticipation of their marriage, Beatrice (as she was called) was baptized, confirmed and communicated in the Episcopal Church. Although Cecil never denied his mother’s Jewish roots, he certainly tended to downplay them. In his autobiography, he wrote at length about his father’s family, but almost nothing about his mother, and never mentions her Jewish heritage. He did, however, do his best to minimize negative depictions of Jews in *The King of Kings*, but nevertheless was judged to be an anti-Semite by the *Jewish Tribune*, and ultimately compelled to make cuts to the film to satisfy his critics.<sup>8</sup>

His brother, Richard DeMille, observed that Cecil was “not a completely conventional Christian. He didn’t take direction from popes and prelates. He was more of a Protestant man of the Book.”<sup>9</sup> “He strove,” Richard said, “to put God’s word on the screen and believed that God approved of his efforts.”<sup>10</sup> Cecil himself explained that “my

ministry was making religious movies and getting more people to read the Bible than anyone else ever has.”<sup>11</sup>

In remaking *The Ten Commandments*, DeMille looked beyond the Bible, however, in order to fill in the thirty-year gap in the account between Moses' birth and his flight out of Egypt. As DeMille explained in both the movie trailer and in the prologue to the film, he and his screenwriters consulted the works of Philo (c. 20 BCE-50 CE), Josephus (first century CE), and Eusebius (260/65-339/40 CE), as well as Jewish *Midrash*. The film also credits three historical novels: Dorothy Clarke Wilson's *Prince of Egypt* (1949), Rev. Joseph Holt Ingraham's *Pillar of Fire* (1859) and Rev. Arthur E. Southon's *On Eagle's Wings* (1937). The extraordinary and unparalleled attention to authenticity (generally speaking) and the level of detail in props and sets was achieved by consulting a number of prominent Egyptologists including: William C. Hayes, Curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of Egyptian Art, Labib Habachi of the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, and Keith Seele and George Hughes of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Ralph Marcus also of the Oriental Institute and Rabbi Rudolph Lupo of the Jewish Community Library, Los Angeles, provided expertise in Judaism.

DeMille and his creative team did not stop there, however, going beyond Judeo-Christian, Egyptological, historical and literary sources to craft the account of Moses and the Exodus. Most people who have seen this iconic epic are unaware that DeMille, his researchers, and screenwriters also made use of the Qur'an although it is not found *explicitly* in the film's credits among the other sources. The use of the Qur'an is particularly evident from the volume of research produced for the film, in the film's

script, as well as in remarks made by those involved in the making of the film. DeMille himself wrote in his autobiography that the Qur'an was "one of the primary sources for our production of *The Ten Commandments*."<sup>12</sup> The *Qur'anic* and *Islamic* elements in DeMille's *magnum opus* are the subject of this study. Such elements are significant because they demonstrate that DeMille, a conservative Christian, was aware that Moses was not only a biblical prophet but a *Qur'anic* prophet as well, and that he sought to use the film as a means of unifying Jews, Christians and Muslims at a time when few Americans would have acknowledged their common Abrahamic ancestry or knew anything about Islam.

## II. Americans and Islam in the 1950s

By the 1950s, Americans were becoming increasingly aware of Muslims, both in the United States and in the world due to immigration and conversions especially among African-Americans. Communities of Muslim-Americans consisting of Arabs, Albanian, Bosnians, South Asians as well as African-Americans already existed in several American cities including New York, Chicago, Toledo, Detroit, and Cedar Rapids.

Popular views of Islam and Muslims in the 1950s, however, had certainly been shaped largely by motion pictures and world events. Although few commercial films concerned themselves with Islam and Muslims *per se*, many films from the 1920s through the 1950s depicted *Arabs*, albeit in rather unflattering and stereotypical ways. Arab men, whether in serious films or comedies, were often portrayed as dangerous, saber-wielding or gun-totting villains, profligate despots, or abusive misogynists, while Arab women were depicted as seductive sirens or helpless sexual playthings.<sup>13</sup> In the

months and years preceding the release of *The Ten Commandments* (November 1956), there were, however, some notable exceptions.

