And David arose and went, he and his men, and slew of the Philistines two hundred men; and David brought their foreskins, and they gave them in full number to the king, that he might be the king's son-in-law. And Saul gave him Michal his daughter to wife.

—1 SAMUEL 18:27–28

I wish my accusers would read their Bible more closely, for in those pages are more violence and sex than I could ever portray on the screen.

—CECIL B. DEMILLE

4 polyhymnia

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Film producers have made it standard operating procedure to seek much of their material from the literary world. From *Gone with the Wind* to *The English Patient,* some of the most highly regarded films have been based on extremely popular books. Because no book has ever come close to the Bible in popularity—more than two billion copies sold!—it naturally offers itself to cinematic treatment. Perhaps even more than Greco-Roman history or mythology, the Bible offers the film director an opportunity to work with a preestablished plot that an audience will know before entering the theater; the audience will then focus on the director's skill in adapting the Bible to a visual medium, not on the director's (and the screenwriter's) ability to contrive a good plot. On the other hand, the director must face the fact that each of his viewers has a lifelong visual preconception of biblical stories and characters, and that many of them have religious interpretations of the Bible that will not tolerate any wayward digressions. Cocteau had no problem adapting and rearranging the Orpheus myth in *Orphée* for an audience that had limited knowledge of Orpheus and no theological stake in his story. But similarly rearranging stories from the Bible entails serious risks; the source is known too well and means too much to too many people. Even in *The Green Pastures* (1936), for example, in which the Old Testament has been liberally adapted, the spirit behind the adaptation remains reverent.

But reverence is not the ultimate criterion for a biblical film either, for reverence can lead all too easily to boredom, vapidness, and even unintended comedy. For instance, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1963) attempts to present Lot as a powerful, muscu-

lar, and tormented Hebrew leader who in his intense spirituality despises the human slavery practiced by the Sodomites. The approach is reverent, but when this powerful, physical Hebrew is portrayed by the well-mannered, thin-framed, Oxfordian Stewart Granger, the effect is likelier to inspire laughter than awe. *Sodom and Gomorrah* would have been better off with less superficial reverence and more pervasive cinematic reality.

Filming the Old Testament and filming the New Testament demand two very different approaches. The Old Testament (1) consists of many heroes and patriarchs in all lands from Syria to Dan to Beersheba and from Egypt to Mesopotamia; (2) comprises stories that range from childish and delightful to complex and absorbing to primitive and gruesome; (3) offers miracles and spectacular passages that often demand the disruption of the entire planet; and (4) avows a religious message that revolves around the celestial, invisible deity generally known as Jehovah. The New Testament (1) concentrates ultimately on one figure, Jesus; (2) comprises four sophisticated, stylized narratives; (3) presents generally less earthshaking miracles, involving only the tiny land of Palestine; and (4) introduces a religious message that revolves around the earthly, anthropomorphic Christ.

In filming the Old Testament, the director must (1) select which of the numerous characters and tales he will include, (2) select which biblical narrative style he will employ for his story, (3) be prepared to execute some spectacular effects, and (4) select a forceful and convincing method for presenting the invisible but omnipotent Jehovah.

In the Beginning . . .

In 1961 Dino De Laurentiis decided to film the entire book of Genesis, from the creation to Joseph's sojourn in Egypt. He was prepared to spend $90 million (of other people's money) on this twelve-hour, multidirector film. The directors he sought were Orson Welles for the Abraham and Isaac episode, Luchino Visconti for the Joseph episode, John Huston for the creation, and Fellini for the flood. Maria Callas was to play Sarah, Igor Stravinsky was to compose the score, and God was to be Olivier. Such dreams, we might imagine, often frequented the minds of movie producers in the early 1960s. The reality that emerged from this fantasy was Huston's *The Bible . . . In the Beginning* (1966), which episodically covered the first twenty-two chapters of Genesis, from the creation to the abortive sacrifice of Isaac.

