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## The Construction of a Christ-figure within the 1956 and 1923 Versions of Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments

Anton K. Kozlovic  
Flinders University, antonkozlovic@hotmail.com

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## The Construction of a Christ-figure within the 1956 and 1923 Versions of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*

### Abstract

Cecil B. DeMille was an avowed Episcopalian Christian of half-Jewish descent who co-founded Hollywood and became the undisputed master of the American biblical epic. He produced and directed two versions of *The Ten Commandments*, both of which set the standard for the genre in their respective days. One of the secrets of their still resonating power was the subtextual engineering of his protagonists as Christ-figures. This DeMilleian auteur signature strategy is grossly unappreciated today, but which contributed significantly to his phenomenal box-office success and directorial longevity. Using textually-based, humanist film criticism as the analytical lens, the critical film and religion literature was reviewed, the two biblical epics closely inspected, and their christic subtexts explicated herein. It was concluded that DeMille was a far more artful and devout religious filmmaker than has hitherto been acknowledged, believed or honoured to date. Further research into the emerging and exciting interdisciplinary fields of Religion-and-Film and DeMille Studies was recommended.

## Introduction

Jewish film scholar David Desser noted that Cecil B. DeMille's<sup>1</sup> sound version of *The Ten Commandments*<sup>2</sup> stood 'as the most notorious example' of 'the Hollywood religious epic' and had 'little to do with Judaism.'<sup>3</sup> Yet, this latter claim should not be too surprising, even if true. Why? Because DeMille (affectionately known as C. B.) was a professed Episcopalian Christian of half-Jewish descent<sup>4</sup> who used the silver screen<sup>5</sup> as a sermonising tool to advocate the cause of Christianity, not Judaism. In addition to offering sex, sin and spectacle for good commercial reasons. As David O. Selznick said to fellow film mogul Louis B. Mayer, DeMille 'must be saluted by any but hypocritical or envious members of the picture business.'<sup>6</sup> Besides, the story of Moses is a foundation story for the peoples of the book - the Jews (*Tanach*), the Christians (Bible) and the Muslims (*Qur'an*), all of which have unique information, interpretative slants and profound insights into the man and associated holy events.

Both the silent and the sound versions of *The Ten Commandments*<sup>7</sup> set the standard for the biblical epic in their respective days, and they still hold up well in a post-Millennial world filled with Bible films,<sup>8</sup> including the recently released *The Passion of the Christ*.<sup>9</sup> By the end of DeMille's seventy film career,<sup>10</sup> he was so successful as Hollywood's leading cinematic lay preacher that one anonymous Protestant church leader enthusiastically proclaimed: '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.<sup>11</sup> DeMille himself claimed that: 'my ministry was making religious movies and getting more people to read the Bible than anyone else ever has.'<sup>12</sup> He would have died a happy man for as Tremper Longman III noted: 'Even in an age of rapidly decreasing biblical literacy, most people have heard of the Ten Commandments. Perhaps Cecil B. DeMille is more responsible for this than are today's preachers.'<sup>13</sup>

### **DeMille: The Master of the American Biblical Epic**

DeMille was variously declared 'the master of the religious epic',<sup>14</sup> the 'arch apostle of spectacle',<sup>15</sup> and the 'King of the epic Biblical spectacular',<sup>16</sup> as also demonstrated by his biblical masterpieces *The King of Kings*<sup>17</sup> and *Samson and Delilah*.<sup>18</sup> Yet, crafting New Testament (NT) subtexts into his Old Testament (OT) films and other secular stories was one of DeMille's most profound auteuristic habits that contributed to his phenomenal success, albeit, frequently unappreciated today. Even when this auteur habit was acknowledged, it was typically done in a derogatory fashion. For example, Jeffrey Mahan complained that: 'C. B. DeMille actually imports New Testament texts to the story of the exodus and puts the "Magnificat" in the mouth of Moses's mother in *The Ten Commandments* (1956).'<sup>19</sup> Such criticisms were designed to deride DeMille and fail to appreciate DeMille's

inter-testamental artisanship that was responsible for elevating his biblical films far above his directorial peers and into the cinema history books.<sup>20</sup>

Regrettably, DeMille is still an unsung auteur, the butt of many jokes, and whose 'works have not prompted much critical attention except as triumphs of kitsch'.<sup>21</sup> It has been claimed (albeit, unfairly) that he 'lacked a creative genius'<sup>22</sup> and so it was 'not fashionable to praise De Mille for his art, only to envy his acute sense of what the public wanted and could be shown at any one time'<sup>23</sup> (i.e., a backhanded compliment about his pop culture orientation and marketing prowess). Consequently, the 'critics have never acknowledged his artistic merits'<sup>24</sup> and so his standing as a creative biblical artist has been frequently obscured, if not deliberately ignored or actively derided. This is a shame and a serious scholarly deficiency in urgent need of correction. The time is now ripe to address these faulty evaluations and redress that academic imbalance.