In March of 1956, an English film called *The Black Tent* was released. It portrayed the friendship between a British officer named David and a Bedouin named Salem who were allies against the Germans in World War II-Libya. At one point in the film, when David asks Salem for his sister's hand in marriage, Salem responds: "We in our faith recognize the brotherhood of man under the solvent rule of Allah."<sup>14</sup> Two years before DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Warner Brothers Studio released *King Richard and the Crusaders* (1954). The Muslim commander Saladin, played by Rex Harrison, is portrayed as chivalrous and sincere, expressing his aim to create "a world, at least, where beliefs can meet in understanding," and his desire to "bring eternal peace to east and west."<sup>15</sup> Nineteen years earlier in 1935, DeMille had made a film called *The Crusades* in which he, too, had portrayed the Muslim commander (played by Ian Keith) in a fairly positive light. DeMille's granddaughter Cecilia remarks: "DeMille rejected the bloodthirsty image of Muslims that was projected at the time. He portrayed Saladin as a civilized, cultured, chivalrous man."<sup>16</sup> This served DeMille well later when filming *The Ten Commandments* in Egypt in 1953. Upon meeting Gamal 'Abd el-Nasser (later Egyptian president) and the Minister of War, Abdel Hakim Amer, shortly after King Farouk had been deposed, Amer said to DeMille: "Mr. DeMille, we grew up on your film *The Crusades*, and we saw how you treated us and our religion. Our country is your country."<sup>17</sup> In his autobiography DeMille said that one of his objectives in making *The Crusades* was: "to bring out that the Saracens [i.e. Muslims] were not barbarians, but a highly cultivated people, and their great leader, Saladin, as perfect and gentle a knight as

any in Christendom.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Muslims were not “as the propaganda of the time would have it, infidel dogs, but highly civilized and chivalrous foemen.”<sup>19</sup> All that being said, *The Crusades* is a profoundly Christian film; the Cross predominates throughout right up to until the closing *Alleluia* chorus and, Saladin aside, Muslims are depicted as marauding invaders who destroy Christian images, enslave Christians, and sell their women captives. In fact, when the film was first released internationally in 1936, censors in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine rejected it, although in later years it was permitted.<sup>20</sup> DeMille believed it to be one of his most popular pictures in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> According to *Crusades* star Henry Wilcoxon:

*The Crusades* presents a strong personal statement of DeMille on the futility of Holy War. What does it matter how we worship God, so long as each man does it in his own way. The people who insist their way is the only way are the people I have no time for. Their “intolerance” is what *The Crusades* is all about.<sup>22</sup>

It is difficult to determine more *precisely* what motivated DeMille to make *The Crusades*. It is possible that, as a man of faith, he was disturbed by the growing violence in Palestine as Jewish immigrants began to displace Palestinian Arabs. In 1929, more than two hundred Jews and Arabs were killed in riots in Jerusalem and Hebron, and hundreds more injured. Violent clashes continued through the early 1930s as Jewish immigration surged, erupting into a full-scale Arab revolt in 1936. DeMille who was in Palestine in 1931 on his return trip from Russia noted: “Tensions later to break into fierce open war were noticeable when we visited Jerusalem.”<sup>23</sup> Those tensions and conflicts perhaps also explain why Egypt, Syria and Palestine initially refused to show DeMille’s film. In contrast, his film *The King of Kings* (1927) seems to have a “healing influence upon religious tensions” in Egypt:

One day when the students of the American University [in Cairo] were watching *The King of Kings*, the muezzin's call to prayer was heard from a near-by mosque. The screening was stopped. The Moslem [sic] students knelt, facing towards Mecca. The Christian students waited respectfully until their classmates had finished their prayer, then all together resumed following the story of Him whom Moslems honor as the Prophet Jesus and Christians call the Saviour of mankind.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to motion pictures, the American perception of Muslims and Islam in the 1950s was certainly colored by several significant events that happened as World War II drew to a close. Beginning in 1946, India began to experience brutal sectarian violence as it moved towards independence. The carnage that accompanied the Partition of India and Pakistan in August 1947 resulted in the deaths of at least 200,000, and possibly as many as a million Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus.<sup>25</sup> Israel's independence in May 1948, and the subsequent Arab-Israeli War involving Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, the Transjordan and Iraq soon followed this. In 1954, the Algeria National Liberation Front (FLN) began its armed uprising against French colonial rule, a war that would continue until 1962. A week before *The Ten Commandments* premiered in New York, in late October 1956 Israel, Britain and France invaded Egypt after Egyptian President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. The western association of Muslims (Arab and South Asian) with war and violence continued to grow.

In the early- to mid-1950s Americans had several new popular and dependable sources of information on Islam available to them. In 1950, Bernard Lewis' *The Arabs in History* provided a historical survey from the advent of Islam to the modern era, relatively free of the polemics that were later to characterize his work. In 1954, Alfred Guillaume's *Islam* served as a succinct but competent and sympathetic introduction to the faith. Two new English translations of the Qur'an were also published: A.J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* in 1955, and N.J. Dawood's translation of the Qur'an (titled *The*

*Koran*) in 1956, thus making the text increasingly available to a wider readership. Also in 1956, the first edition of an important work in Christian-Muslim relations was published: Kenneth Cragg's *The Call of the Minaret*. Cragg, an Anglican bishop and Islamic scholar presented a critical yet informed and irenic approach to Islam "based on understanding, appreciation and seeking resonances with the Christian Gospel,"<sup>26</sup> while remaining painfully aware of the difficulties in the Muslim world described above.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the early 1950s residents of the nation's capital witnessed the construction on the Islamic Center of Washington, DC. Although there were already other mosques in the United States at this time, such a prominent structure in Washington attracted national and international media coverage.<sup>28</sup> When it was completed and dedicated in June 1957, President Eisenhower himself addressed the Muslim community:

Meeting with you now, in front of one of the newest and most beautiful buildings in Washington, it is fitting that we re-dedicate ourselves to the peaceful progress of all men under one God.