Huston characteristically joked that "I've always wanted to create the heavens and the earth," and he went about his task with unmatched originality. He wisely decided not to attempt a uniform presentation of all the stories. The Old Testament itself does not have a consistent narrative approach, and the same cinematic treatment cannot possibly serve both the majestic, physical creation of the earth by an unseen yet mighty God and the very human and heart-warming pregnancy of the nonagenarian Sarah. *The Bible* therefore eschews the qualities that typical films demand—continuity, climax, and coherence. In this sense the film is not ultimately satisfying, and it tends to relinquish its hold on the

viewer after the first two of its three hours. But despite the lack of overall dramatic tension, each episode has its individual charm or excellence, and is this not what one should realistically expect from a film of Genesis?

The Bible omits the usual opening credits (which would have been terribly untimely and premature before a film subtitled *In the Beginning*) and begins with Huston's rich and articulate narration of the opening chapters of *Genesis*. The screen is covered with an abstract red blur that grows whitish when God says, "Let there be light." As days two through five gradually unfold, the obscured screen begrudgingly reveals Ernst Haas's artistic shots of surging ocean waters, smoking, fiery lava, crashing waterfalls, primeval mossy trees, a majestic sunrise over the ocean and an equally captivating full moon, then dolphins, seals, slippery whales, and gulls playing in and above the seas, and cattle, horses, and scaly lizards on the dank, fresh earth. Finally our attention is focused on a clump of dirt in vaguely human form. Urged on by the climactic choral music of Toshiro Mayuzumi and high violins, Adam finally raises himself from the earth and walks over his new domain.

The scenes of Adam and Eve in Eden are delicate and simple. Although both prototype humans are stark naked, the film teasingly shies away from revealing angles. Filmed through a camera lens thinly coated with Vaseline, the mildly hazy effect of the Eden scenes is enhanced further by a gold filter and by gold-painted leaves and shrubbery. Adam (Michael Parks) and Eve (Ulla Bergryd) hardly match the titanic stature that many interpreters might attribute to the first man and woman; they instead appear plausibly as two innocents, fresh and naive and all but anonymous, who belong in this lush, fertile primordial morning. In a most charming moment, God (in Huston's voice) tells our two ancestors to "be fruitful and multiply." The camera looks down at the two from twenty-five feet above, as if the picture were capturing the subjective god's-eye view of Eden. In response to God's rather suggestive command, Adam and Eve merely hug; explicit sex is not needed, and in the novelty and innocence of the earth's early moments, a tender, tentative hug is the perfect cinematic touch.

The uniqueness of Huston's interpretation next visits itself upon the serpent in the Tree of Knowledge. Huston originally sought the lithe Rudolph Nureyev for the part, then tried a thirteen-foot, 102-pound python that just refused to hiss on cue, so he ended up hiding the human face of the serpent behind the thick foliage of the educational Tree. When God punishes the reptilian fiend, the human face is seen slithering down the Tree to dissolve obscurely into a more familiar type of ophidian.

Following Cain's barbaric fratricide, *The Bible* eases into its fourth and most individual episode—Noah and the flood. Some critics in 1966 complained that it was poor planning for Huston to play Noah, narrate *Genesis*, and sound the voice of God all in this same episode. But Huston's multiple roles cannot confuse anyone who knows the story (everyone), and it accents the individuality of Huston's interpretation. What really separates this scene from all others based on episodes from the Old Testament is Huston's folkish humor. As God's voice calls upon Noah, the sheepish man runs and hides. He timidly

81 "Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground," says Genesis 1:7, and here John Huston's *The Bible . . . In the Beginning* (1966) captures an appropriately dusty Adam (Michael Parks) in man's first living seconds. Huston smeared his camera lens with Vaseline to create a hazy effect for the Eden scenes. The nudity of Adam and Eve is teasingly but tastefully elusive.

looks up and hears God's most explicit instructions: three hundred cubits by fifty cubits by thirty cubits. Noah walks away puzzled but obedient, comically gesturing and sizing up the strange dimensions with his hands. One night Noah works on the ark by himself; he accidentally catches his foot in the bucket of pitch and slides down the sloped deck on his six hundred–year–old derrière. The bucket thumps into the head of his lazy son Japheth, but Japheth just continues sleeping. Huston has taken a bold step by adding light visual comedy to biblical narrative. His inimitable ability to develop such drollery into a folkish atmosphere makes the risk pay off. The visual drollery continues as we see the shaved heads and bone jewelry of Noah's sinful critics, or the tree trunks that constitute the ark's scaffolding. Such images also set the primitive tone and natural atmosphere for the real essence of the episode: the animals.

