Moses and the Reel Exodus

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Abstract
Over the last seventy-five years, Moses and the exodus have been the subject of a number of films. Although these films are based on the biblical text, they all make changes to that text in the transition from the page to the screen. These changes reveal the malleability of the biblical text in the hands of filmmakers as they each reshape it for their own times. This article will examine four of the best-known Moses films to demonstrate how Moses and the events of the exodus have been used to serve the goals and views of the filmmakers.

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In a film, everything that is seen or heard is the result of decisions made by the filmmaker. As a "script" to help the filmmaker make these decisions, the Bible is short on detail. The biblical story of Moses is no exception. The text's description of his first appearance as an adult reads, "He went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exod 2:11-12). The description of the action is simple enough, but the details are sparse. Where did this happen? What was Moses wearing? How did he do it? Did he strangle the Egyptian? Stab him? Hit him with a shovel? Did Moses "zing" the Egyptian with a snappy one-liner before finishing him off? What about the Egyptian? How did he react? Did he try to fight back? A reader's imagination may fill in the blanks, but when it comes to filmmaking, this is not an option. What appears on the screen reflects the filmmaker's artistic vision as well as the larger historical and cultural contexts of the film.

This article will examine four well-known film versions of the story of Moses: Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 *Ten Commandments*, his 1956 film of the same name, the 1996 made for television film *Moses*, and the 1998 animated feature *Prince of Egypt*. Analysis of these four films reveals the malleability of the biblical narrative in the hands of filmmakers and offers insight into the meaning society has found in and imposed on the Bible.
There are a few general observations that can be made about all of the films.

Although all four films use the biblical text as their basis, none of them rely on it solely, omitting and adding material. These deviations from the biblical text serve to eliminate problematic aspects of the biblical story, supply details lacking in biblical version, and add Hollywood-friendly elements.

In each subsequent film, Moses gets younger. According to Exod 7:7, Moses was eighty years old when he first confronted Pharaoh. Only DeMille's 1923 Ten Commandments, which depicts Moses as an old man with a long white beard, is remotely faithful to this textual detail. In the 1956 Ten Commandments and in Moses, he appears to be in his thirties or forties, and in the most recent film, The Prince of Egypt, he is in his teens or early twenties.²

In each successive film Moses' sense of authority and confidence in his ability to perform his assigned task decreases. The 1923 Moses never expresses any doubts or wavers in his task, while the 1998 animated Moses experiences moments of genuine anguish over what he is called to do. This trend follows Moses' increasingly younger age. Moses becomes a more human figure, with whom the audience can identify. More importantly, it reveals an increasing cultural (or at least Hollywood) bias against the rigid religious authoritarianism represented by the 1923 Moses.³
Over the course of the films, Moses and the rest of the cast take on an appearance that more accurately reflects what we would expect to see in the Middle East.

DeMille's 1923 silent film, *The Ten Commandments*, presents the story of the Exodus as a prelude to a "modern" story that illustrates the enduring value of the commandments. The Ten Commandments are the solution to the perceived moral chaos and deterioration of values, a perception that was highlighted by the events of the First World War. The very first title card following the credits proclaims: "Our modern world defined God as a "religious complex" and laughed at the Ten Commandments as OLD FASHIONED. Then, through the laughter came the shattering thunder of the war. And now, a blood-drenched, bitter world-no longer laughing, cries for a way out. There is but one way out. The Ten Commandments ... are the fundamental principles without which mankind cannot live together."

Moses' role in the biblical segment of the film is to represent the law and its divine origin. His first appearance is as an elderly man confronting the Pharaoh after the first nine plagues. The story of his infancy is left untold and the miracles of the burning bush and the plagues are not depicted. Moses undergoes no development. He is introduced as "the Lawgiver" and he remains in that role.
Most of Moses' "lines" are taken from the biblical text with few non-biblical additions, and because there is no vocalized inflection little insight into Moses character is gained from his "dialogue." Visually, Moses is removed from everything that is going on around him. Even in the midst of the crowd, he stands apart, remote and stern. When he leads the people out of Egypt, he walks alone, about twenty feet ahead of everyone. At the shores of the Red Sea, he stands alone on a rock above the crowd. He is distant and authoritative.