And I should like to assure you, my Islamic friends, that under the American Constitution, under American tradition, and in American hearts, this Center, this place of worship, is just as welcome as could be a similar edifice of any other religion. Indeed, America would fight with her whole strength for your right to have here your own church and worship according to your own conscience...

Civilization owes to the Islamic world some of its most important tools and achievements. From fundamental discoveries in medicine to the highest planes of astronomy, the Muslim genius has added much to the culture of all peoples. That genius has been a wellspring of science, commerce and the arts, and has provided for all of us many lessons in courage and in hospitality.

This fruitful relationship between peoples, going far back into history, becomes more important each year. Today, thousands of Americans, both private individuals and governmental officials, live and work - and grow in understanding - among the peoples of Islam.<sup>29</sup>

In Eisenhower's view, the various religious communities in the United States and in the world were natural allies united against a common enemy: Soviet communism. DeMille,

who combined biblical piety with political conservatism, felt similarly. Three years earlier in 1954, while *The Ten Commandments* was in production, in a letter to *The Jewish Chronicle*, DeMille had written: “These three great religions [Judaism, Christianity and Islam] face a common enemy today. But they also have a common bond in their devotion to one God revealed to Moses at the burning bush.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, whereas his 1923 *Ten Commandments* served to warn people of the consequences of ignoring God’s law, his 1956 remake dramatized the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh to reflect the struggle of western democracy against Soviet communism. DeMille had selected Yul Brynner to play Rameses, Moses’ opponent, after seeing him perform on Broadway in *The King and I*, but he would not have overlooked that his film’s villain was Russian-born. In his unusual appearance in the prologue to the film, DeMille passionately declared his purpose in making the movie:

The theme of this picture is whether men are to be ruled by God’s law, or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator like Rameses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today.

### **III. The Research**

In spite of the obvious political parallel DeMille was attempting to draw in *The Ten Commandments*, the film is first and foremost a story of faith, a dramatization of Israel’s Captivity in and Exodus from Egypt, a story DeMille believed in – literally – and was determined to demonstrate that by making the film look and sound as authentic as was possible. The head of research for the film was Henry S. Noerdlinger (1905-1985) who had worked for MGM before becoming DeMille’s research consultant in 1945. He worked with DeMille on several films including *Unconquered* (1947), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952).<sup>31</sup> DeMille said of Noerdlinger,

who was Swiss-born, that he had a “European’s command of languages, an American’s sense of the practical, and the judicial temperament, the industry, and the exactness of a scholar.”<sup>32</sup> As noted above, the research performed for *The Ten Commandments* was considerable, and remains unmatched by subsequent films that dramatize the Exodus. Noerdlinger documented the results of his research in a book titled *Moses and Egypt*, published by the University of Southern California Press in 1956. According to Noerdlinger, DeMille paid for the publication of the book so that it could be distributed “among the educated clergy, Sunday school teachers, newspaper and magazine editors”<sup>33</sup> to demonstrate the scriptural, historical and Egyptological veracity of the film.<sup>34</sup>

DeMille himself provided an introduction to the book in which he explained: “Here, I hope, Jewish, Christian, and *Muslim* believers and the clergy of all faiths will find the light of archaeological and historical science illuminating the Word of God.”<sup>35</sup> Noerdlinger, too, understood the potential significance of the film for Muslims: “To portray the life of Moses, the man who is revered by the followers of three great religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – is an undertaking of great responsibility.”<sup>36</sup> Out of the conflict between Pharaoh and Moses, he wrote a new nation arose:

a new nation of men and women who owed their allegiance to no man and to no earthly idol, but to one God, YHWH; to the one and only God, Who created all, Who is worshipped as the father of all his sons and daughters by the brotherhood of Jews, Christians, and Muslims and, in a wider sense, by the followers of other religions as well.<sup>37</sup>

This is an extraordinary vision of the brotherhood of humanity in the midst of the Cold War, racial tensions in the United States, and Arab-Israeli conflicts.