After collecting 270 animals from various European zoos and a German circus, Huston penned them all in at De Laurentiis's studios outside Rome. He spent weeks training the pairs of beasts to file into the ark calmly and without incident. Unfortunately, pairs

82 John Huston leads pairs of zebras, elephants, camels, giraffes, and llamas into one of the five arks he constructed (full-scale and miniature) for *The Bible . . . In the Beginning*. In this Noah sequence, Huston narrates Genesis, speaks the voice of God, and plays the part of Noah. The folksy humor and primitive setting give this sequence its unique charm. The three unadorned tree trunks, the hull's webbing of tree branches, and the tree stumps scattered about show whence the ark came.

of male and female animals penned in at close quarters tend to become threesomes and litters. Several animals became ill, and one rambunctious water buffalo ran up the gangplank to the ark, crashed through its walls, and galloped onward toward Rome as no four-legged beast had done since Hannibal's elephants. After five months of such unpredictable disturbances, Huston decided to film the more ferocious beasts from behind glass. The film seems to show all the animals filing into the ark, but they actually filed into the doorway and right out the other side of a flat set; a different set was used for the interior scenes. Huston used five different arks — miniatures, full-scale, interior, and exterior.

The resulting ark scenes are marvelous. Bears cautiously sniff the doorway to the ark before entering, pelicans peck the rumps of the preceding chimpanzees, pairs of tigers, deer, elephants, giraffes, zebras, cassowaries, dromedaries, toucans, yaks, gnus, burros,

swans, and cranes all parade into the hull beneath the impressive superstructure. As Noah feels the first few drops of rain on his outstretched palms, he picks up two lethargic turtles and carries them quickly into the ark. Inside is a veritable menagerie. A dark wooden atmosphere is pierced by the overwhelming roars, chirps, cries, growls, and screeches of our animal kingdom's prototypes. Noah and his wife humorously feed all the beasts; Noah pours a pail of milk into the hippo's gaping bidentate mouth; he feeds the giraffe from a pouch in his robes; he offers milk to the lions ("They're only great cats, wife"); and he toys with the huge elephant. As the zoological specimens amble out onto the steamy terrain of Mt. Ararat after the flood has receded, Noah has to fight back the tears. All the lightness and humor of the episode have come to their touching conclusion. *The Green Pastures* (1936) may have provided inspiration for the drollery of Huston's ark sequence into a unique biblical vision.

After the Tower of Babel disperses its babbling multitudes of multilingual laborers, *The Bible* concentrates on the stories of Lot, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Isaac. The scenes bog down with Christopher Fry's neo–King Jamesian dialogue, which has its poetic qualities but tends to be impersonal and mundane. But Abraham (George C. Scott) is played in chillingly prophetic proportions, and his night raid on the region of Dan to rescue Lot—Huston borrowed the torches tied to rams' tails from Samson in *Judges* 15:4—is spirited. The scenes of *Sodom and Gomorrah* almost resemble an adult film. It is left to Peter O'Toole, as all three of the story's angels, to maintain the appropriate biblical tone. A bestial menagerie that Noah wouldn't have allowed on his boat noisily slither their slimy, gaudily jeweled, caressed and caressing bodies to Lot's door and demand to "know" the Angel, only superficially conveying the idea of a twentieth-century B.C. city. But perhaps Huston purposely left the ancient temporality of Sodom in question, for the "rain upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven" (*Genesis* 19:24) is portrayed as a nuclear blast and its all-too familiar mushroom cloud.

