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Watching Ancient Egyptian Poetry — Among Other Histrionics

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Abstract
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British Egyptologist, Richard B. Parkinson, is highly critical of the 1954, 20th Century Fox film, *The Egyptian*, both for its championing of "American Christian values," as well as reflecting nationalistic prejudices surrounding "Cold War tension with the Soviet Union." A close examination reveals that *The Egyptian* actually subverts the attitudes that Parkinson ascribes to it, and represents screen-writer Philip Dunne's commentary upon the then-current practice of "blacklisting.

In *Reading Ancient Egyptian Poetry Among Other Histories*, British Egyptologist, Richard B. Parkinson, offers a fascinating study of the scribal transmission of Middle Kingdom texts in antiquity.¹ He also provides a welcome overview of the treatment of ancient Egyptian literature by modern scholarship, extending his discussion to include aspects of its "performance" within popular culture, being especially keen to identify "orientalizing" attitudes towards the ancient denizens of the Nile Valley. In this regard, Parkinson's assessment of the 1954 Hollywood adaptation of Mika Waltari's best-selling novel, *The Egyptian*, is of particular interest.²

Both the fictional work³ and the film,⁴ are loosely based on the *Tale of Sinuhe*: the story of a man- - - Sinuhe- - - who fled Egypt to Syria-Palestine following the assassination of the Twelfth Dynasty ruler, Amenemhat I.⁵ In contrast to the original source, which dates to c. 1940 BC(E), the more recent
versions transfer the setting to the New Kingdom, over a half millennium later, where the drama is played out against the attempts of the Eighteenth Dynasty pharaoh, Akhenaten, to introduce monotheism into the Nile Valley, during the so-called "Amarna Period."

In notable contrast to his imaginative and original analyses elsewhere in his volume, here, Parkinson relies heavily on the opinions of others. He is content to dismiss The Egyptian as being "a stage to display the superiority of the biblically founded American ideal," while deriding its characters as "representative of American Christian values." However, the scholar makes the further assertion that "the conflicts in the film reflected contemporaneous Cold War America tensions with the Soviet Union," adding that "the presentation of the forces opposing (the idealistic pharaoh) Akhenaten embodied orientalistic attitudes." He clinches this disparaging verdict with the blanket observation that "the pagan priests were played by less European actors. . ." The writer apparently overlooks that the studio cast the very British, Henry Daniell as one of the main foils to the king's policies.

Given Parkinson's pleas to be sympathetic to multiple "readings" of "texts," his comments are surprisingly glib. I am in no position to judge the Hollywood offering's artistic merits- - - or lack thereof - - - but as a "historical document" in its own right, The (cinematic) Egyptian might be worth more
To be sure, he is correct in pointing out the film's anachronistic depictions of Akhenaten's religion, but many Egyptologists of the time noted parallels between texts from his reign and those of the Bible, as well as seeing the pharaoh as a "Christ"-like figure. Likewise, Parkinson's umbrage over images of female sexuality in both book and movie fails to acknowledge that some of the portrayals of women definitely came from ancient prototypes. Waltari, who was followed by the screenwriters, clearly derived a major plot-line involving the gold-digging courtesan, Nefer, from the voluptuous Tabubu in the Demotic tale of Setne-Khamwese.

More importantly, the Hollywood feature can hardly be reduced to the simplistic tale of a morally superior America (e.g. Egypt) confronting a barbaric Russia (e.g. the Hittites), that Parkinson assumes. In fact, whatever the "Cold War" references, the subtext is less that of "super-power" competition, and more the atmosphere of intimidation associated with the "black-list" era of Hollywood. Historians now recognize that some of the films of the 1950's not-so-subtly alluded to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) investigations of the entertainment industry. Perhaps the most famous example is the 1952 Stanley Kramer-Carl Foreman Western, High Noon, where a lone sheriff opposes a band of vengeful thugs, while at the same time, resists community pressure towards their accommodation. This topos of taking a
courageous stand against oppression was especially well-suited for biblical and
costume epics of the period, where the idea of bearing witness/martyrdom was
central to the story. The religious element, as well as historical distance, provided
a convenient cover for expressing ideas that, in a contemporary context, might
have been regarded as dangerously subversive.\textsuperscript{20} Tellingly, these sorts of
spectacles often contained a climactic "judgment" scene where the hero proclaims
his convictions at the cost of his life.