Somewhat appropriately for a biblical filmmaker, mainstream religion scholars are now seeing considerable value in DeMille's religious films and are spearheading the much-deserved rehabilitation of his artistic reputation and Hollywood layer preacher credentials. For example, in *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative*, Melanie J. Wright claimed:

The Hollywood epic has typically been categorized as superficial and banal by biblical scholars and film critics alike, but the study argues for the

rehabilitation of DeMille's Moses as a complex example of innovative biblical interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

One can only agree with her wholeheartedly.

Using textually-based, humanist film criticism as the analytical lens (i.e., examining the textual world inside the frame, but not the world outside the frame),<sup>26</sup> both versions of DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* were closely inspected. The critical film and religion literature was reviewed and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour), and the construction of DeMille's Christ-figures and associated biblical characters were explicated herein.

### **Sacred Subtexts: Hidden Religious Figurations Out in the Open**

Sacred subtexts (aka holy subtexts; divine infranarratives) have been described as 'anonymous religiousness'<sup>27</sup> or the pursuit of 'overtly religious themes in a secular 'wrapper'.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally speaking, they are hidden religious figurations built into ostensibly secular films. Sacred subtexts exist because narratives can have a dual nature, namely, an overt plot plus a covert storyline of varying complexity that is comparable to the metaphorical or symbolic within literature. As Bernard F. Dick described this relationship: 'the narrative and infranarrative (or text and subtext) are not two separate entities (there is, after all, only one film); think of them, rather, as two concentric circles, the infranarrative

being within the narrative.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, secular feature films can engage in religious storytelling without appearing 'religious', as evidenced by the numerous Christ-figures built into science fiction films.<sup>30</sup> Yet, these covert religious figurations are not limited exclusively to secular films. They can just as easily be crafted inside overtly religious films, albeit, they are sometimes harder to detect if not attuned to their existence, characteristics and multiple nuances.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, this is exactly what DeMille did in his sound and colour version of *The Ten Commandments* when he deliberately constructed Moses as a Christ-figure.

#### **Moses as Christ-figure in *The Ten Commandments* (1956)**

DeMille had subtextually enhanced the divine resonance of his on-screen Moses (Charlton Heston) by shaping this venerable OT figure to match an NT Saviour-as-Liberator role. That is, the scriptural Moses who was 'slow of speech, and of a slow tongue' (Exod. 4:10)<sup>32</sup> was cinematically reconfigured as a divine warrior-king-hero that Paul Roen described as 'the Savior Moses.'<sup>33</sup> DeMille-as-lay-theologian-and-epic-filmmaker was very fond of pointing out the Moses-Jesus link<sup>34</sup> because it had scriptural precedence in John 5:46-47: 'For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me [Jesus]: for he wrote for me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?' Furthermore, as the film's costume designer and biblical painter Arnold Friberg noted: 'Mr. DeMille likes the parallel between the first Passover meal and one of the Last Supper. He has often

spoke of putting out a pair of beautiful pictures, one with the Passover and one of the Last Supper.<sup>135</sup> DeMille had legitimately tapped into a major theological thread within Christian Scripture Studies, namely, the portrayal of Jesus as the 'Liberator of Slaves,'<sup>136</sup> and then applied it to his Moses - the liberator of the Egyptian enslaved Hebrews. To achieve his sacred design, DeMille specifically engineered this christological figuration in the following eight ways.

**ONE:** DeMille had subtly infused an NT resonance into his OT film when Pharaoh Rameses I (Ian Keith) ordered the death of every newborn, Hebrew, man-child in Goshen, which was Egypt's 'Eastern gate.' His high priest had told the reigning Pharaoh that an 'evil star' detected by the astrologers had entered 'into the house of Egypt.' This event proclaimed the prophesy of the birth of 'a Deliverer' who would lead the enslaved Hebrews 'out of bondage', and therefore a direct threat to the established Egyptian sociopolitical order. This condensed DeMilleian focus differed slightly from the biblical account where the Pharaoh was concerned about the children of Israel becoming greater in number and mightier than the children of Egypt (Exod. 1:9). However, DeMille did not ignore this fact, he merely voiced this demographic concern through Pharaoh's military commander in a subtle fashion. Furthermore, the biblical Pharaoh was concerned that the numerous Hebrews might join Egypt's enemies and fight alongside them (Exod. 1:10), and so as a preventative measure, he ordered his Hebrew midwives to kill all the newborn Hebrew male

children (Exod. 1:16). However, they did not carry out the order (Exod. 1:17), and so Pharaoh subsequently ordered his subjects that every newborn Hebrew male be cast into the river (Exod. 1:22), presumably to perish through drowning, exposure and predation.

DeMille's non-scriptural, OT reference to an 'evil star' is important because no star is mentioned in the Exodus account (chap. 1). However, this star reference is highly reminiscent of the Matthean version of the Nativity where a special 'star in the east' (Matt. 2:2) signified the birth of Jesus Christ, the 'King of the Jews' (Matt. 2:2). Thus another potential threat to the established Roman sociopolitical order. This celestial event had provoked Herod to order the killing of 'all the children in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under' (Matt. 2:16). Therefore, the birth of Moses at a time of officially sanctioned child massacre resonated nicely with the birth of Jesus Christ at another time of officially sanctioned child massacre. DeMille's on-screen references to celestial stars, the East, and the killing of man-children had greatly strengthened his Moses-Jesus parallel.