Huston gave *The Bible* a novel cinematic interpretation, based on a fresh, intelligent vision unlike any of his predecessors'. He avoided the mistake of the 1921 version of *The Bible* that merely presented the Old Testament as a stage play. His Eden sequence, thanks to the blond wig of Ulla Bergryd, with its long, dangling strands pasted to her breasts, avoided the cheap sexuality of Albert Gout's *Adán y Eva* (Mexican, 1956), which starred Christiana Mattel, Miss Universe 1953. Dino De Laurentiis had produced a low-budget *Adamo ed Eva* in the 1950s, and Disney Productions had released a corny but clever semianimated musical version of the Noah episode in 1959. Their 1999 version in *Fantasia/2000* is much better, with Donald Duck playing Noah's assistant and working in time with the music of Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance," just as Mickey Mouse had played the Sorcerer's apprentice in the 1940 original version. An artistic amateur production of *Lot in Sodom* (1933) exploited double or kaleidoscopic exposures, heavy chiaroscuro effect, bizarre focusing, and symbolism to become known as a classic of nonmainstream cinema. Then, of course, there was *The Green Pastures* (1936), which we shall examine in Chapter 8.

Of a vastly different nature was Fox's *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1963, also called *Last Days of Sodom and Gomorrah*). Starting with the biblical outline that Lot had two daughters, lived in Sodom, and saw his wife turned into a pillar of salt, the film ladles on blood and cheap spectacle without consideration for the Bible's narrative, and the special effects are practically an insult to Jehovah. Unfortunate miscasting gives us Stanley Baker as the lascivious lover of the Sodomite Queen Bera (Anouk Aimee; *King* Bera, by the way, is mentioned in Genesis 14:2), while Miklos Rozsa's moving music has little real drama to accompany. The entire affair attests to its Italian cloak-and-sandal production. The film overemphasizes salt-mining and "the one unforgivable sin" of Sodom—slavery. To be sure, Queen Bera walks into her bedroom with her pet leopard to illustrate the maxim "When in Sodom, do as the Sodomites," but bestial sodomy offended the smarmily self-righteous Lot less than slavery. Lot proudly announces to the heathen Sodomites that Jews do not tolerate slavery. Would Hagar have agreed? This is a classic example of the perils of moral anachronism. Modern thought should not be imposed upon a second-millennium B.C. Hebrew.

In 1928 Daryl Zanuck had just joined Warner Brothers, and he promised "the greatest picture ever made." He hired a *novus homo* in the American film world, the young director Michael Curtiz, who had recently emigrated from Hungary. The result one year later was *Noah's Ark*. Like most films about the ancient world that were produced in the 1920s—including *Sodom und Gomorrah* (1922), directed by Curtiz while in Austria—the story included both ancient and modern settings. The modern setting of *Noah's Ark* concerned criminals and First World War espionage, the highlight of which was a spectacular rainy night's wrecking of the Orient Express on a bridge spanning a deep river channel. The ancient setting combines the biblical story of Noah and his pious family with a hodgepodge of Babylonian sin and paganism. Of particular interest is the opening scene, which reveals a Tower of Babel modeled after the famous painting by Brueghel, as well as ark and flood scenes.

The ark itself looks enough like Huston's craft to have been the later director's iconographical source, and Curtiz's animal procession includes the now familiar profiles of elephants, horses, camels, lions, cows, zebras, bears, oxen, llamas, goats, deer, pigs, and monkeys. With a tighter budget than Huston's, Curtiz could not rent his animals, so he sent his photographer Hans Koenekamp to different zoos to film the various creatures. When all the beasts had been shot, Koenekamp then matted as many as eighteen shots onto one frame of the final version to make it seem as if the animals were all boarding the ark at the same time.