In the film, the moral chaos that the Ten Commandments hold in check is represented by a desire for physical pleasure and material comfort. In the biblical portion of the film this desire is represented by the Pharaoh, whose lavish court and dancing girls inspire a look of horror and a shudder of disgust from Moses and Aaron. The desire for pleasure is also represented by Miriam, the sister of Moses who plays a key role in leading the orgy-like celebration around the golden calf. According to Exod 32:5, it is Aaron who summons the people to worship the calf; Miriam is not mentioned. The film's narration states that Aaron makes the calf, but the attention is focused on Miriam. Dressed in a revealing two-piece outfit, Miriam sensuously rubs her hair and body on the calf and summons the people to the idol with the non-biblical line, "Come worship ye the golden god of pleasure!" The calf is not merely a visible god, but the symbol of the quest for pleasure, and is antithetical to the commandments.
Because the goal of the film is to stress the consequences of violating the divine law, God immediately punishes Miriam with leprosy. The film depicts a simple world of cause and effect with divinely given guidelines. This depiction of a mechanical working of the Ten Commandments supports the claim that there is a knowable moral structure to the world that will allow humanity to live in peace. It is easy to see the appeal of this message following the chaos of the First World War and the ensuing social changes.

In the modern portion of the film, the consequences of disregarding the Ten Commandments are embodied by Dan McTavish and his wife, Mary. Dan's concerns are strictly worldly. He does not worship a golden calf, but rather "the golden eagle" emblazoned on a coin. Dan is very much a man of his time. He and Mary sport the fashions of the day and dance to jazz records. Mary dismisses the commandments as irrelevant with the statement, "I think Elinor Glyn's a lot more interesting." Dan's adulterous relationship with Sally Lung, the "Eurasian," hints at a lust for exotic experiences and pleasures that bring about corruption and is perhaps a commentary on the cosmopolitanism and worldliness that accompanied soldiers returning from the First World War. Dan rejects the warnings of his mother and brother John by proclaiming "All that's the bunk, Mother ... that sort of stuff was buried with Queen Victoria." When he and Mary leave home after his mother has reprimanded them for listening to a "dance record" on the Sabbath, he
announces: "We'll break all of your old Ten Commandments, we'll finish rich and powerful with the world at our feet!" Eventually Dan becomes a successful builder, but the narration reveals that he has violated all of the commandments, with the possible exception of murder.

Although the biblical portion of the film emphasized the immediacy of divine punishment for violating the Ten Commandments, in the modern story, it takes time for Dan to learn "that if you break the Ten Commandments-they will break you." In time, Dan's deeds catch up to him. The walls of a church he has built using substandard concrete collapse upon the visiting Mother McTavish, killing her. He is blackmailed by a magazine and discovers that his mistress is an escapee from a leper colony who entered the country by hiding herself in a shipment of building supplies that Dan had smuggled into the country. When he realizes that she has infected him with leprosy, Dan kills her and returns home long enough to tell Mary, now his wife, that she is probably infected with leprosy as well. Finally, as he flees in his boat, "Defiance," he is swamped by the giant waves of a storm and drowns like an Egyptian in the Red Sea.

For all of the film's black-and-white depiction of the consequences of violating the commandments, there is a tension within the film. As she dying lies in the rubble of the collapsed church, Mother McTavish tells Dan: "Whatever you've done, it's all my fault. I taught you to fear God instead of to love Him-and
LOVE is all that counts." This echoes John's earlier warning to her that she was using her cross as a whip against Dan and Dan's comment at a local lunch counter that, "I'm fed up on a lot of religious stuff that's so cold-I had to come out into the rain to get warm." As Mother McTavish embodies them, the commandments in and of themselves are not enough. Something is missing.

According to the film, that something is Jesus. After Dan leaves Mary, she goes to John. When she tells him about the leprosy, he responds, "There is only one man who can help you-a man you've forgotten." Opening the family Bible, he reads to her and the film shifts to a scene from the New Testament in which a leper approaches Jesus and is healed. As the biblical scene fades back to the contemporary setting, Mary, who is kneeling at the feet of John the carpenter just as the leper knelt at Jesus' feet, looks at her hands and marvels "Why John, in the light it's gone."9

What is revealed is a thoroughly Pauline theology. The law condemns and punishes, but offers no salvation. This is underscored by the fact that Mary is healed while Miriam, who falls at the feet of Moses saying "Cleanse me I pray thee, for I have worshipped idols and become a leper," is not.10 Moses may be the lawgiver, but he is not the savior. Moses, who brings the Ten Commandments to the world, is a straw man. He and his commandments are presented as the contrast to the
gospel message of love, and this may be one of the reasons for the depiction of him as distant, aloof and stern.