Film historian, Jonathan Kuntz points out that a prime example of this
motif occurs in 20th Century Fox's, \textit{The Robe}, where a Roman convert to
Christianity, the tribune Marcellus Gallio, assails the mad emperor, Caligula:\textsuperscript{21}

If the Empire and the Emperor desire peace and brotherhood among all
men, then my King (e.g. Jesus) will be on the side of Rome and her Emperor. But
if the Empire- - - and the Emperor- - - wish to pursue the course of aggression and
slavery, that have brought agony and terror and despair to the world- - - if there's
nothing left for men to hope for, but chains and hunger- - - then my King will
march forward to right those wrongs! Not tomorrow, Sire- - - Your Majesty may
not be so fortunate as to witness the establishment of His kingdom- - - but it will
come! \textsuperscript{22}
The declaration, which results in Marcellus' execution, is notable for a number of reasons, least of which is its contents. The original screenwriter of The Robe was Albert Maltz, who was himself, blacklisted for his associations with the Communist Party, and whose name was only recently restored to the credits of the film.\textsuperscript{23} Maltz' replacement was Philip Dunne, one of the founding heads of the "Committee for the First Amendment," formed in the wake of theHUAC conviction of the "Hollywood Ten" for refusing "to name names."\textsuperscript{24} Much of Marcellus' speech quoted above is in the original novel of Lloyd C. Douglas. But there, the confrontation between the tribune and Caligula takes place at a private banquet.\textsuperscript{25} However, in the film, the screen-writer(s) transfer the setting to the imperial throne-room, where Marcellus is charged with sedition.\textsuperscript{26} After attempting to intimidate Marcellus' family members, the emperor, seated on a throne emblazoned with the titulus "SPQR" - - - "(for) the Senate and the People of Rome" - - - demands that the officer recant and take a loyalty oath to the state, quite reminiscent of the histrionics of earlier Congressional interrogations.\textsuperscript{27}

Similar dynamics are evident in The Egyptian - - - a product of the same studio as The Robe - - - and a film that very much replicates the sympathies of its predecessor.\textsuperscript{28} Once more, Philip Dunne was one of the screen-writers. Like The Robe, the climax of The Egyptian shows the protagonist, Sinuhe, being forced to defend his beliefs before the ruling authorities. What is intriguing is that, again,
the denouement of the movie places the main character in surroundings very different from that of the book. At the end of his novel, Waltari portrayed Sinuhe— a royal physician— wandering the streets of Thebes, laden with guilt over his role in the betrayal and poisoning of Akhnaten. Abandoning his place of luxury and privilege, Sinuhe chooses to live in solidarity with the poor, seeking to console them in their miseries.²⁹

There is no difference between one man and another, for all are born naked into the world. A man cannot be measured by the color of his skin, or by his speech, or by his clothes, and jewels, but only by his heart. A good man is better than a bad man, and justice is better than injustice— and that is all I know.

Eventually, his former friend, the general Horemheb— now pharaoh— confronts Sinuhe and privately warns him to refrain from his disruptive activities. After a meeting in his own hut, Sinuhe declares that he will never change his behavior, resulting in the new king reluctantly banishing him for his civil disobedience.

By contrast, Philip Dunne, in his autobiography, describes how he shifted the staging in the film for Sinuhe's cri de coeur and expulsion.³⁰

The big scene at the end of the picture had the new Pharaoh. . . condemn his old friend Sinuhe the doctor. . . to perpetual exile in the desert. It had what we called production values: the Pharaoh and his consort. . . led a massive procession
into the audience chamber. There were soldiers, courtiers, musicians, cheetahs on leashes, all the magnificence of eighteenth-dynasty (sic) Egypt. It took three cameras, four hundred extras, a hundred technicians, and about six hours to shoot.