Throughout the chapter that documents the life of Moses from scriptural and classical sources, Noerdlinger provides numerous references to the Qur’an in addition to

the Bible, Midrash, Mishnah, etc. He does the same for the chapter on “The Men and Women of the Bible.” He cites from two different English translations of the Qur’an. The first was by George Sale (1697-1736). It had originally been published in 1734, but Noerdlinger used an edition produced by Frederick Warne Publishers in London in 1909 with the title *The Koran*, which included an introduction by Edward Denison Ross. Sale’s translation was the Qur’an for men of the Enlightenment; both Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson owned a copy.<sup>38</sup> Although Sale’s translation had been commissioned by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and had definite Protestant missionary objectives, his commentary accompanying the text was perceived to be so sympathetic to Islam that he was accused of having a pro-Islamic bias.<sup>39</sup> Ross (1871-1940), who provided the short introduction to the later edition, was a British orientalist and linguist, and first director of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (1916-37).

The second translation that Noerdlinger used, and to a far greater extent than Sale’s, was *The Holy Qur’an* by Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali (1874-1951) published in Lahore in 1951 by the Ahmadiyya Movement. This movement originated in what is today Pakistan when Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-89) claimed to be a prophet (*nabī*), as well as the messiah (*al-masīh*) and the promised one who would come at the End Time (*al-mahdī*). Because of this, most Sunni Muslims do not consider the Ahmadis to be true Muslims. The movement later split as some adherents, namely the Lahore group led by Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali, regarded Ahmad as a reformer (*mujaddid*) only. Ahmadiyya missionary Mufti Muhammad Sadiq played a prominent role in Muslim-American history in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, establishing mosques, making converts especially among African-Americans, and founding in 1921 *The Muslim Sunrise*, one of the earliest

Muslim publications in the United States.<sup>40</sup> Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali’s translation of the Qur’an, first published in 1917 and then in many subsequent editions, is as accurate as most other English renderings, is quite readable, and draws from numerous classical Muslim scholars, although sometimes the commentary reflects Ahmadi rather than more orthodox Muslim beliefs.<sup>41</sup>

Following his discussion of “The Men and Women of the Bible” Noerdlinger includes a chapter titled “The Holy Scriptures,” in which he provides a general description of the “Old Testament,” specifically its early transmission, canon and translations. He then includes a short section on the *Qur’an*, describing its structure and noting some of the Hebrew prophets and patriarchs that are also found in the Qur’an. Including the Qur’an in a chapter on “The Holy Scriptures” was a bold move on his part as the term generally designates *biblical scriptures*, i.e. the Hebrew Bible and New Testament; but here, Noerdlinger uses the term to refer to the Holy Scriptures of Jews and *Muslims*.<sup>42</sup> This would explain the otherwise curious omission of any mention of the Qur’an in the film’s opening credits when it was clearly one of the sources the filmmakers consulted, as evidenced by Noerdlinger’s book and the testimony of actors and others. Thus, when the credits name the “The Holy Scriptures” among the sources for the film’s content, we are to understand “The Hebrew Bible *and* the Qur’an.” Noerdlinger was clearly positively affected by his reading of the Qur’an judging by his comments that remain as relevant and vital now as they did fifty-six years ago:

In the times in which we are living it may be well for Western people to realize fully that the fundamental message of the Koran is identical with that of the Bible: Love of and obedience to the one God. The doctrine of faith of Islam, “there is no God but He” (3:17), is the same as the statement of Jews and Christians, “the Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4).

*The Holy Scripture of Islam* respects the Torah and the Gospels in stating “He revealed the Torah and the Gospel aforetime, a guidance for the people” (3.3). Prophets and revelations of earlier times are recognized by “We sent messengers before thee ... nor was it possible for a messenger to bring a sign except with Allah’s permission” (40.78).<sup>43</sup>

Henry Wilcoxon, DeMille’s associate producer for *The Ten Commandments* as well as an actor in the film recalled that in addition to the Book of Exodus, Noerdlinger had the cast read the Qur’an, many of them doing so for the first time. Wilcoxon said that he found the Qur’an as beautiful as he found the King James Version of the Bible.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to referencing the Qur’an in his book, Noerdlinger also cites the *Dictionary of Islam* by Thomas P. Hughes (London, 1935) and the *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* by H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers (Leiden, 1953). In a photograph of Noerdlinger posing in front of shelves of books he consulted for the film,<sup>45</sup> the *Encyclopedia of Islam* can be seen on the shelf behind him above his left shoulder, and the Maulana Ahmad ‘Ali translation of the Qur’an over his right shoulder - a happy coincidence perhaps, but it nevertheless graphically confirms Noerdlinger’s interest in, and appreciation of, Islam.