The film's claim that Ten Commandments are the key to a harmonious world is undercut. Yes, they are divine in origin, but Christ and the message of love have supplanted them. DeMille is unwilling, even in a film about the Ten Commandments themselves, to ignore the Christian conception of the law.

In his second film depicting the story of the Exodus, DeMille is not concerned with the moral chaos that threatens society, but with the threat of totalitarianism, in the unnamed form of communism. At the start of the film, DeMille appears on screen and explains that, "The theme of this picture is whether men ought 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?" He then observes, "This same battle continues throughout the world today." The story of exodus is presented as a cold war allegory.

Moses, played by Charlton Heston, is the embodiment of good American values. He is an exemplary figure, a defender of the weak, as is demonstrated by the scene when, after being exiled from Egypt and wandering in the desert, Moses comes to the well of Midian. There he stands up for the daughters of Jethro against the Amalakite herders who are trying to usurp the daughters watering rights.
Although he is out-numbered, Moses quickly beats the herders down with his staff, driving them off and proclaiming, "Let them be first whose hands have drawn the water." He values hard work and honors his commitments. As a result, he prospers, as attested to by his success in selling the wool for Jethro and the other "Sheiks of Sinai." As one of them says, "His words are truth, his trading is just."

Although Moses is strong and powerful, he does not abuse that power. When Moses first appears in the film as an adult, it is to the cheers and adulation of all of Egypt as he returns from a victorious military campaign in Ethiopia. He presents the ruler of Ethiopia not as a conquered foe, but as a new ally, an action that has overtones of the United States treatment of its defeated opponents following World War II.

Moses' kindness, however, has a practical dimension. When he is sent to Goshen to supervise the Hebrew slaves, he proves to be a compassionate overseer, criticizing the master builder as a "master butcher" for his harsh treatment of the slaves. He raids the temple granaries to provide food for the slaves and gives them a weekly day of rest, obeying the Sabbath law long before it is carved in stone. He justifies his actions not by an appeal to divine law, but with the utilitarian explanation that weak slaves make few bricks and dead slaves make none.
Although Moses challenges Egyptian tradition and offends the religious authorities by raiding the temple granaries, he is loyal and humble in his service to the Pharaoh. When Sethi comes to the city Moses is building, he observes, "With so many slaves, you could build an army." Moses' response is "but I have built a city."

Because of his successes, which flow from his exemplary qualities, Moses is in line to become Pharaoh when he learns of his heritage as a Hebrew. The revelation that he is a Hebrew does not seem to affect Moses' sense of who he is. When his Egyptian mother laments that he has learned the "shame" of his true identity, he dismisses her comments, saying, "What change is there in me? Egyptian or slave I am still Moses." This reflects the American ideal that heritage is not as important as character and actions.\textsuperscript{12}

When Moses learns that he is Hebrew, he abandons his royal life and exchanges his work as the chief overseer for that of a worker in the brick pits. As he experiences firsthand the misery and injustice of slavery, Moses is torn between his loyalty and love for Sethi and Nefretiri and the royal opulence they represent, and his growing commitment to the equality of all people. This conflict comes to a climax when Moses is brought before Sethi in chains after he has killed Baka, the master builder. Sethi asks Moses if he is the hoped for "Deliverer" of the Hebrews.
Moses says he is not, but adds that if he could, he would free the slaves, because, "If there is a god, he did not mean for this to be so."

Although Moses gains a deeper understanding of the value of human dignity and freedom, he does not yet see it in religious terms. He appears to have no religious or spiritual life. He is mystified at the faith of the Hebrews in a God who has allowed them to remain in bondage. It is only after he has spent time with Jethro and his family that he gains a deeper understanding of God. When Sephorah, his wife, tells him that God's whole purpose is impossible to see, Moses tells her that he will not be at peace until he hears "the word of God from God himself." He expresses a sense of religious universalism stating, "If this god is God, he would live on every mountain, in every valley. He would not be the god of Israel or Ishmael alone, but of all men ... he would dwell in every heart, in every mind, in every soul." This view of God is confirmed by Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. He tells Joshua and Sephorah, "He revealed his word to my mind ... He is not flesh, but spirit, the light of eternal mind. And I know that his light is in every man."13 This universality of God is the grounding of the universality of freedom.