The lavish setting serves as a backdrop to Horemheb's triumphal entry, his strength and brutality accentuated by barbaric drums and dissonant brass playing over the soundtrack. The occasion for the gathering is a celebration of the king's recent victory over his enemies, the Hittites, who are marched in chains as prisoners of war. Significantly, Horemheb's achievement- - - heralding Egypt's "rebirth" as a world-power- - - occurs after he has dismantled the dead Akhnaten's policy of disarmament and international cooperation. In the wake of this martial display, Dunne has Horemheb usher Sinuhe in before his gathered minions, and formally charges him with treason. When no one comes forward to his defense, the pharaoh allows Sinuhe to address the "court".

SINUHE: (I speak) not for myself, Sire, but for one whose memory you tried to wipe out; whose very name you've sought to destroy. For Akhenaten. . .

HOREMHEB: Do you flaunt your treason in my face? That name is forbidden! Take care physician, or I will. ..'

SINUHE: Will? Will what you will. You will go to war and win a battle. You will conquer, and not know that it is defeat. You will raise Egypt to glory, and watch her die. We live in the twilight of our world, Horemheb, and you will be its sunset. Nations rise, only to fall. Kings build mighty monuments, only to have them crumble into dust. Glory flies like a
shadow. All these things have the seeds of death in them. Only a thought can live. Only a great truth can grow and flourish. And a truth cannot be killed. It passes in secret from one man's heart to another. It is given in a mother's milk to her child. . . "

HOREMHEB: Are you trying to tell me that you'll fight against me?

SINUHE: Oh, you will win that, too. For if you fail to silence me, you know what I will do.

HOREMHEB: What will you do, physician?

SINUHE: I will go among the people, and try to answer the questions that burden their hearts. The questions that I have asked myself all my life, wherever I've wandered in the world, and which were answered for me by a dying man (e.g. Akhnaten). I will wear the clothes of a slave, and kick the sandals from my feet, and speak to the wives as they fry their fish before their mud-huts by the river; to the porters on the docks; to the smiths by their bellows; to the slaves under their yokes. And I will a man cannot be judged by the color of his skin, by his clothes, his jewels, or his triumphs. But only by his heart. A good man is better than a bad man. Justice is better than injustice. He who uses mercy is superior to him who uses violence- - though the latter call himself pharaoh, and make himself 'master of the earth.' We have but one; Master: the God who made us all. Only His Truth is immortal. And in His Truth, all men are equal. No man is alone.

HOREMHEB: The sentence: exile for life.

Besides the obvious change in venues, which gave Dunne the opportunity to present Sinuhe's ordeal as a public spectacle, the screenwriter has dramatically moved the apologia away from existential angst towards a more politicized focus. In neatly balanced antithesis- - - winning is defeat, the rise of nations is their sunset, monuments built to self-glory will crumble into dust- - - Dunne denounces the mainstays of Horemheb's policies- - - militarism and imperialism- - - in a
much more explicit manner than in Waltari’s book. He extends the criticism further to include capitalism and materialism, when Sinuhe declares that individual worth is a matter of ethos, exemplified by respect for civil rights, pacifism, and non-violence. These noble teachings are directly attributed to Akhnaten—-an innocent slain and damned for his cause—-but whose humanistic ideal Dunne gives universal application by linking it to a Transcendent ideology. Upon close examination, this, the penultimate scene of The Egyptian, is highly critical of the pieties that Parkinson would blithely ascribe to the film. By extension, one cannot but notice that central to the hero’s persecution, is his insistence on speaking Akhnaten’s outlawed name: in effect, Sinuhe breaks the "blacklist" imposed by Horemheb. However, just as worthy of comment is the effect of casting Victor Mature in the role of the vengeful king. The assignation of this Kentucky-born actor to the part, causes one to reexamine Parkinson’s charge of "orientalizing," just as his "performance" is jolting in a way that the scholar does not address. In contrast to the British accents of the majority of players—-including Edmund Purdom’s Sinuhe—-Mature speaks in flat American tones. The incongruity in accent works well here. In both novel and film, Horemheb is portrayed as an upstart without social pedigree or lineage: he is routinely mocked as the "son of a cheese-maker." Upon his assumption of the throne, this ancient version of "Babbitt" pursues a policy that is unabashedly aggressive abroad, while being oppressive towards "liberal" elements at home.
Not only does the appearance of an American in this case produce audience unease, but Mature's portrayal can hardly be seen as the film's endorsement of a "hawkish" "Cold-War" attitude.