For the great flood a huge tank holding six hundred thousand gallons of water was built adjacent to the set. From the tank large spillways ran across the tops of the columns of the Babylonian temple. The plan was to dump all this water onto the Babylonian set while the extras and stuntmen were standing there. Photographer Hal Mohr quit when he heard of this dangerous plan, but the plans proceeded unchanged. With

83 "Queen" Bera (Anouk Aimee) is about to take her lover (the spotted one) into her chambers to prove that she really is the royal Sodomite in *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1963). The Bera of Genesis 14:2 was a King.

three hundred extras on the set and another 105 men to create wind, lightning, rain, and flooding, fifteen cameras were set up, and prebroken joints in the buildings were set with dynamite and detonation wires. This $40,000 dollar special-effects extravaganza was executed in a matter of seconds, and despite some unconvincing model work, the results are spectacular even today. But Mohr was right to be cautious: several men were seriously injured; one lost his leg. But as good came from the evil of the biblical flood, so did some good come from the outrage caused by the carelessness in putting this sequence on film. Soon afterward, safety regulations were established in Hollywood, and thereafter special effects were rarely as hazardous to actors and extras.

The greatest difference between the flood sequences of *Noah's Ark* and *The Bible* is one of perspective. Huston concentrated internally on the safety and relative security of Noah and the animal passengers, while Curtiz focused externally on the violent and indiscriminate destruction that surrounded those wooden walls. He featured shots of frightened Mesopotamians clinging to the high walls of the ark in the driving rain and fighting the surge of the waves. As the survivors sail away, we see a mass of humanity drowning behind them, as the evil Babylon suffers a tortured (and unbiblical) destruc-

84 This still from Michael Curtiz's silent version of *Noah's Ark* (1929) reveals the wood chips and shavings remaining from Noah's prudent construction project. Noah (Paul McAllister) and family pray piously and seriously, quite a different touch from Huston's folksy humor. Like most "ancient" films of the 1920s, *Noah's Ark* contains both ancient and modern sequences.

tion. Despite the studio's much publicized effects, the film was a box-office failure. Nonetheless, it was reissued in 1958—two years after *The Ten Commandments*—with a complete soundtrack.

A number of biographies of Old Testament figures were filmed in the twentieth century. Henri Andréani produced a number of French silents—*Caïn et Abel* (1911) and *Esther, La Mort de Saül, Rebecca,* and *La Reine de Saba* (all in 1913). Two versions of the Joseph story appeared in 1914—Eugene Moore's first film, *Joseph in the Land of Egypt,* and Louis N. Parker's filmed play *Joseph and His Coat of Many Colors* (1914)—followed by Carl Froelich's German *Joseph und seine Brüder* (*Joseph and His Brethren,* 1922). Of all the patriarchs, Joseph, with his mistreatment at the hands of his brothers, his imprisonment, visionary skill, and ultimate triumph in Egypt, is the most dramatic and cinematogenic. A new batch of Joseph films appeared in the sound era: Maurice Elvey's *Her Strange Desire* (1930), based on Edgar Middleton's play *Potiphar's Wife; Joseph and His Brethren* (1930), by Adolph Gartner, whose biblical credits also included *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1932); and George Roland's Yiddish version of *Joseph in the Land of Egypt* (1932).

In 1960 Columbia shot some thirty-seven thousand feet of an epic version of the never released and barely extant *Joseph and His Brethren* starring Rita Hayworth, and the Italian revival of the ancient-film genre in the early sixties produced a few more films based on Genesis, including *Giacobbe ed Esau* (*Jacob and Esau,* 1964); *I Patriarchi della Bibbia* (*The Patriarchs of the Bible,* 1963), which ranged from Adam to Joseph and added a prediction of the Messiah; and another *Joseph and His Brethren* (1962). *Joseph* resembles *Sodom and Gomorrah* in that it combines well-known American or British actors (Robert Morley as Potiphar, Finlay Currie as Jacob, and Belinda Lee as Henet, Potiphar's wife) with Italian extras, and inflicts one-dimensional characterizations and a preposterous script—Joseph and Potiphar go on a hunt for lions and (stuffed) elephants "in the jungles of Egypt"—on everyone. The sets are transparently phony; Joseph is thrown into the pit and sold to Midianite merchants on a barely disguised soundstage with crudely painted palm trees and wheelbarrowed sand. Perhaps the one saving aspect of *Joseph and His Brethren* is that it attends to many of the details of the story told in Genesis. But biblical narrative is confused with screenwriter's fantasy, and overall effect is about as believable as Methusalah's nine hundred and first birthday. Bosley Crowther called it "the clumsiest, the silliest, the worst of the quasi-Biblical pictures to come along since the wide-screen was born."[1]