Moses' experience of God provides the divine seal of approval to Moses' view of the injustice of slavery. Moreover, it is a validation of the qualities that define Moses. Opposed to Moses is Rameses, now Pharaoh. Rameses' only concern...
is his own power, and the lives of the slaves necessary to maintain that power are of little consequence to him. The disparity between Moses and Rameses is highlighted by the fact that, while Moses has a newfound faith in God, Rameses is an atheist. This would make him an historical anomaly in Ancient Egypt, but the perfect prototype of the godless communist. During the plagues, Rameses dismisses the power of the "God of slaves," explaining how an eruption to the south dumped red mud into the Nile causing the frogs to leave the water and then die, bringing flies and disease. He puts faith in his military power, but this power is no match for Moses' God and ultimately Rameses is forced to admit that Moses' God "is God."

The worship of the golden calf is the final conflict between the values of Rameses and those of Moses and God. While Moses is on the mountain, Dathan, a Hebrew who had served the Egyptians for financial gain, proposes to lead the people back to Egypt "where there is food." The calf will go ahead of them as a sign to the Egyptians that the Hebrews are willing to submit themselves to Egypt and its gods. The calf is a symbol of Egypt. It represents not only the sinfulness of the Hebrews in creating and worshipping a golden idol, but it a willingness to give up freedom in exchange for material comfort.

When Moses returns with the tablets of law, Dathan tells him, "We will not live by your commandments. We're free." Moses responds, "There is no freedom
without the law." Dathan attempts to rally the people to him saying, "He shows you no land flowing with milk and honey. I show you a god of gold." Moses responds, "Those who will not live by the law ... shall die by the law," and hurls the tablets of stone at the golden calf, which explodes and creates an earthquake that engulfs the unfaithful. The destruction of the calf and those who have chosen to follow it is God's final repudiation of the values of Rameses' Egypt.

The final scene of the film depicts an elderly Moses standing on a mountain while in the distance the people march into the Promised Land. As Moses bids farewell to Joshua, he says "Go, proclaim liberty throughout all the lands, unto all the inhabitants thereof." The words are from Lev 25:10, and they are also inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. As the scene fades, Moses claims a small rise and raises his hand as divine light streams down. Although only visible for a very brief moment, in this pose, Moses resembles the Statue of Liberty, an icon of American independence. DeMille's allusions to classic symbols of American liberty blended with divine law reveal the message of the film.19

In the end, the film is not as much about the Ten Commandments themselves, as what they represent, the divine guidelines that, if followed, will allow all people to live in freedom. In the Bible, the Ten Commandments are only a small portion of the law that is the basis for Jewish life and ritual. The film does not emphasize these rituals, the Ark of the Covenant is never built, there are no
meticulous instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle, and blood is never poured on the altar to sanctify the relationship between God and the people. For DeMille the Ten Commandments are not symbolic of a larger collection of laws and rituals of a specific people. As a result, there is a tension in the film. In an abstract form, the Commandments are the blueprint of freedom, but DeMille does not want to dwell on the details.

The message of the film is also undercut by the Moses-Nefretiri-Rameses love triangle that drives much of the non-biblical sections of the movie. After Moses has learned that he is a Hebrew, but before he is exiled from Egypt, Nefretiri tries to convince him to return to his life as a prince. She appeals not only to his physical desires, but also to his conscience, arguing that, under Rameses the slaves will suffer, but that as Pharaoh, Moses could free them. When Moses returns to Egypt she again tries to seduce him and, when he rejects her advances, goads Rameses into refusing to release the slaves. After Rameses releases the Hebrews, she taunts him until he goes after them, only to see his army drown in the Red Sea. As DeMille presents it, the driving force of the Exodus is a spurned woman. For all the lofty emphasis on freedom and the conflict between opposing world views, DeMille cannot escape the conventions of Hollywood.

The 1996 Turner Entertainment TV epic Moses presents the story of Moses and the exodus as an example of religious discovery. Over the course of the film,
Moses comes to understand who he is and the meaning of his relationship with God. The result of this discovery is a deep and sustaining faith.