Victor Mature's part in *The Egyptian* is even more disquieting when we recognize that it is radically "against type." In the late 1940's throughout the Fifties, the actor was a staple of biblical and quasi-biblical spectulars. Beginning with Cecil B. DeMille's Samson and Delilah, and then continuing with *The Robe* and its sequel, Demetrius and the Gladiators, Mature was a heroic figure.³⁹ Mature's vengeful portrayal of Horemheb in *The Egyptian*, undercuts the expectations movie-goers in the United States would have initially brought to the character. That it is Victor Mature- - - the epitome of screen religiosity- - - who seeks to crush "(the) biblically founded American ideal" should not be minimized.⁴⁰ Whatever its relation to "orientalizing," Mature's vulgarian Horemheb is nothing less than the embodiment of the 1950's "military-industrial" complex running roughshod over "progressive" values.⁴¹ Despite the film's aesthetic weaknesses, through this disconcerting casting it results that it is not the "exotic outsider" who proves to be dangerous, but the "familiar insider." *The Egyptian* is hardly the bland and harmless piece of "entertainment" some "sophisticated" observers make it out to be.⁴²
Throughout *Reading Ancient Egyptian Poetry*, R. B. Parkinson, creatively impresses upon the reader how important are "space, place, time, and performance," in the "reception" of a work, and how these factors affect interpretation. As valid as this observation is for perceptions of the *Tale of Sinuhe* throughout the Bronze Age, it is equally applicable to its later incarnation in the "Atomic Age." Arguably, from certain vantage-points- - "especially when the modern reader lacks detailed knowledge of the context that gave it meaning"43- - - the casual viewer might regard *The Egyptian* as a gaudy promotion of Eisenhower-era American "civil religion." At worse, it might be taken as evidence of a simplistic- - - but dangerous- - - Manichean mindset. However, a fuller "awareness" of the circumstances surrounding *The Egyptian* 's creation might also "open up the interpretative spaces beyond the assumptions of a normative academic `common sense."44 The recognition that *The Egyptian* alludes to its own contemporary crises prompts us to consider that its target was not some distant "Other," but very much "Itself." And in its own "occidentalizing" way, the film was "queerly" "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant," inviting its audience” to examine the theoretical and central forces. . . that privilege the normative over the disruptive."45


9 Ibid, p. 252. How Parkinson comes to this conclusion is puzzling. While most of the priests are shown with shaved heads, there are no discernible markers of ethnicity, other than they are white-skinned, as is the pharaoh (played by Michael Wilding). It is interesting that many of Akhenaten's opponents speak with American accents, and are depicted as harassing the idealistic followers of the king's solar-religion. This is in contrast to the use of British actors to denote "imperialism," and Americans, the ideals of "freedom," in Ben-Hur and Spartacus. While such casting in these later films seems deliberate, one is not
quite sure if this was so intentional with *The Egyptian* (but cf. below). Marlon Brando was scheduled to play the role of Sinuhe (cf. Thomas M. Pryor, "Fox Films To Make 7 Super Specials," NY Times [1/6/1953], p. 22), but refused after the first reading of the script, necessitating legal action against him (cf. Thomas M. Pryor, "Fox Plans Suit Against Brando," NY Times [2/5/1954], p. 15; Leonard Moseley, *Zanuck: The Rise and Fall of Hollywood's Last Tycoon* [Little-Brown: Boston-Toronto, 1984], pp. 263-265). Judging from his other performances, Brando's approach would likely have been inventive. The English actor, Edmund Purdom, was hired as a last minute replacement. Parkinson (ibid, p. 253) makes the snide comment that "Purdom's career never fully recovered." This is not supported by facts: Purdom went on to have major roles in big-budget films for MGM. See the publicity article by Barbara Birch Jamison, "On Paging A Party Named Purdom," *New York Times* (8/22/1954), X5, just prior to the release of *The Egyptian*.