#### **IV. The Script**

As indicated above, DeMille hoped that Muslims, as well as Jews and Christians, would benefit from the research behind the film. He acknowledged his use of the Qur’an in an inscription on the finished script: “All these things are as I have found them in the Holy Scriptures, the Glorious Koran, the ancient Hebrew writing, and in the annals of modern discovery.”<sup>46</sup> The screenplay for *The Ten Commandments* was written by Aeneas MacKenzie, Jesse Lasky Jr., Jack Gariss and Frederic M. Frank. DeMille’s influence,

however, is apparent. Like Wilcoxon, Lasky noted Noerdlinger and DeMille's use of the Qur'an to shape the story of Moses.<sup>47</sup> The Qur'anic and Islamic elements in *The Ten Commandments* may first be detected towards the end of the first half of the film, in the scene in which Moses, having crossed the desert, first arrives in Jethro's tent:

Jethro: He who has no name surely guided your steps.

Moses: "No name?" You Bedouins know the god of Abraham?

Jethro: Abraham is the father of many nations. We are the children of Ishmael, his firstborn. We are the obedient of God.

Moses, who had only recently begun to learn about the faith of his people, learns that others, too - namely the Bedouin Arabs - worship the God who has no name. "*The obedient of God*" - the term by which Jethro identifies his people - is a literal rendering of the Arabic word "*Muslim*." Jethro and the Midianites are thus identified as Ishmaelites, the *monotheistic* descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham. Whereas the Book of Exodus identifies Jethro (or Reuel) as "the priest of Midian" (Ex. 2.16; 3.1), and implies that he served a *pagan* god before Moses brought about his conversion (Ex. 16), DeMille and his screenwriters *Arabized* and *Islamized* Jethro by calling him "the *sheikh* of Midian." Instead of using the biblical references to Jethro, DeMille and his writers deferred to the Qur'an, representing Jethro as a *monotheistic* Bedouin Arab, rather than a pagan priest, which Muslims would have found offensive. In the Qur'an, Shu'ayb (generally identified with the biblical Jethro) is a *prophet* who was sent to the Midianites (Madyan) to preach the one God: "O my people! Serve God (Allāh). You shall have no god but Him" (*al-Aṣṣāf* 7.85; cf. 11.84 and 29.36).<sup>48</sup> Thus, in a single, brief scene DeMille underscores the *Abrahamic* relationship of Jews and Muslims in the midst of twentieth century Arab and Israeli conflicts.

The references to the *Ishmaelites* – i.e. the ancestral Arab-Muslims – continue in a subsequent scene between Moses and his wife, Jethro's daughter Sephora, in the shadow of Mount Sinai:

Moses: Does your god live on this mountain?

Sephora: Sinai is His high place, His temple.

Moses: If this god is God, he would live on every mountain, in every valley. He would not be only the god of Israel or Ishmael alone, but of all men. It is said that he created all men in His image. Then He would dwell in every heart, in every mind, in every soul.

Sephora: We cannot see his whole purpose. Even Ishmael did not know that God drove him into the desert to be the father of a nation.

We hear additional references to the *Ishmaelites* in a subsequent scene in which Moses is instructing his son Gershom about their Abrahamic heritage:

Gershom: Did the little boy die in the desert, my father?

Moses: No. God brought Ishmael and his mother Hagar into a good land.

An explicit Islamic reference comes in the scene in which Joshua speaks with Moses after his epiphany on Mount Sinai:

Joshua: Did He speak as a man?

Moses: (speaking of God) He is not flesh, but Spirit, the Light of Eternal Mind. And I know that His Light is in every man.

Joshua: Did he ask something of you?

Moses: That I go to Egypt.

Joshua: *You are God's messenger.*

“God's messenger” is a direct translation of the Arabic *rasūl Allāh*, an Islamic designation for God's prophets. Thus, for example, we read in the Qur'an:

And recall Moses in the Book for he was a chosen one, a *messenger* and a prophet. (19.51)

We sent Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his ministers. He said: “I am the *messenger* of the Lord of the Worlds. (43.46)

Qur’anic references continue in the second half of the film when Moses returns to Egypt to free the Hebrews from bondage. In the scene in which Moses turns his staff into a cobra, Rameses says to him: “The power of your god is a cheap magician's trick,” and then calls his own magicians to perform the same feat. Although in the biblical account, Pharaoh similarly summons his magicians to prove that Moses’ trick can be replicated, the script also seems to reflect the Qur’anic version, which *explicitly* says that Pharaoh and his ministers accused Moses of perpetrating a magician’s ruse:

When Moses came to them (Pharaoh and his ministers) with Our clear signs, they said: “This is nothing but faked magic, but we have not heard of this among our forefathers!” (*al-Qaṣa* 28.36)

We sent Moses with Our Signs and clear authority to Pharaoh, Haman and Qārūn, but they said: “(He is) a magician and liar!” (*al-Ghāfir* 40.23-24)

Later in the film, when Rameses dismisses the plagues as naturally occurring phenomena, and refuses to free the slaves, Moses warns him that hail will burn as fire upon the ground (Ex. 9.13-35) and that darkness will cover Egypt for three days (Ex. 10.21-23). Then, says Moses: “you shall know that *God is God* and *bow down to His will*.” The phrase “God is God,” echoes the *shahāda*, the Muslim profession of faith: *lā ilāha ilā-llāh* – “There is no god but God,” and “Bow down to His will” is precisely what *Islam* means: “Whoever submits himself to God, and is a doer of good, he will have his reward from his Lord. No fear or grief shall be upon them” (2.112).