**TWO:** When Prince Moses killed Baka (Vincent Price), the Pharaoh's master-builder of the pyramids, and gave as his reason: 'I am Hebrew', the Hebrew slave Joshua (John Derek) cried out: 'You are the chosen one!' 'You will deliver us.' For Christian viewers, this phrase resonated strongly with the NT's claims: 'Jesus

is the Christ' (John 20:31), 'the king of the Jews' (Matt. 27:37), the hoped for 'Messiah'/'Messias' (John 4:25). That is, the 'anointed' one (Luke 4:18), 'the chosen of God' (Luke 23:35), the 'saviour' (Titus 1:4) of humanity who was sent to 'deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God our Father' (Gal. 1:4). Furthermore, DeMille constructed the OT Joshua as an NT John the Baptist-figure to buttress Moses as Christ-figure. Why bother? Because John the Baptist is a crucial character for pointing out and validating the long-awaited arrival of the Messiah. Indeed:

Joshua assumes that freeing the people requires war. "I'll lead men to the armory to get swords," Joshua says. "No," Moses orders. "It is not by swords that he will free his people; it is by the staff of a shepherd." This is a reference to Moses' actual status [as a formerly practicing shepherd]. But it is also a reference to the Medieval exegetical reading of Moses, in which he is a metaphoric prefiguring of Jesus freeing humanity from bondage both by his sacrifice and by his example.<sup>37</sup>

**THREE:** DeMille continued his subtextual christological theme when Moses-as-Egyptian-prince knowingly meets, for the first heart-wrenching time, his Hebrew birth mother, Yochabel (Martha Scott). She is emotionally overcome and then reverently says: 'God of our fathers, who has appointed an end to the bondage of Israel. Blessed am I among all mothers in the land, for my eyes have beheld thy deliverer.' This DeMillean beatitude echoed the Virgin Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55:

And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord,  
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.  
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things: and holy is his name.  
And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.  
He hath shewed strength with his arm: he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He hath put down mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.  
He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away.  
He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;  
As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

In addition, it also echoed it in its two prequels. Firstly, from the angel Gabriel: 'blessed art thou among women' (Luke 1:28), and secondly, from the gospel narrator Luke: 'Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb' (Luke 1:41-42). The logic of DeMille's christic construction required that his OT Yochabel be analogous to the NT Virgin Mary simply because he had subtextually constructed Moses as a Saviour Jesus. Thus, his supporting female characters were designed to buttress this subtextual inter-testimonial parallel. Yochabel's Magnificat-like speech helped cement the connection between Moses and Jesus' mothers and should be applauded and not derided as Jeffrey Mahan had done.<sup>38</sup>

**FOUR:** DeMille further consolidated his christological subtext when Prince Moses worked as a lowly Hebrew slave in the muddy brick pits. He adopted a Pieta stance (itself an iconic image of Jesus and the Virgin Mary) to comfort a dying old

man and fellow Hebrew slave, Simon (Francis J. McDonald). Simon does not realise that his comforter is actually Prince Moses, God's Deliverer-in-the-making. During this compassionate moment, Simon tells Moses of his (supposedly unfulfilled) prayer, namely, 'that before death closed my eyes, I might behold the Deliverer who will lead all men to freedom.' Of course, God had kept his word to the prayerful old man, but only DeMille's audience knew it; not even Moses was aware of his holy destiny at this time. Furthermore, this OT Simon is strongly reminiscent of the NT Simeon, the righteous man in Luke 2:25-32, especially verse 26 where the Holy Ghost revealed to him 'that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.' If Moses is analogous to Jesus Christ, then DeMille's fictitiously named Simon is the equivalent of the scripturally true Simeon. One strongly suspects that "Simon" was cunningly chosen by DeMille to be misidentified with "Simeon" in support of DeMille's OT/NT parallelism.

**FIVE:** DeMille's multi-layered, subtextual artisanship was so deep that Simon, the dying old man, was going to be played by another old man, H. B. Warner, to further saturate this compassionate scene with christological resonances.<sup>39</sup> Warner was DeMille's Christ in *The King of Kings* who became the classic screen icon of Jesus for decades thereafter. Regrettably, the old and frail Warner was physically dying at the time and was too weak for the demands of the Simon role, which eventually went to Francis J. McDonald (the Story Teller in

DeMille's Samson and Delilah). H. B. Warner was also too sick to play the blind old man who gives insightful witness to the joyous beginnings of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt (this role went to John Miljan, Lesh Lakish in DeMille's Samson and Delilah). Instead, DeMille had the old and very frail Warner play a very frail old man, Amminadab. As Bill Mikeljohn, DeMille's casting agent on the production reported: 'DeMille gives Warner center stage in the middle of the Exodus with Nina Foch. Warner can't walk, so DeMille has him carried [by Donald Curtis playing Mered]. The Exodus came to a halt for H. B. Warner! There, that should give you an idea of the real Cecil B. DeMille!'<sup>40</sup>

An ambulance brought Warner from his nursing home to the movie set where he was placed upon a stretcher with an oxygen mask during preparations. As Donald Curtis reminisced:

Warner had a complicated speech about making it to the promised land taken directly from Psalm 22:

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax ... My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou has brought me into the dust of death.