In the film, Moses, played by Ben Kingsley, is an outsider within Pharaoh's court. He stutters. He is shy, clumsy, and is derided by Ramses, the Pharaoh, as the "adopted son." He is between worlds, not part of the royal court and regarded with suspicion by the Hebrews. There is something missing in his life. When he accompanies the Pharaoh to a site where the Hebrew slaves are working, he tells Jochabed, his Hebrew mother, whom he only knows as his wet nurse, "I want for nothing, except ..." and the way his eyes drift to the royal procession indicates that he is missing a sense of family and belonging. He senses that he was not born an Egyptian and he tells Ptira, his Egyptian mother, "I'm not Egyptian or Hebrew. I'm nothing." She insists he is an Egyptian prince, and tells him he should be proud of who he is. Jochabed confirms the truth of Moses' Hebrew heritage, but she tells him, "You are whatever you choose to be."

Along with his lack of identity, Moses has no firm religious convictions. When Jethro asks him which gods he worships, he responds, "The Egyptians have many gods. The Hebrew slaves have only one." But he says nothing about his own beliefs. After his encounter with God at the burning bush, Moses struggles with the question of whether or not he really saw and heard God. As he and Jethro talk, Moses reveals that he is a Hebrew and, speaking of Jochabed and Ptira, says, "Both
mothers spoke to me of God, but I've yet to find my God. I can't find him. I can't find him."

Moses faces the question of where he will put his faith, and whether he will answer God's call. Even when he does accept it, he exhibits reluctance and uncertainty. When his initial confrontations with the Pharaoh end in failure, he questions if he did hear God's call. He prays to God, saying, "Fill me with belief, Lord. Fill my arms, fill my hands, fill my tongue." The film depicts faith as a struggle. Following God's will is not easy—the slaves are not instantly released, the journey in the wilderness is difficult, and before the sea parts, Moses must stand with his staff raised at its edge all night. Faith is not easy, but it is rewarding; it brings a sense of joy. At the displays of God's presence, Moses laughs out loud and even dances. Even when he is told he will not be permitted to enter the promised land, Moses' faith allows him to accept God's will. In this way the film portrays traditional religious faith and practice as the answers to spiritual longings.

Kingsley's Moses reflects aspects of our contemporary world's understanding of religious experience. Moses' understanding of God is one that develops over time, and which increasingly gives him strength and confidence. His Moses is much more human than Heston's Moses. After Heston's Moses encounters God, he becomes remote and distant, even to the point of undergoing a physical transformation. Kingsley's Moses, however, remains human, most notably in his
struggle to control his temper, which the film indicates is one of the flaws in his character. Moses’ encounter with God does not make him perfect, but it provides him a way to become better. Kingsley's Moses is a model of spiritual development in a time when many claim to be spiritual but not religious. Moses presents a model of a faith and spirituality where one can question, experience setbacks, and still grow in faith. It is a faith available to all. Jethro tells Moses, "Your God didn't mean for you to be his only voice." When the Ten Commandments are given, Moses is not alone on the mountain, but at its base with all the people. God's voice comes to all those people who have the courage to hear it. As Moses begins to recite the commandments aloud, Aaron and a young boy join him. As each commandment is spoken aloud, more and more people join in until the whole community is reciting the law.

As in the 1956 *Ten Commandments*, in *Moses*, the commandments are depicted as they key for insuring harmony and freedom for all people. However, the commandments are less important than the people's willingness and desire to follow them. Jethro tells Moses, "Laws are not sufficient by themselves. The people must learn to follow the law without Moses or any leader. They must learn to want to follow the law, without fear or any whip on their back or their souls, to follow the law because they are free not to. When they have learned that, then they will truly be free." Ideal religious faith is one that is not authoritarian.
The 1998 animated *Prince of Egypt* combines elements of the 1953 version of the *Ten Commandments* and 1996's *Moses*. It presents the now familiar story as a journey of discovery, not of one's religious faith, but as the discovery of one's individual identity and self worth. The source of conflict in this discovery comes as Moses' decision to do what he believes is morally right destroys the close relationship he had with his "brother," Rameses.

At the opening of the film, Moses is young and irresponsible. As Moses and Rameses careen through the streets and over the sand dunes in a frantic chariot race, Moses taunts the more cautious Rameses saying, "Where's your sense of fun?" After Seti has scolded them for their recklessness, Moses chides Rameses for caring too much, to which Rameses can only reply that Moses "doesn't care at all." Yet irresponsibility is not the sum of Moses' character. He tries to shield Rameses from Pharaoh's anger by taking the blame on himself and he acts as an advocate for his brother, encouraging Seti to give Rameses more responsibility.