In the film (as in the biblical account), Rameses' recalcitrance continues in spite of the repeated plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians. Ultimately, he decides to wreak his own revenge upon Moses and the slaves:

(Rameses:) I will give this spawn of slaves and his god an answer the world will not forget. Commander of the Host, call in the chariots from Tanis. There shall be one more plague; only it will come upon the slaves of Goshen. The firstborn of each house shall die, beginning with the son of Moses.

This plan, of course, results in the deaths of *Egypt's* firstborn instead of the Hebrews. The Exodus account makes no mention of Pharaoh's plot to inflict infanticide at this point in the narrative, however, nor is it found in the *Midrash*. But DeMille's decision to include Rameses' murderous plan is no mere cinematic invention. In *Moses and Egypt*, Noerdlinger explained that the "justification for this rendition could be based upon a verse contained in the Koran,"<sup>49</sup> citing 7.127:

The ministers of the people of Pharaoh said (to Pharaoh): "Will you leave Moses and his people to create havoc in the land, to abandon you and your gods?" He said: "We will kill their sons and we will allow the females to live. And we will be masters over them."

Another reference to Pharaoh's scheme is found in 40.23-25:

We sent Moses with Our signs and clear authority to Pharaoh, Haman and Qārūn, but they said: "(He is) a magician and liar!" And when he came to them with truth from Us they said: "Kill the sons of those who believe in him, and let their females live," but the plot of the unbelievers (ends in) nothing but error.

In the subsequent Passover scene, Moses is again referred to as "God's Messenger."

Bithiah, Moses' Egyptian foster-mother has come to him seeking refuge, and sits beside

Mered at the *Seder* table:

Bithiah: There is a great light that shines from your face, Moses. Perhaps someday I shall come to understand it.

Mered: *He is God's Messenger*, Princess.

On account of the reference in 1 Chronicles 4.18 to her marriage to Mered, DeMille depicts her as departing Egypt with the Israelites, and she continues to be a brave and stalwart defender of Moses. In the Islamic tradition, Bithiah is known by the name Āsiyah, and is revered for her faith in the one God (Qur'an 66.11). She is considered among "the most excellent" of the female inhabitants of heaven, and the only woman besides Mary, the mother of Jesus, to have achieved perfection.<sup>50</sup>

A final scene in which there appears to be Qur'anic influence comes after the miracle at the sea, after Rameses witnesses the destruction of his army in the sea. He returns to his palace where his queen, Nefretiri, demands to know Moses' fate. Rameses responds by simply and soberly declaring: "His god is God." Seated on their thrones side by side, Pharaoh and his queen fade out as Mount Sinai comes into view between them. God's victory is complete. The Book of Exodus makes no mention of Pharaoh's fate, and does not indicate whether or not he died along with his troops; neither does Noerdlinger nor DeMille explain why they decided to include Pharaoh's profession of faith. Two sources are possible: the Jewish *Aggadah* (extra-biblical traditions) and the Qur'an. In both Jewish and Islamic traditions, Pharaoh, who has been swept into the waters along with his soldiers, makes a dramatic confession of faith. We read in the Qur'an:

We permitted the children of Israel to pass through the sea, and Pharaoh and his forces followed them aggressively and hostilely until he started to drown. He said: "I believe that there is no god except the One in whom the children of Israel believe, and I am one of those who submit." (10.90)

God, or, as other traditions suggest, the angel Gabriel, answers him:

Now? But you rebelled and you were one of the depraved. Today we shall save you in your body so that you will be a sign for those who come after you. But surely many people are heedless of Our signs. (10.91-92)

Although Pharaoh's *body* was saved from the sea, there is little doubt according to the Qur'an (17.103) that Pharaoh was drowned. Muslim theologians have hotly debated whether Pharaoh's confession was authentic, if God accepted it, and if Pharaoh was therefore saved from punishment in the Afterlife.<sup>51</sup> The theological substance of that debate is not our concern here, but suffice it to say that Noerdlinger and DeMille were undoubtedly aware of Pharaoh's profession of faith as it is related in the Qur'an even if they altered the outcome by allowing Rameses to survive. They were also certainly aware that the *aggadic* account of Pharaoh's fate is virtually the same as that found in the Qur'an, except that in the Jewish traditions Pharaoh actually does survive the ordeal and eventually is installed as the king of Nineveh (and identified with the king in the Book of Jonah) – a curious bit of folklore DeMille omitted.<sup>52</sup> It thus seems likely that both the Qur'an and *Aggadah* inspired Rameses statement of belief as depicted in the film.