But he couldn't manage it. DeMille told me to say whatever he wanted to say and told the rest of us to improvise along with him. And that's what you have on screen: H. B. Warner's last appearance in Cecil B. DeMille's last movie, speaking words that came directly from his heart.<sup>41</sup>

In the end, Warner said with brevity, passion and emotional credibility: 'I am poured out like water ... my strength dried up into the dust of death', and the film was immensely better for it.

**SIX:** In another rich layer of subtextual engineering, H. B. Warner (playing Amminadab) was subtextually crafted as Jesus-God participating in the Exodus. Why? To give his divine imprimatur by living amongst his chosen during their joyous, hope-filled hour of glorious freedom. Warner's crippled body subtextually resonated with Jesus' broken body taken down from the cross, thus further enhancing the christic subtext of the scene. Indeed, for the knowing viewer, Warner's co-actor Donald Curtis was studying to become a religious minister.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, this DeMilleian scene comprised of a real world minister-in-training, carrying a former Jesus-figure playing a subtextual Jesus-as-God figure in the company of Bithiah (Nina Foch), a royal Egyptian convert to Moses' Hebraic religion. In fact, many of DeMille's scenes were thick with layered meaning.

Furthermore, while being carried by Mered (Donald Curtis), Amminadab (H. B. Warner) was holding a small, multi-forked branch of a fig tree. There is no overt plot reason for this nature prop and one wonders why a sick old man would want to be burdened with such a horticultural responsibility, let alone have the physical strength to keep holding it during an arduous journey. Temporarily overlooking psychoanalytic reason for doing so rooted in death and new life

symbolism, visually speaking, the denuded fig branch looked strongly like a natural Menorah—the signature icon of the Jews/Hebrews—God's chosen people (Deut. 7:6). It appears that DeMille wanted to symbolically tag the Hebrews as God's chosen people, and so he planted a plant prop to do it. This prop could also be interpreted as a natural symbolic hint of God and the burning bush (Exod. 3:2), the site where Moses was commanded to free God's people. Even the choice of a fig tree as the Menorah-looking prop was symbolically significant for the fig tree is a nature 'symbol for the nation of Israel ... [and] for the good life. To live under one's fig tree represented a life of peace, joy and prosperity.<sup>143</sup> Warner died not long after his DeMillean cameo and achieved another form of peace plus cinematic immortality.

**SEVEN:** When Moses fled Egypt to the land of Midian, he worked as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian (Exod. 3:1). Moses dutifully tended his flock at the backside of the mountain of God, Mount Sinai-Horeb (Exod. 3:1). It was here that the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exod. 3:2), and then God spoke to him (Exod. 3:4) giving Moses his divine commission (Exod. 3:10). Thus, the OT Moses the good shepherd-cum-kingly-leader of his human flock prefigured the NT Jesus Christ, another good shepherd-cum-kingly-leader tending his human flock (and who also used the parable of the lost sheep in his earthly ministry to emphasise the good shepherd

theme—Luke 15:3-7). Today, the Bishop's crosier within the Roman Catholic Church is still shaped like a shepherd's crook, and is symbolic of both his ecclesiastical office and his role of keeping the members of his flock in line.<sup>44</sup>

**EIGHT:** When DeMille's Moses dramatically parted the Red Sea, he said aloud: 'Behold his mighty hand!', although Exodus 14:21 merely stated: 'And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind.' However, even though the OT did not have a 'Behold his mighty hand!' phrase, within the NT there is a Jesus saying that faintly reflected DeMille's on-screen Moses dialogue. Namely, 'that they may behold my glory' (John 17:24), which suggestively links Moses with Jesus once again, albeit, more tenuously. DeMille's dialogue was definitely more powerfully emotionally than Scripture, which at least suggests that C. B. was a better dramatist than the Divine in this particular instance.