The life of Moses the prince is an uncomplicated one of luxury and secure identity. This begins to change when Rameses presents Moses with Tzipporah, a captured Midianite woman. She promptly calls him an "arrogant, pampered palace brat." Moses responds by throwing her into the throne room pool but, having done so, he catches the eye of his mother, the queen, who turns away from him in
disappointment. Although nothing is articulated, something in Moses begins to change and he allows Tzipporah to escape from the palace.

Moses' secure sense of identity is further upset when, as he follows the escaping Tzipporah, he encounters Miriam and Aaron. Miriam tells Moses that he is not an Egyptian prince, that he is their brother, and that he will be the one to deliver the people from bondage. Moses rejects her words, saying he does not care about their freedom, but when she sings part of the lullaby his mother sang to him, it ignites a spark of recognition that he can not extinguish and he begins to question who he is. Eventually his questioning leads him to discover that Seti had order the slaughter of the Hebrew children. Seti tries to put him at ease about this by telling him, "Oh my son, they were only slaves" and later the queen tells him, "Forget the truth and be content."26

Having learned the truth, Moses is unable to view life around him in the same way. In his confusion and anger, he accidentally kills a guard who is beating a Hebrew slave. He then flees across the desert discarding his Egyptian sandals, wig, and jewelry. He is left with nothing; he has no possessions and no sense of his purpose. He tells Jethro "I've done nothing in my life worth honoring." Jethro's response is a song, which concludes "So how do you judge what a man is worth by what he builds or buys? You can never see with your eyes on earth, look through heaven's eyes. Look at your life through heaven's eyes." There is little suggestion
of a need for self-improvement; all that is needed is a different point of view. The appeal to "heaven" is religiously vague and generic, which is one of the defining characteristics of the film.

When Moses returns to Egypt, Rameses initially is overjoyed to see his brother and friend, but that joy vanishes when he realizes why Moses has come back. Moses tells Rameses, "I can no longer hide in the desert while they [the slaves] suffer at your hand." Rameses refuses to set the people free, claiming he must maintain the ancient traditions and demonstrating what Moses calls his "contempt for life."

Although Moses is the titular figure of the film, it is important to note the role women play in this telling of the story. *Prince of Egypt* dispenses with Aaron's biblical role as Moses' spokesman. Instead, Tzipporah accompanies Moses and both she and Miriam are a critical source of strength and comfort for Moses. After Pharaoh's initial refusal to free the slaves, when Moses is discouraged, Miriam tells him, "I have been a slave all my life and God has never answered my prayers until now. God saved you from the river. He saved you in all your wanderings and even now he saves you from the wrath of Pharaoh. God will not abandon you so don't you abandon us."
The importance of Tziporah and Miriam reaches its apex as the people leave Egypt. As the people gather and move forward, the two women begin singing the film's signature song "When You Believe." The chorus of the song proclaims "There can be miracles, when you believe. Though hope is frail it's hard to kill. Who knows what miracles you can achieve when you believe." The object of belief is not specified. There is no mention of what God can do, when one believes, but rather what the individual can do. The song crescendos as the people reach the sea, Moses parts the waters, and the people pass through to the other side. Interestingly, Moses does not lead them, instead he brings up the rear, making sure that no one is left behind. Moses has claimed his identity and realized his potential as a leader of the people, but he is not an authoritative leader who saddles the people with laws and commandments. It is only in the film's final scene that Moses is shown holding the stone tablets as he looks down at his people.27

In the film, Moses loses his identity as an Egyptian prince to gain one as the deliverer of his people. In the process, he comes to realize the value and dignity of all people. Unfortunately, and perhaps, unintentionally, the film suggests that this process can only happen on a personal level. Moses does not care about the slaves until he learns that he is one. Rameses and the other Egyptians are never able to realize the inherent worth of all people.28
In the end, "Prince of Egypt" presents a watered-down, politically-correct Moses. Or perhaps a "religiously-correct" Moses—the film’s producers consulted over 600 Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars and religious leaders to make sure they would not offend anyone. Interestingly enough, Jeffrey Katzenberg, one of the three DreamWorks chief executives, has stated that the film was "not a religious film." The film is carefully constructed to give as little offense as possible to a few people as possible. Direct mentions of God are infrequent, as are the use of the terms "Hebrew" or "Israelite." Any mention of a promised land, especially one that could be modern day Israel or Palestine are nonexistent. The emphasis is on discovering one's identity, but not one that is so strong that it will offend anyone.