10 The original *New York Times* review of Bosley Crowther, "'The Egyptian' at Roxy is Based on Novel," *New York Times* 8/25/1954, p. 23, was negative: "(The Egyptian) glistens with archeological scenery. . . and moves at the pace of a death march. . . " However, he does exonerate Edmund Purdom's performance, noting that he "is a handsome and earnest young actor who is obviously clutching at dramatic straws. . . " In a subsequent article, Crowther ("The Price of Size: `The Egyptian' Manifests the Peril of Overproduction in Films," *New York Times* 8/29/1954, X1) lambasted the production again. Curiously, his complaint was the opposite of Parkinson's (cf. below): "Where the appeal of the novel is in its lurid and lively accounts of wicked savage encounters, excessive sensual bouts. . . Mr. Zanuck and his associates have attempted to cover these things in great scenic pageants and refined, non-pornographic charades."

11 Admittedly, there are many Egyptological inaccuracies. For example, the film telescopes Waltari's novel, so that all the palace-drama takes place in Thebes, rather than Amarna, to which the king (historically) moved his residence. Hieroglyphs on monuments are from the later Ramesside period.

12 The most famous example being the similarities between "The Great Hymn to the Aton," (which is set to music in the film by the composer, Alfred Newman, with lyrics based on a translation by James Henry Breasted) and Psalm 104. For the text of the ancient "hymn," cf. William Kelly Simpson, "The Hymn to the Aton," in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions,*

13 See the summary of Montserrat, Akhenaten, pp. 95-104.

14 Parkinson, Reading, pp. 252-253.

15 Parkinson follows Serafy, "Egypt in Hollywood," pp. 78-79, who states that The Egyptian "adopts the two standard film noir character types, the femme fatale and the mother/nurturer" - - - the first represented by Nefer (and some of the royal women), the latter, by Sinuhe's true love interest, Merit. Serafy fails to note that the dichotomy is utilized by Waltari, even as these sorts of contrasting figures are to be found in antiquity, denoting "folly" and "wisdom." Parkinson states that The Egyptian's "modern orientalist clichés included a gold-clad temptress with a fluffy feline companion," adding that "in the original, Sinuhe's sexual activity is less flamboyant." However, an examination of Waltari's novel reveals that it contains numerous scenes of sexual encounters, including necrophilia.

16 For Setne and Tabubu, cf. Miriam Lichtheim, "The Stories of Setne Khamwas," in Ancient Egyptian Literature 3: The Late Period (University of California Press: Berkely-London, 1980), pp. 125-138 (Setne 1, pp. 133-36). Setne wants to sleep with the beautiful Tabubu, who - - - like Nefer - - - is associated with the goddess Bast(et). As in the modern adaptations, the main character signs over to the woman all his possessions. In The Egyptian, Sinuhe deeds over his parents' tomb to the prostitute. In the ancient tale, Setne promises to give Tabubu his children's inheritance, after agreeing to her demand to kill them so they won't contest the arrangement.

17 Both Parkinson and Serafy, "Egypt in Hollywood," p. 81, make reference to the Hittites' "secret" development of iron technology as a Cold War motif. Without denying the resonances, the episode comes from Waltari's novel.