### **Was DeMille's Saviour-Moses Theologically Wrong?**

Was DeMille-as-Christian-true-believer wrong to infuse subtle christological references into his OT Moses? Theologically speaking, 'No!' This practice has a long and honourable history within Christianity. As Peter Fraser pointed out: 'After the coming of Christ, the Church rejected the literal Jewish hermeneutical method as untenable. Instead, the Church Fathers interpreted the Old

Testament as a book entirely about Jesus.<sup>45</sup> This meant that the entire Holy Bible, not just the New Testament, was viewed as a sacred Christian document with a sacred christological thread running through it. In one elegant formulation, it was described as follows:

The Law gives the foundation of Christ. History shows the preparation for Christ. Poetry expresses aspiration for Christ. Prophecy proclaims an expectation of Christ. The Gospels record the historical manifestation of Christ. Acts relates the propagation of Christ. The Epistles give the interpretation of Christ. Revelation describes the consummation of all things in Christ.<sup>46</sup>

For Christian Scripture scholars appropriating and reinterpreting the OT, Moses was certainly a type of Christ because his life, character and deeds paralleled Jesus Christ in at least nineteen different ways. Namely:

|    | CHARACTERISTIC/EVENT    | MOSES       | JESUS CHRIST  |
|----|-------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1. | Servant                 | Ps. 105:26  | Matt. 12:18   |
| 2. | King                    | Deut. 33:5  | Acts 17:7     |
| 3. | Prophet                 | Deut. 18:15 | Luke 7:16     |
| 4. | Judge                   | Exod. 18:13 | John 5:27     |
| 5. | Shepherd                | Exod. 3:1   | John 10:11.14 |
| 6. | Intercessor             | Num. 21:7   | Rom. 8:34     |
| 7. | Mediator                | Exod. 33:9  | 1 Tim. 2:5    |
| 8. | Reduced Others' Burdens | Exod. 5:5   | Mat. 11:28    |

|     |                                 |              |               |
|-----|---------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| 9.  | Gave Parting Blessings          | Deut. 33:1   | Luke 24:50-51 |
| 10. | Good Childhood                  | Exod. 2:2    | Luke 2:40,52  |
| 11. | Children Killed at their Births | Exod. 1:22   | Matt. 2:13-16 |
| 12. | Their Enemies Died              | Exod. 4:19   | Matt. 2:20    |
| 13. | Both Sat Near Wells             | Exod. 2:15   | John 4:6      |
| 14. | Both Had Power Over the Sea     | Exod. 14:21  | Matt. 8:27    |
| 15. | Both Generated Criticisms       | Exod. 32:1 2 | Peter 3:4     |
| 16. | Both Were Troublesome           | Exod. 10:7 1 | Peter 2:8     |
| 17. | Both Were Almost Stoned         | Exod. 17:4   | John 8:59     |
| 18. | Both Used Twelve Men            | Deut. 1:23   | Mark 3:14     |
| 19. | Both Used Seventy Men           | Num. 11:16   | Luke 10:1     |

This strong OT-NT parallel helps explain why DeMille gave his on-screen Moses many characteristics that were not scripturally specified in the OT. Throughout the history of Christianity, many have accepted the Moses-Jesus parallel and considered that in YHWH/Yahweh/Jehovah:

His [Christ's] approach could be perceived more and more distinctly, and was unmistakable in the fiery lightning on Sinai. What did Moses behold in the burning thornbush and in the fire on Sinai? The Christ. But just as we call the sunlight, when we see it mirrored by the moon, 'moonlight', so the Christ was called 'Yahweh' or 'Jehovah'. Hence, Yahweh is none other than the reflection of the Christ before he himself appeared on the earth.<sup>47</sup>

Conversely, as the Jew Michael Shapiro argued:

Many events in the New Testament seem modeled on Moses' life and work. Jesus' young life parallels that of Moses. An evil king threatens to kill newborns, the prophet flees into exile in the desert, only to return to "free" his people. When the prophet is absent from his people, he is despised among men, his preaching forgotten. The Sermon on the Mount is meant to enrich the covenant given at Sinai. Jesus is depicted as a "second Moses." Both Moses and Jesus are referred to as "redeemer."<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, one can see many more Moses-Jesus parallels in the biblical literature that DeMille could have used to enhance the christological features of his Moses. For example, Moses and Jesus are from the same Hebrew/Jewish race, both had brothers and sisters who misunderstood them/their mission, and both chose a life of hardship. Both were not of the priestly class, yet both were chosen by God to guide their people as judges and leaders of their religious community. Both persons chose twelve leaders to govern and oversee their followers, both taught them how to pray, and both provided them with a sacred vision and religious identity. Moses and Christ are thus sacred servants because both acted as God's agents on Earth through which God's revelations were given to humankind. Both communicated directly with God, both were official lawmakers and distributors of God's will, the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-26) and the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:36-40) respectively, and both were miracle workers. Neither leader was supported or approved by their respective Establishments (secular or sacred). Both helped found/revised a new religion/code of conduct, both successfully lead their human charges to their promised lands, and the followers of both strayed from their/God's

teachings. Not surprisingly, both figures were prominent within the Torah, the Gospels and the Qur'an.

### **Moses is a Christ!**

Moses is a legitimate Christ-figure, and well before DeMille decided to construct him on-screen in the second *The Ten Commandments*. In fact, it is theologically sound to call Moses 'Christ' because 'Christ', before it became a proper name of Lord Jesus Christ, was originally a formal title, not merely an appellation. In ancient Greek it means 'Anointed One',<sup>49</sup> or in modern parlance, the 'chosen one', usually via divine intervention. Jesus became the Christ, the Anointed One, a Saviour after John the Baptist baptised him in the Jordan River (Luke 3:21-23). The Apostle Peter also formally acknowledged Jesus' divine status when he said: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16), and then Jesus himself confirmed his own holy status two times later (Mark 14:61-62; John 4:25-26). This divine choosing-cum-anointing process is also what happened to Moses at the Burning Bush.