Although the makers of the four films examined in the article believe they have captured the essence of the biblical story of Moses and the exodus, ultimately their films reflect the way they impose meaning on the biblical text. Each film takes the story of the exodus and shapes it into a story for its time. Moses is depicted as a stern lawgiver, a proto-American, a model of faith, and a confused teenager. Each of these depictions reveals what was valued in those times and by the filmmakers.

1 Ideally this paper would also include an examination of the 1975 made for television film Moses the Lawgiver, starring Burt Lanchaster as Moses. Unfortunately, this film is not available on video at the present time.
2 It is difficult not to attribute this process to the increasingly youth oriented focus of Hollywood. The exception to this trend to make Moses younger is the 1956 film in which Moses is instantly aged by his encounter with God at the burning bush.

3 It is important to recognize that while the values and views of Hollywood and those of the larger culture are intricately connected, they are not necessarily synonymous.

4 In Numbers 12, Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses' authority and God strikes Miriam with leprosy.

5 Elinor Glyn (1864-1943) was a British writer of popular, action filled romance novels. In the 1920s, Glyn worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter, including working on the adaptation of several of her own novels. The 1927 version of her novel, It, immortalized actress Clara Bow as "the 'it' girl." In 1921, Glyn played a small role in The Affairs of Anatol, directed by DeMille.

6 The building inspector, Redding, warns Dan, "Go easy, Son! This Sally Lung is half-French and half-Chinese. The combination of French perfume and Oriental incense is more dangerous than nitroglycerin." As with Miriam in the biblical story, DeMille equates the female Sally Lung with sensuality and pleasure and therefore she is a threat to the moral order represented by the Ten Commandments. Melanie Wright, ("Moses at the Movies: Ninety Years of the Bible and Film," Modern Believing 37 (October 1996): 48.), suggests that Sally Lung plays on viewers "fears about the infection of American society by the newly-arrived immigrants who crowded city tenements." Sumiko Higashi (Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 12.), observes "DeMille's moralizing in the Modern Story, which condemns a consumer culture linked with degenerate Orientalism, undoubtedly appealed to fundamentalists in the country."

7 The title of the record is "I've Got Those Sunday Blues."

8 According to Jeanie Macpherson, the writer of the script, this theme was the nucleus around which the rest of the script for the modern story crystallized. (Anne Edwards, The DeMilles: An American Family (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1988), 94.)

9 It is not entirely clear if Mary actually did have leprosy. The specific term is never used. Mary tells John, "Don't touch me - I'm branded," to which he responds, "You're not branded by anything but fear." This would seem to indicate that Mary is not suffering from a physical affliction, but her comment at the end of the film that "in the light it's gone" suggests that there was something physical and visible.

10 In Num 12:13, Moses does intercede with God on Miriam's behalf, asking God to heal her.

11 The film briefly narrates the story of Moses infancy, but doesn't really pick up until Moses is an adult in pharaoh's court. In his speech at the start of the film, DeMille addresses the fact that much of the story of Moses is left untold in Bible. He assures the audience that the story created to fill in these gaps is not mere speculation; but that it is "based on the work of ancient historians, such as Philo and Josephus" who, in DeMille's words, "had access to documents long since destroyed, or perhaps lost, like the Dead Sea Scrolls." The work of these ancient historians is even included in the opening credits, along with Eusebius and the Midrash. The referencing of these non-biblical
historical sources indicates DeMille's desire to impart an academic stamp of approval on the accuracy of the film and therefore on its message. This desire was also the impetus by the publication of a scholarly work detailing the archeological research that DeMille drew upon in his depiction of the world of the Exodus: Henry S. Noerdlinger, Moses and Egypt: The Documentation to the Motion Picture "The Ten Commandments" (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1956).

12 This sentiment that personal actions and achievement are to be valued over inherited position is also expressed in the scene where Moses presents the Ethiopian king and his sister to Sethi. As the king and princess approach the throne, Rameses commands them to kneel before the Pharaoh. Moses responds to Rameses, "Command what you have conquered, brother" and the two Ethiopians remain standing.