Decades later television offered a medium for a new group of films based on Genesis, one of the first of which was *The Story of Jacob and Joseph* (1974). Directed by Michael Cacoyannis, this film helped establish the style for made-for-television films, which enjoy an expanse of time at the expense of dramatic tension and form. Two decades later Turner Broadcasting produced *Abraham* (1994), *Jacob* (1994), *Joseph* (1995), and *David* (1997). Of all the films in this series, *Joseph* is perhaps the most engaging, with such marquee stars as Ben Kingsley playing a sincere Potiphar, Lesley Ann Warren playing his emotionally fragile wife, and Martin Landau playing the aging patriarch Jacob. *Joseph* also enjoys a thoughtful script that exploits the contrasts between monotheistic and polytheistic religious systems, varies the complex dynamics among Jacob's many sons, and at least toys with blurring biblical distinctions between good and evil. Several sequences in the film are also enhanced by Ennio Morricone's music.

Ten Commandments Times Two

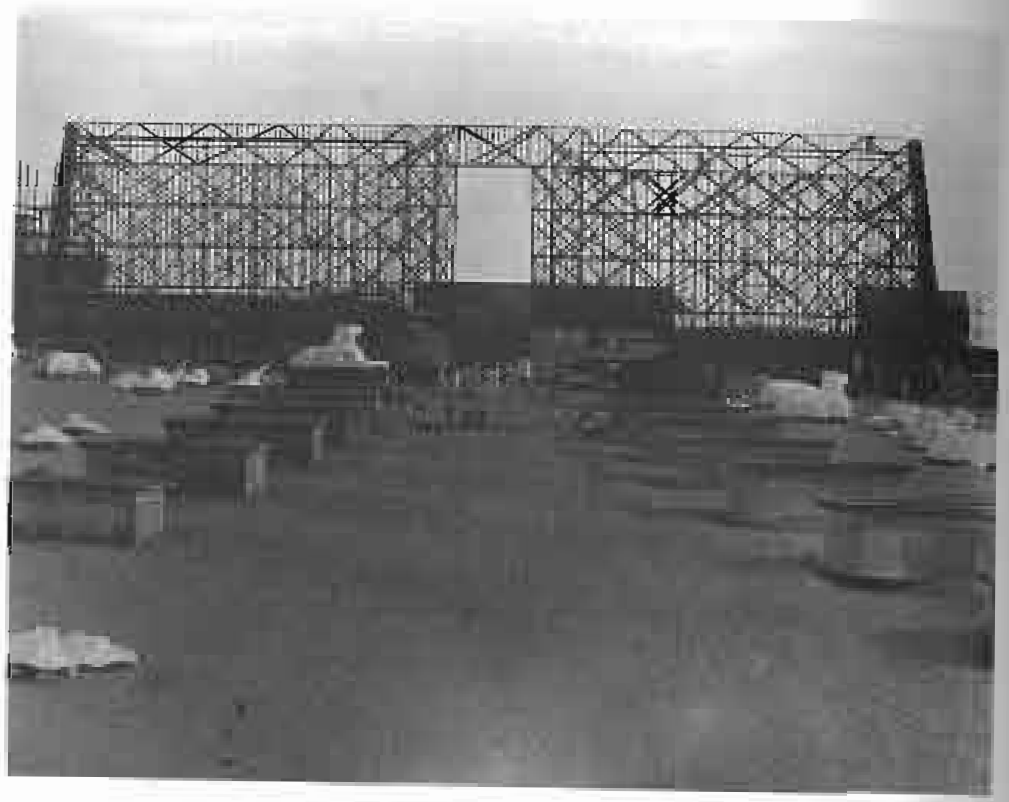
Turning the gilt-edged pages to Exodus, movie directors have filmed the story of Moses eight times. The first three were admirable silent versions by Pathé (*Moses,* 1907), Henri Andréani (*Moïse sauvé des eaux,* 1911), and Vitagraph (*The Life of Moses,* 1909–1910), and these were followed by Michael Curtiz's Austrian *Moon of Israel* (*Die Sklavenkönigin,* 1924), which starred the fabulous María Corda. But as the power of Pharaoh yielded to that of Moses and his god, so does any praise for these silent versions yield to that bestowed upon Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments.* In creating his first great ancient spectacle, DeMille characteristically looked at hundreds of ancient