Thus God appointed Moses as His prophet and representative, and Moses could now correctly be called an anointed one, or "Christ." In order to come into that privileged position, Moses had had to give up "the treasures of Egypt" and let himself "be ill-treated with the people of God" and thus suffer reproach. But to Moses such "reproach of the Christ" was riches greater than all of Egypt's wealth. -- Heb 11:24-26.<sup>50</sup>

However, the name 'Moses Christ' or 'Moses the Anointed One' was not popular within the Bible, although references to God anointing leaders did occur elsewhere, for example, Saul (1 Sam. 12:3; 26:11; 2 Sam. 1:14) and David (1 Sam. 16:12-13; 2 Sam. 22:51). Ironically, Paramount's home-grown anointed one, Cecil B. DeMille, can be legitimately chastised from a Christian true believer's point of view for not making the above christological features more prominent within his two Moses films!

One suspects that DeMille toned down the christological aspects of his OT film for three possible reasons. Firstly, because DeMille had to satisfy the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities, who held fundamentally different views about Moses (Musa) and Jesus (Isa). He did not want to offend them, especially as his financial backers and studio bosses were Jewish in an industry dominated by Jews.<sup>51</sup> He also wanted to film *The Ten Commandments* on the Holy Land controlled by the Islamic Egyptian government, which was denied him during his first Moses film because of financial limitations. Secondly, because DeMille, the self-confessed pop culture professional<sup>52</sup> was aiming for a mass audience who may not have been theologically sophisticated enough to understand, accept or want NT subtextual engineering. Thirdly, religion hidden within religion may have been potentially disorientating for a 1950s audience, thus jeopardising the film's acceptance (and profits), let alone evoking the wrath of Jewish bosses and Islamic

governments. However, forty years later, Melanie J. Wright<sup>53</sup> used the film for interfaith dialogue purposes, in addition to cultural studies and cinematic theology, thus further testifying to its continuing profundity and pedagogic utility for contemporary audiences.

### **John McTavish as Christ-figure in *The Ten Commandments* (1923)**

Even more amazing, DeMille-the-auteur also managed to evoke both a Jesus-figure (i.e., a historical representation) and a Christ-figure (i.e., a subtextual representation) of the Messiah within his silent *The Ten Commandments* (1923). The first part of this film was an Old Testament prologue about Moses, and the second part was a modern parallel exemplifying the moral themes of 'the Law' enunciated in the previous section. Yet, within that modern section, it contained a flashback scene that harked back to the ancient New Testament world (thus functionally making it an uneven triptych) where Jesus was busily curing a leprosy woman, The Outcast (Agnes Ayres). John McTavish (Richard Dix) had read out the leper story from the Good Book for a dejected Mary Leigh (Leatrice Joy), which DeMille visually re-enacted on-screen for the audience's benefit.

Immediately after Jesus' on-screen cleansing success, Mary Leigh is similarly cured of her leprosy (or at least her fear-based perception of leprosy - itself a 1920s code word for venereal disease), which she caught because of her

husband's dalliance with his infected Eurasian mistress, Sally Lung (Nita Naldi), an escapee from the Leper Island of Molokai. The cured Mary is grateful to John, the film's putative Christ-figure, and so she gently puts her head into his lap. In return, he puts his hand on her head in a traditional Jesus-like blessing as they talked about the power of the Light (itself an iconic metaphor for God or the Divine). Like Jesus, the ancient carpenter from Nazareth (Mark 6:3), John McTavish, a modern day 'boss-carpenter' in charge of constructing a Church, had a profound curative effect upon Mary Leigh - the sinner. Just like another sinning Mary who was cared for and cured by Jesus - Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:2). DeMille had artfully constructed Mary Leigh as a subtextual Mary Magdalene-figure to buttress John as a Christ-figure.

John's Christ-figure nature was also visually prefigured when his brother Dan McTavish (Rod La Rocque) held a large metal ring behind his head to form a de facto halo - a standard Christian sign of the divine.<sup>54</sup> John McTavish was also repeatedly described as a 'carpenter' and even his mother Martha (Edythe Chapman) held a Bible and said: 'Dear John - some mighty fine men have been carpenters!', which was an obvious reference to Jesus' earthly trade. While Redding the building inspector (Robert Edeson) referred to John as an 'angel' brother', thus evoking further divine resonances. As Sheryl Stinchcum put it:

... if you're looking for a Christ-figure, you don't have to look further than John. Predictably, he is by trade a carpenter and shares many of the

characteristics commonly associated with Christ. He's straightforward, eager to do the right thing, gentle – yet morally strong. The only member of the family with a balanced view of religion, John reveres a loving God and follows the Ten Commandments. Like Christ, John is a peacemaker.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, as Jared Gardner noted: 'when the film does, in its conclusion, finally return us to the biblical history, it is not Moses but to Christ ... Thus, in conventional Christian terms, the new testament displaces and resolves the unfulfilled type of the old [testament].<sup>56</sup> Thus we see why DeMille ends the story of Moses not with the founding of Israel, but instead with the scene of shame and destruction, in order to pass on to modern America ... the status of the "Chosen people." Christ and America thus provide the resolution to the narrative DeMille breaks off in the [biblical] prologue.<sup>57</sup>

Intriguingly, DeMille's historical on-screen Jesus, whose back was to the audience, as well as most of the other NT characters/actors were not listed in the film credits except for *The Outcast* (Agnes Ayres). Presumably, not to offend Jewish sensibilities because of its note of Christian triumphalism and supercessionism by DeMille-the-Christian-Jew. In fact, DeMille had also deliberately cut out an important Christ scene from the film's third triptych segment, for what Robert S. Birchard surmised was a sound marketing reason. As he reported:

The ... cut was a 35½-shot in the final sequence. The studio continuity described the action: "City showing sunrise - head of Christ dissolves into scene, raises hands, dissolves out leaving scene of sunrise." Because Jews,

Christians, and Moslems all recognize the Old Testament of the Bible, the image of Christ limited the universal appeal of *The Ten Commandments*, and deleting this visual reference to Christ seemed reasonable.<sup>58</sup>

Overall, this classic Bible film was designed to accommodate Jews, Christians and Moslems, modernists and ancient world buffs, Bible lovers and erotic aficionados, action fans and spectacle enthusiasts. This all-encumbering filmmaking tactic was very understandable because DeMille-the-auteur-Christian-artist was also a 'shrewd businessman'<sup>59</sup> who truly earned his reputation as a pop culture professional through his the-public-is-always-right business philosophy.

### **Conclusion**

Given the existence and complexity of these interlocking textual and subtextual characterisations, DeMille proved to be a far more artful biblical filmmaker and a far more devout Christian cinematic lay-preacher than has been acknowledged, believed or appreciated to date. Not only was C. B. a master filmmaker worthy of the tag: 'the auteur of auteurs',<sup>60</sup> but his engineering of sacred subtexts rooted in Christian theology helps explain the secret of his phenomenal box-office success, his directorial longevity (1913-1956), and what helped propel him far beyond his directorial peers into becoming the master of the American biblical epic.

As George Cukor reported regarding the second *The Ten Commandments*:

'the story telling was wonderful. The way that man could tell a story was fascinating - you were riveted to your seat. That's exactly what he was: a great, great story teller ... That was De Mille's great talent and the secret behind his popular success.'<sup>61</sup> One can only agree with Cukor, and also with David Wallace when he concluded that DeMille, 'far more than D. W. Griffith, "showed the way"<sup>62</sup> forward to Hollywood style and success. Further research into the emerging and exciting interdisciplinary fields of Religion-and-Film and DeMille Studies is warranted, desirable, and certainly long over due. The forthcoming ascendancy of the religious film genre is certainly inevitable, as is the second coming of DeMille, for as Henry Wilcoxon predicted over three decades ago: 'True recognition for DeMille's greatness will come many years after his death.'<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many scholars have spelled Cecil's surname as 'De Mille' or 'de Mille' or 'deMille', however, the correct professional spelling is 'DeMille' – C.B. DeMille & D. Hayne (ed.), *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, W. H. Allen, London, 1960, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ten Commandments*, (dir. Cecil B. DeMille), 1956.

<sup>3</sup> D. Desser, 'Transcendental Style in 'Tender Mercies'', *Religious Communication Today*, vol. 8, 1985, p.21.

<sup>4</sup> DeMille was the son of a Christian (Episcopalian) lay minister father, Henry Churchill DeMille (DeMille & Hayne, pp.12-13) and a (Sephardic) Jewish mother, Matilda Beatrice 'Bebe' DeMille nee Samuel – A. Edwards, *The DeMilles: An American Family*, Collins, London, 1988, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Although there are real ontological differences between 'film', 'cinema', 'video', 'TV movie', 'CD', 'DVD', 'Internet movie' and other designations such as 'movies', 'silver screen', 'pictures', 'motion pictures', 'flicks' etc., they are all audiovisual images and will be treated herein as essentially interchangeable.

<sup>6</sup> R. Behlmer (ed.), *Memo from David O. Selznick*, The Viking Press, New York, 1972, p.400.

<sup>7</sup> *The Ten Commandments*, (dir. Cecil B. DeMille), 1956; *The Ten Commandments*, (dir. Cecil B. DeMille), 1923.

<sup>8</sup> R.H. Campbell & M.R. Pitts, *The Bible on Film: A Checklist, 1897-1980*, The Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> *The Passion of the Christ*, (dir. Mel Gibson), 2004.

<sup>10</sup> G. Ringgold & D. Bodeen, *The Complete Films of Cecil B. DeMille*, The Citadel Press, Secaucus, NJ, 1969.