13 The statement that God was revealed to Moses' mind serves two purposes. First, it is a nod to the psychological understandings of religion. More importantly, it solves the problem of having to make the risky decision about what God sounds like. God speaks to each person in his or her own voice. In the film, this is achieved by using Charlton Heston's own voice recorded and then mechanically slowed down and treated with an echo effect. According to Heston's autobiography, this was his idea. He recalls telling DeMille, "When we were filming today, I was trying to imagine God's voice. Surely I heard Him inside my own head, my own heart. I think it should be in my own voice, too." (Charlton Heston, In the Arena (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 132.)

14 The identification of Rameses with modern communism is underscored by "his Eastern European accent and Kruschev-like bald head." (Wright, "Moses at the Movies," 51.)

15 Rameses also derides the God of the Hebrews as a "desert God," creating a contrast between the pampered, civilized, and in the film's view, decadent Egyptian society and the harsh, austere, but pure life of those who dwell in the shadow of Sinai. In a similar fashion, Nefretiri mocks Sephorah, asking Moses how he can prefer his wife's dry skin, chapped lips, and smell of goats to her smooth skin, moist lips, and perfumes. Moses' reply is that "there is a beauty beyond the senses."

16 Rameses is articulating a theory that can still be found in some scholarly works on the Exodus.

17 Whereas Rameses represents the communist threat from the outside world, Dathan is the enemy within, a figure that would have been easily recognized in the era of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Ironically, Edward G. Robinson, who played Dathan, had been removed from the Hollywood blacklist of suspected communist sympathizers only a short time before filming of The Ten Commandments began.

18 This statement is difficult to reconcile with Dathan's plan to return the people to Egypt and, presumably, slavery.

19 This is not to suggest that DeMille was unique in this. As recent events have highlighted, the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance" during this same period of history to highlight one of the distinctions between the United States and the Soviet Union.
The film does depict the celebration of Passover, but this is the one exception to the avoidance of ritual activity.

The film explains this by saying that it is through Nefretiri that God hardens Pharaoh's heart. Nefretiri tells Moses "You will come to me or they (the people) will never leave Egypt ... Who else can soften Pharaoh's heart? Or harden it?" Like Miriam and Sally Lung in the 1923 film, Nefretiri represents the temptations of the flesh. She is not the only woman in the 1956 film to play this role. When Moses learns of his true identity, Bithia, his Egyptian mother implores him to reject it, saying that he could serve the causes of justice and truth better from the throne than he could from the brick pits. It would seem that, in DeMille's view, women are closely tied to physical comfort that corrupts men and diverts them from their true calling. Even Sephorah seems to play this role, and she tells Nefretiri, "He has forgotten both of us. You lost him when he went to find is God. I lost him when he found his God."

Mernefta, the son of Ramses poses the following riddle to Ramses, "When is an Egyptian not an Egyptian?" When Ramses presses him for the answer, Mernefta claims to have forgotten, but looks pointedly at Moses.

In contrast to the women in DeMille's movies, the women in Moses do not represent a hindrance to Moses' mission. In the film, Zipporah encourages Moses. After God calls him, and he is trying to figure out what to do, Zipporah encourages Moses. After God calls him, and he is trying to figure out what to do, Zipporah tells him, "It is a true call. You must answer it. When Moses says he could get killed, she tells him, "I will trust in God. Will you?"

In contrast to DeMille's films, Moses does depict the practice of some of the rituals of the Bible.

His hair turns white and becomes permanently windswept

The queen here is similar to many of the women in DeMille's versions of the story, offering physical pleasure and comfort over the hard reality of truth.

The film does not show Moses receiving the law. It also omits the story of the golden calf and as a result, there is never any acknowledgement of the responsibilities of freedom.

A similar critique could be made about The Ten Commandments (1956). Heston's Moses does not fully come to understand the evils of slavery until he learned of his Hebrew heritage, but prior to that revelation, he had demonstrated a growing awareness of human dignity, as evidenced by his compassion, motivated as it was by utilitarianism, as the overseer of the slaves.


Although the Turner biblical films preceded it, The Prince of Egypt was the first film from a major studio to deal with biblical material since the release of The Last Temptation of Christ, some ten years earlier. I believe the protests and controversy surrounding that film had a tremendous impact in the way biblical material was treated by Hollywood.