18 Serafy, "Egypt in Hollywood," pp. 80-81 comments that the film shows Egypt "in the clutches of totalitarianism by high priests of an oppressive and corrupt government who stamp out free thought to preserve the ancient order. This grim view of society accorded to the American perception of life in the Soviet Union." He adds: "Of course, McCarthyism was also limiting free speech in America, especially in Hollywood." Apart from a gratuitous jibe, Serafy does not see
“McCarthyism” as an element within the film. As noted The Egyptian is primarily a commentary on domestic politics in the United States.


20 Potentially sensitive-and suspicious-topics, such as disarmament, are also addressed in the western, Broken Arrow (20th Century Fox, 1950), and in the science fiction film, The Day the Earth Stood Still (20th Century Fox, 1950). Although he acquiesced to the blacklist, studio head, Darryl F. Zanuck, had little sympathy for it (cf. George F. Custen, Twentieth Century's Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood [Basic Books: New York, 1997] pp. 310-317), and was open to addressing controversial issues (albeit sometimes in historical or fantasy guise). According to Custen (ibid, pp. 314-315) screenwriter Philip Dunne was interested in making a film critical of HUAC as early as 1949. He later suggested to Darryl F. Zanuck that he make George Orwell's 1984: "We could make another The Robe, set in the future instead of the past." The comments certainly demonstrate that the screenwriter was looking for vehicles by which to express his political views on the blacklist.


22 On Albert Maltz and The Robe, cf. Bernard F. Dick, Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten (University of Kentucky Press, 1989), pp. 94-96; Jack Salzman, Albert Maltz (Twanye Publishers: Boston, 1978), p. 129. Maltz wrote his version of the screenplay in 1945-46, when the project was under the auspices of RKO Pictures (Dick, Radical Innocence, p. 94). From his examination of the production files of 20th Century Fox in the UCLA archives, Dick surmises that (Radical Innocence, pp. 95-96) most of the explicitly religious scenes surrounding Palm Sunday and Good Friday were from Maltz, along with the "conversion" episodes involving Demetrius, Marcellus, and finally Diana at the conclusion of the film. Likewise, Maltz retained Lloyd C. Douglas' depiction of Caligula's final taunt of Marcellus and Diana as they go to their deaths. For the
restoration of Maltz's screen credits, see, Jean Rouverol, Refugees from Hollywood: A Journal of the Blacklist Years (University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque, 2000), p. 267. Maltz was also the un-credited screenwriter for the irenic Broken Arrow.

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24 On Dunne and the Committee for the First Amendment, see his autobiography, Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics (Mc-Graw-Hill: New York, 1980), p. 193-208. Dunne (ibid, p. 254) describes himself as being somewhat critical of the earlier Maltz script of The Robe: "Dramatically, the script was a vast improvement on the book, but a great many of the scenes were trite and DeMillish. In other words, it was a typical biblical. . . I improved some of the characterizations, eliminated some of the religious hokum, interpolated some authentic Roman history, and sharpened the drama. . . " Dunne received sole credit for the screenplay, claiming that he learned twenty years later that the original was "the work of one or more blacklisted writers," decrying that the "blacklist, or its noxious fallout, had turned me into something I had always despised: a credit hog" (ibid, p. 255). This would contradict Custen (Twentieth Century's Fox, p. 312) that Maltz worked at reduced wages on the script with Dunne.

The sedition theme is in the novel (ibid, 503), but notably, in the film, Caligula likens the Christian movement to the slave uprising under Spartacus—- a favorite symbol of revolution in Communist ideology. Given Dunne's statement (cf. above) that he "interpolated some authentic Roman history," it might be surmised that he is the author of this particular wording.

Kuntz, "Making of The Robe," offers, "(in The Robe) we have a tribunal in front of Caligula that is just like the 1947 HUAC hearings. . . (with) Marcellus behaving exactly like the Hollywood Ten behaved, speaking 'truth to power'- - - as they saw it; announcing their commitment to new ideas that were going to change the world, and then walking off to a form of martyrdom." On the use of "loyalty oaths" in Hollywood, see Custen, Twentieth Century's Fox, p. 316.