works of art and European paintings to find the most appropriate and/or attractive costuming. He insisted that the sets be designed after Egyptian originals. He also sent his assistant Florence Meehan on a twenty thousand–mile trip to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, India, Persia, Burma, Kashmir, China, Siam, and Japan to collect oriental jewelry, costumes, tapestries, silks, swords, and other props. He commissioned the construction of three hundred chariots—an order that could have put ancient chariot makers back in business after a lapse of two millennia—bought two black, Kansas thoroughbreds for $5,000, and hired 225 Orthodox Jews to "look like their ancestors." He sent copies of the Bible to everyone on his payroll and planned to shoot the Exodus scenes in Egypt. Paramount's Adolph Zukor, remembering the recent commercial failure of *Intolerance,* rejected this last idea, and he was skeptical about the entire project: "Old men wearing tablecloths and beards! Cecil, a picture like this would ruin us."[2] But DeMille traded upon his previous successes and assured Zukor that there would be "plenty of box office–worthy sinning" in addition to the religious message, so the studio boss let him proceed with the project.

In keeping with this promise, DeMille centered his approach to the story around the Golden Calf revelry; this scene could tie the ancient story into a parallel modern orgy, and its one hundred thinly clad women would certainly give it huge mass appeal. DeMille had his writer Jeanie MacPherson prepare an ancient account of Exodus that could dissolve into a modern parallel after the Golden Calf episode. The result was a modern story about a man who disrespects the Bible and even calls the Ten Commandments, which his mother has just read to him at the dissolve, "a lot of bunk." He goes through life sinning and cheating everyone but ultimately encounters justice and suffers guilt when the church he has lucratively built from cheap cement cracks and topples onto his devout mother.

The ancient story of *The Ten Commandments* is very much abbreviated. The first sequences show the Israelites suffering under Pharaoh. The titles read from Exodus 1:13: "And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour," so the hapless slaves tug at huge ropes before the gates of Pharaoh's (here unspecified) city. Dathan, the Hebrew, shakes his fist at Pharaoh Rameses, and all the slaves are lashed with the whip. Rameses announces, "If a man clog the wheels of Pharaoh, he shall be ground to dust." And to be sure, a Hebrew man is soon crushed to a pulp by a huge granite wheel. The scene quickly changes to Pharaoh's court. Moses and Aaron have already set nine plagues upon Egypt. Moses now warns Pharaoh, who sits between two live lions chained to double columns, about the coming death of Egyptian firstborn, but Pharaoh's young son is unafraid and whips Moses. The next scene shows Pharaoh mourning over his dead son; at last, he consents to let Moses' people go. Because the titles for these ancient scenes are derived from passages of Exodus, the action appears to be little more than a pantomime of the Bible story.

To shoot the ensuing Exodus scene DeMille had taken his cast of 3,500 people and 6,000 animals to Guadelupe, in Santa Barbara County—about two hundred miles



85 The skeleton of a colossal entrance pylon rises in the rear of this photo from DeMille's silent *The Ten Commandments* (1923), while plaster sphinxes lie by their future pedestals. DeMille shot the Exodus scene from the top of the pylon. After shooting was completed, this Orange County site was not dismantled but simply backfilled; in the 1980s archaeologists excavated the set, then backfilled it again for future generations to rediscover.

from Los Angeles. There he set up a camp with its own cows, government, hospital, and restaurants (including a Kosher restaurant for the 225 Orthodox Jews). A private police unit enforced the strict orders to all cast members that there was to be absolutely no "unbiblical" behavior at the camp. DeMille's reasons for these orders were twofold: first, that there should be no scandal that might cause adverse publicity for the picture, and second, that all would act their parts better if they lived in the spirit of their biblical roles for a few weeks. For DeMille, not only lead actors but all the extras had to live their parts; he believed that an authentic atmosphere would create the most realistic film.