## V. Conclusion

As seen from the above discussion, the Islamic elements and influences in *The Ten Commandments* are not negligible. This is due to Henry Noerdlinger's research, his use of the Qur'an and reputable reference works such as the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, as well as DeMille's own religious and ideological desire to produce a film that would speak to Jews, Christians *and* Muslims – all of whom revered Moses as God's lawgiver, and who could be allies in faith against atheistic communism. In spite of Noerdlinger's and DeMille's best efforts, however, and their use of thousands of Egyptian-Muslims as extras in the film who played both Egyptians and Hebrews, not all Muslims appreciated the film. Conflicts in the Middle East between Arabs and Israelis overshadowed DeMille's cinematic interfaith mission. Even before the film had been made, the

Egyptian magazine *al-Hilal* expressed the view that DeMille was attempting to use his picture to further the Zionist cause.<sup>53</sup> Censors in Egypt banned the film in the aftermath of the Suez War between Egypt and Israel in 1956.

Further away from the center of Arab-Israeli tensions, Muhammad Ali Bogra, Pakistan's Prime Minister (1953-1955) became one of DeMille's strongest supporters in this endeavor, and wrote to him to tell him so:

I hope that your latest effort to promote understanding between the three great religions of the world will succeed. God has given you a powerful medium for the projection of thought. I sincerely hope that you will undertake with missionary zeal the task of producing films which will also safeguard a free and democratic way of life.<sup>54</sup>

DeMille's endeavor to draw Jews, Christians and Muslims together around the story of Moses and "the birth of freedom" with explicit references to their common Abrahamic ancestry anticipates by more than a decade the Catholic Church's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*), promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in 1964:

3. The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humankind; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, *submitted to God*.<sup>55</sup>

As demonstrated above, Noerdlinger and DeMille had already expressed such ideas in *The Ten Commandments* in 1956. Moreover, DeMille and Noerdlinger's interest in the Qur'an and Islam anticipates by decades American interfaith endeavors, many of which emerged only in the post-9/11 era. By 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards, perhaps, the Islamic elements incorporated to *The Ten Commandments* may not seem terribly significant or surprising. It is now commonplace for people to speak of the "Abrahamic religions,"

although prior to Vatican II this was not the case, and even now some question it, if not outright refute it.<sup>56</sup> In the minds of Cecil B. DeMille and Henry Noerdlinger, there was no doubt of the Abrahamic *and* Mosaic ancestry shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Qur'an told them so.

#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "AFI's 10 Top 10," American Film Institute, accessed March 10, 2015.  
<http://www.afi.com/10top10/category.aspx?cat=10>

<sup>2</sup> "AFI's 100 Years...100 Cheers," American Film Institute, accessed March 10, 2015.  
<http://www.afi.com/100Years/cheers.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Scott Eyman, *Empire of Dreams: the Epic Life of Cecil B. DeMille* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 475.

<sup>4</sup> Eyman 505.

<sup>5</sup> "All Time Box Office," Box Office Mojo, accessed March 10, 2015.  
<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/adjusted.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2004) 353.

<sup>7</sup> *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, Donald Hayne, ed., (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-hall, 1959) 305-6.

<sup>8</sup> *Autobiography* 282ff.

<sup>9</sup> Eyman 359.

<sup>10</sup> Eyman 250-1.

<sup>11</sup> Eyman 497.

<sup>12</sup> *Autobiography* 421.

<sup>13</sup> Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Updated edition (Northampton: Olive Branch, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Shaheen 116.

<sup>15</sup> Shaheen 305-6. For a more negative assessment of this film, see: Lorraine Kochanske Stock, "Now Starring in the Third Crusade: Depictions of Richard I and Saladin in Films and Television Series," in: *Hollywood in the Holy Land: Essays on Film Depictions of the Crusades and Christian-Muslim Clashes*, ed. Nickolas Haydock and E.L. Ridsden (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), 93-122.

<sup>16</sup> Cecilia DeMille Presley and Mark A. Viera, *Cecil B. DeMille: the Art of the Hollywood Epic* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2014) 263.

<sup>17</sup> Eyman 444. Shaheen does not assess the film favorably (143-4).

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<sup>18</sup> *Autobiography* 342.

<sup>19</sup> *Autobiography* 344.