Philip Dunne, Take Two, p. 65.


Transcribed from the film.

The words strikingly anticipate Martin Luther King's 1963 Lincoln Memorial "I Have a Dream" speech. One should note how Dunne changed Waltari's "a man cannot be measured by the color of his skin," to "a man cannot be judged by the color of his skin," as well as adding "he who uses mercy is superior to him who uses violence." Dunne himself worked as a speechwriter for Democratic candidates (cf. Take Two, pp. 324-327), and interestingly, was in Washington a few weeks after King's address.

Perhaps this should also be seen against the backdrop of Gandhi's death in 1948.
The film's epilogue, which notes that "these things happened thirteen centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ," (backed by Alfred Newman's score, recalling his music for The Robe) unquestionably links the film to Christianity. However, one needs to comment on Serafy's assessment ("Egypt in Hollywood," 79) that "Akhenaten's sun worship is shown to be nearly identical to Christianity." As support, he quotes Akhenaten's death speech, which is absent in Waltari's novel, and likely is to be attributed to Philip Dunne. After realizing that Sinuhe has poisoned him, Akhenaten addresses his murderer:

Have I drunk death, Sinuhe? . . . So be it. The fault is mine. You gave me what I asked for, but I was wrong to ask it. I was weak. I thought my god had forsaken me. But he hadn't, Sinuhe. Nor have you killed him, as you believed. Horemheb seeks to kill him by tearing down his temples, but the House of God is all creation. Tear down the mountains, empty the seas, strip the sky of stars- - and still you haven't touched God. I see it clearly now. I thought God was the face of the sun, and thus I made His image. But God is more- - much more. The sun is just a symbol of His warmth, His creative power. He is no idol, no tangible thing- - but the Creator of all things, the Loving Spirit that lives in all our hearts. I'm fortunate beyond other men, that he permitted me to recognize him . . . Nor does my death matter. I was no more than a shadow of things to come; one voice that spoke for Him. But there will be other voices- - clearer than mine. For the hearts of men will not be denied forever. God is in us all, and one day, in His own good time, He will speak out in words that cannot be misunderstood. . . God forgives everything, Sinuhe- - He forgives you.

Although there are "Christ-like" resonances (being forsaken; forgiveness) Akhenaten is presented as an ancient Egyptian "John the Baptist," proclaiming not a redeemer-figure, but a kind of "pantheistic humanism."

Notably, Dunne presents similar sentiments in other biblical/religious films that he wrote. In the The Robe, Dunne's "Christianity" is "demythologized," marked instead by "its compassion for every man," being but "one of many ways to God." Indeed, at the climax to the film, Caligula asks: "Tell us Tribune, are we to believe these stories that this Jesus could heal by the touch of his hand, make the crippled walk, and the blind see again?" To which, Marcellus replies: "It makes no difference whether you believe them or not, Sire. All that matters is there are no stories that he made anyone blind, or made anyone a cripple, or raised his hand except to heal." The dialogue is not in the original novel.
Dunne was rather expansive on the subject of religion and the supernatural (Take Two, p. 252):

I don't deny anyone's right to believe in miracles, but as a non-believer myself... I think I should be both presumptuous and hypocritical to imply belief by writing this into my scripts... But I do believe in some miracles... Jesus was a miracle, not because he did conjuror's tricks with water and wine, but because he brought a message of hope to the hopeless and love to those who were hated and despised. . . Most Christians continue to believe that Christianity follows the teachings of a gentle Jesus, totally ignoring the fact that different Christian sects have sanctified mass slaughter... ever since the astute if murderous Constantine read the public opinion polls of the time and decided to do his killing under the sign of the Prince of Peace. One of the great tragedies of history is the subversion of Jesus' message of decency and love into the great hypocrisy which all too often has usurped the name of Christianity" (ibid, p. 255).

From his self-descriptions and the evidence of his scripts, Dunne's views would seem to be akin to Enlightenment critiques of Christianity, as well as the sentimental, "Liberal Lives of Jesus" of the 19th Century.