- <sup>11</sup> H. Manfull (ed.), *Additional Dialogue: Letters of Dalton Trumbo, 1942-1962*, Evans, New York, 1970, p.357.
- <sup>12</sup> K. Orrison, *Written in Stone: Making Cecil B. DeMille's Epic, The Ten Commandments*, Vestal Press, Lanham, 1999, p.108.
- <sup>13</sup> T. Longman III, *Making Sense of the Old Testament: 3 Crucial Questions*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1998, p.111.
- <sup>14</sup> C.P. Mitchell, *The Devil on Screen: Feature Films Worldwide 1913 through 2000*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 2002, p.165.
- <sup>15</sup> W.C. Clapham, *The Movie Treasury. Western Movies: The Story of the West on Screen*, Octopus Books, London, 1974, p.21.
- <sup>16</sup> J.W. Finler, *The Movie Directors Story*, Octopus Books, London, 1985, p.32.
- <sup>17</sup> *The King of Kings*, (dir. Cecil B. DeMille), 1927.
- <sup>18</sup> *Samson and Delilah*, (dir. Cecil B. DeMille), 1949.
- <sup>19</sup> J.H. Mahan, 'Celluloid Savior: Jesus in the Movies', *Journal of Religion and Film*, vol. 6, no. 1, p.3.
- <sup>20</sup> R. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille's Hollywood*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 2004; DeMille & Hayne; Edwards; G. Essoe & R. Lee, *DeMille: The Man and His Pictures*, Castle Books, New York, 1970; S. Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994; C. Higham, *Cecil B. DeMille*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1973; P.A. Koury, *Yes, Mr. DeMille*, Putnam, New York, 1959; Ringgold & Bodeen, 1969.
- <sup>21</sup> L. Giannetti, *Masters of the American Cinema*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1981, p.19.
- <sup>22</sup> L. Kardish, *Reel Plastic Magic: A History of Films and Filmmaking in America*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1972, p.133.
- <sup>23</sup> R. Wortley, *Erotic Movies*, Crescent Books, New York, 1977, p.14.
- <sup>24</sup> C. Higham, 'Cecil Blount DeMille', in J.A. Garraty (ed.), *Dictionary of American Biography. Supplement Six: 1956-1960*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1980, p.160.
- <sup>25</sup> M.J. Wright, *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, p.5.
- <sup>26</sup> T. Bywater & T. Sobchack, *An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film*, Longman, New York, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> M.P. Gallagher, 'Theology, Discernment and Cinema', in J.R. May (ed.), *New Image of Religious Film*, Sheed & Ward, Kansas City, 1997, p.151.

<sup>28</sup> R. Ellis, 'Movies and Meaning', *The Expository Times*, vol. 112, no. 9, 2001, p.304.

<sup>29</sup>

<sup>30</sup> A.K. Kozlovic, 'From Holy Aliens to Cyborg Saviours: Biblical Subtexts in Four Science Fiction Films', *Journal of Religion and Film*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2001, p.1-13.

<sup>31</sup> A.K. Kozlovic, 'Sacred Subtexts and Popular Film: A Brief Survey of Four Categories of Hidden Religious Figurations', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2003, p.315-332.

<sup>32</sup> The Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV aka AV) will be used throughout, unless quoting other translations.

<sup>33</sup> P. Roen, *High Camp: A Gay Guide to Camp and Cult Films*. Volume 1, Leyland Publications, San Francisco, 1994, p.219.

<sup>34</sup> J.L. Lasky Jr, *Whatever Happened to Hollywood?*, W.H. Allen, London, 1973, p.261.

<sup>35</sup> V.M. Andersen, 'Arnold Friberg, Artist: His Life His Philosophy and His Work', MA dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1970, p.234.

<sup>36</sup> L. Ryken, J.C. Wilhoit & T. Longman III (eds), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1998, p.442-443.

<sup>37</sup> D. Williams, 'The Eagle or the Cross: Rome, the Bible, and Cold War America', PhD dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1996, p.233.

<sup>38</sup> Mahan, p.3.

<sup>39</sup> Orrison, p.55.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p.106.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p.103.

<sup>43</sup> W.S. Owen, P.A. Grist & R. Dowling, *A Dictionary of Bible Symbols*, Grace Publications, London, 1992, p.28-29.

<sup>44</sup> R.C. Broderick, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1976, p.143.

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- <sup>56</sup> . Gardner, 'Covered Wagons and Decalogues: Paramount's Myths of Origins', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2000, p.383.
- <sup>57</sup> *ibid*, p.385.
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- <sup>59</sup> D. Wallace, *Lost Hollywood*, LA Weekly Books, New York, 2001, p.20.
- <sup>60</sup> G. Vidal, *Palimpsest: A Memoir*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1995, p.303.
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<sup>62</sup> Wallace, p.29.

<sup>63</sup> H. Wilcoxon. 'The Biggest Man I've Ever Known', in G. Essoe & R. Lee, *DeMille: The Man and His Pictures*, Castle Books, New York, 1970, p.276.