<sup>20</sup> Birchard 292.

<sup>21</sup> *Autobiography* 344.

<sup>22</sup> DeMille Presley and Viera 260.

<sup>23</sup> *Autobiography* 315.

<sup>24</sup> *Autobiography* 315.

<sup>25</sup> John Keay, *India: a History*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Grove, 2010) 509.

<sup>26</sup> “Rt. Revd. Kenneth Craig, 8 March 1913 – 13 November 2012,” Anglican Communion News Service, November 14, 2012, <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2012/11/rt-revd-kenneth-cragg-8-march-1913-13-november-2012.aspx>

<sup>27</sup> For a critique of Cragg’s views, see: Thomas S. Kidd, *America Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton: University Press, 2009) 82-3.

<sup>28</sup> Kim Dieser, “Islamic Center of Washington, D.C.,” *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History*, Edward E. Curtis IV, ed., (New York: Facts on File, 2010) v. 1, 287.

<sup>29</sup> Dwight David Eisenhower, “Eisenhower’s 1957 Speech at Islamic Center of Washington,” IIP Digital, US Embassy, June 26, 2007. <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2007/06/20070626154822lnkais0.6946985.html#ixzz3NozEHm3h>

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in: Gerald E. Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport: Praeger, 1992) 126.

<sup>31</sup> David Eldridge, *Hollywood’s History Films* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) 145 ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Autobiography* 393.

<sup>33</sup> Eldridge 148.

<sup>34</sup> It must be admitted that Noerdlinger selectively used the works he consulted in order to justify the filmmakers’ decisions. For this reason, the book has been called “pseudo-history.” See: Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University, 1995), 95. Noerdlinger, however, recognized the difficulty in setting the film historically when evidence was debated or lacking entirely (*Moses and Egypt*, 5 ff.).

<sup>35</sup> *Moses and Egypt* 2 (my emphasis).

<sup>36</sup> *Moses and Egypt* 12-13.

<sup>37</sup> *Moses and Egypt* 54-5.

<sup>38</sup> Denise A. Spellberg, *Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an: Islam and the Founders* (New York: Knopf, 2013).

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<sup>39</sup> Spellberg 86-87.

<sup>40</sup> Brannon Ingram, "Ahmadi Muslim Americans," and Karima W. Abidine, "Muslim Sunrise," in: *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History*.

<sup>41</sup> Yohanan Friedman, "Ahmadiyya," *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 200), I: 50-51.

<sup>42</sup> The New Testament is not discussed at length in the chapter since it does not add anything to the story of Moses and the Exodus.

<sup>43</sup> *Moses and Egypt* 86-87 (my emphasis).

<sup>44</sup> Katherine Orrison, *Written in Stone: Making Cecil B. DeMille's Epic, The Ten Commandments* (Lanham: Vestal, 1999) 10.

<sup>45</sup> See: Eldridge 146.

<sup>46</sup> Eyman 445.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Orrison's *Written in Stone*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Qur'an are my own.

<sup>49</sup> *Moses and Egypt* 27.

<sup>50</sup> *Saḥīḥ Bukharī*, 3411 (cf. 3433).

<sup>51</sup> Modern discussions of this controversy include: Denis Gril, "Le Personnage Coranique de Pharaon d'après L'Interpretation d'Ibn 'Arabi," *Annales Islamologiques* 14 (1978), 37-57; Carl W. Ernst, "Controversies over Ibn al-'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ*: the Faith of Pharaoh," *Islamic Culture* 59 (1985), 259-66; Alexander D. Knysh, "The Problem of 'Pharaoh's Faith,'" in his *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: the Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 158-161; Eric Ormsby, "The Faith of Pharaoh: a Disputed Question in Islamic Theology," *Studia Islamica* 98/99 (2004), 5-28.

<sup>52</sup> Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews, Vols. III & IV*, 18-19. Noerdlinger cites Ginzberg's work.

<sup>53</sup> Simon Louvish, *Cecil B. DeMille: a Life in Art* (New York: St. Martins, 2008) 422.

<sup>54</sup> Cecilia DeMille Presley and Mark A. Viera, *Cecil B. DeMille: the Art of the Hollywood Epic* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2014) 401. Cf. DeMille, *Autobiography* 421.

<sup>55</sup> My emphasis. For discussion, see: Neal Robinson, "Massignon, Vatican II and Islam as an Abrahamic religion," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 2:2 (1991): 182-205.

<sup>56</sup> Aaron Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions: On the Uses and Abuses of History* (New York: Oxford, 2012); Jon Levenson, "The Idea of Abrahamic Religions: a Qualified Dissent," *Jewish Review of Books*, Spring 2010 (<http://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/244/the-idea-of-abrahamic-religions-a-qualified-dissent>).

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