It is also intriguing to examine the screenwriter's "theology," as expressed in his earlier David and Bathsheba (20th Century Fox, 1951; producer, Darryl F. Zanuck; director, Henry King) where Dunne's David "explains" the 23rd Psalm to Bathsheba, as she awaits stoning for adultery:

"When I wrote those words (e.g. the psalm), I believed in such a God.

I was only an ignorant shepherd boy:

there was no one to teach me about God,

so I taught myself.

I saw Him in the hills and the trees,

in the miracle of the birth of lambs.

I felt His mercy, when the wolves had fled and my flocks were safe,
when spring broke the grip of snow and ice,
and the cool wind blew after the heat of the day.
I saw His splendor in the flowers blazing in the hillsides,
and the stars burning in the skies- - -
and knew His hand in everything."

However, this gentle "nature deity," eventually is replaced:

"But somehow I wandered from Him.
And when I tried to find Him again,
I had lost Him:

somewhere in Saul's court,
or in the camp of the Philistines.
His image paled in the lights of the city,
and His voice was drowned amidst
the quarreling and the scheming
of the ambitious and the mighty."

David then bitterly announces:

"But Nathan has found him for me:
not the God of my boyhood days.
But a god without mercy, a god who thinks only of his justice."
There is a clear (and negative) dichotomy between the vengeful and cynical "biblical god of 'Law,'" and David's "enlightened religion of feeling."

36 There are other references to "blacklists" in the film: when Sinuhe and Kaptah return to Egypt from the land of the Hittites, they are singled out because their names are on a roster of proscribed individuals.


38 Serafy, "Egypt in Hollywood," p. 81, makes the strange juxtaposition that "Haremhab... is like Stalin... (whose) character seems more than slightly modeled upon General Douglas MacArthur... " By 1954, MacArthur was politically irrelevant. However, one wonders whether the film's "Horemheb" might not be a "coded"-reference to Joseph McCarthy. Although "son of a cheese-maker," is found in the novel, the epithet would neatly suit the Wisconsin senator, who parlayed his war-experience into elected office. Notably, Sinuhe denounces Horemheb precisely for his popularity: "You're the pharaoh that Egypt wants."

39 Mature's characters were not necessarily saintly. His Samson is a bit of a naive clod, while as Demetrius- - - a Greek slave converted to Christianity- - - Mature becomes temporarily embittered towards his faith. At one point in Demetrius and the Gladiators, the character renounces Christ to swear fealty to Caligula, with the emperor then commissioning him to inform on his former co-religionists (another example of the "blacklist" motif). Not coincidentally, the screenwriter was again, Philip Dunne, cf. Take Two, pp. 255-256.

40 This is shown quite dramatically in the film. As Horemheb declares "I am Egypt" over the slumped corpse of Akhenaten, the camera pans to the wall-relief of the benevolent, shining sun-disk of the Aten, and then dissolves to a scene on a pylon where a pharaoh smites the head of a captive.

41 Whether this is a reference to "MacArthur's public challenge to (Truman). . . (which) highlighted the dangers of giving too much power to the military," as Serafy, "Egypt in Hollywood," p. 81, asserts is debatable. However, we would agree with his recognition of the anti-military trope of the screenwriters.
42 Note Dunne’s final polemic against post-World War II American foreign and military policy, which very much recalls his script for The Egyptian: "nationalism and idealism, unwisely combined, produced a venom that in the end almost destroyed not our adversaries but ourselves" (Take Two, p. 339). He further decries (ibid) how “in the name of national security, we have had to consent to the alienation of certain ‘inalienable’ rights, among them the right to know. The military, and the corporations they employ, are of necessity privy to secrets which must be withheld from us, their theoretical masters.”

43 Quoting Parkinson, "Reading Ancient Egypt," p. 15.

44 Quoting Parkinson, Reading Ancient Egyptian Poetry, p. 11.