The resulting scene became one of the more impressive of the silent era. Leaving the Egyptian city through a huge pylon 750 feet wide by 109 feet high—one of the largest exterior sets built to date—and an avenue of twenty-four sphinxes, the excitedly disenthralled Israelite mob is burdened with camels, goats, sheep, chickens, donkeys, and baggage, as wagons share the road with masses of disorderly pedestrians. (This extraordinary movie set was itself the object of an archaeological excavation some seventy-five years after it was buried in the California desert.) In the midst of this crowd, DeMille focuses his camera on several tender familial scenes, a girl with her doll, a woman with her goat, and a family feasting together. The contrast between the intimate personal scenes and the massive crowd scenes produces a well-rounded impression of the joy of the occasion. And all the while DeMille had the "authentic" Orthodox Jews singing Hebrew chants.

When Pharoah's heart hardens one last time, and he sends three hundred chariots swiftly across the sands (of the Mojave), the aerial shot shows each chariot casting its dramatically long, late-afternoon shadow, bringing home the cause for panic amid the Israelite caravan. At one point, some of the chariots crash into each other. According to some reports in 1923, DeMille had purposely and privately sawed through some chariot axles to cause the spectacular crash. At any rate, it looked stupendous, so it remained in the final print of the film; in fact, DeMille used parts of the scene again in his 1934 *Cleopatra*.

The chase sequence culminates with the marvel of marvels—the parting of the Red Sea. After a double-exposed pillar of fire holds off the Egyptians, the waters roll spectacularly back, giving the Israelites dry passage. When the Egyptians follow, they are drowned as the sea reclaims its bed. To create this effect, Roy Pomeroy covered a table top with gelatin molded around gas jets. He ignited the powerful jets, and the gelatin melted in a bubbling swirl. The film was then run in reverse to create the effect of the waters crashing together over the pursuing charioteers.

The ancient sequences of *The Ten Commandments* come to a close after Moses receives the tablets on Mount Sinai and returns to find wild, lascivious revelry among his people. Worst of all, the crowd is worshiping a huge Golden Calf (with an Egyptian Hathor crown and sun-disk), which is caressed with particular perversity by one paganizing Israelitess. Moses hurls the tablets, which splinter against the rocks. The sinner begs Moses for forgiveness and purification, but a sudden bolt of lightning smashes the calf and sends all into a panic. Here the story dissolves into the modern parallel.

The Ten Commandments, in addition to dramatizing Exodus, provides a convincing cinematic account of the events and lessons to be learned from this pivotal section of the Old Testament. The design of DeMille's huge moral and historical show becomes clear in the first title, with its easily digestible message: "The 10 Commandments are not laws—they are the LAW." Such parallels of biblical and modern morality may seem old-fashioned, but this version of *The Ten Commandments* was a smashing success in 1923, and it ensured the continuance of "ancient" films throughout the twenties. Michael Curtiz's *Moon of Israel* had equally successful special effects and impressive crowd scenes, but it lacked the modern parallel story that gave *The Ten Commandments* its powerful claim to moral profundity. Yet DeMille typically spices the morality entrée with generous sprinklings of sex, dance, action, spectacle, and historical realism.

In 1943 an Italian film entitled *The Ten Commandments* was produced, starring Valentina Cortese and Rossano Brazzi, but its ten vignettes about the Mosaic laws were set only in modern times. The film was released in the United States only after the success of DeMille's second version of the story.

When DeMille began work on his sound and full-color VistaVision production of *The Ten Commandments* (1956), he was seventy years old. His seventy films had reportedly grossed more than $575 million, so he essentially had carte blanche in preparing his new film. Taking advantage of a huge budget, DeMille was able to fulfill his unsatisfied desire from the first version—to shoot the Egyptian and Sinai scenes on location in Egypt and on Mount Sinai. He increased the number of extras from 3,500 to almost 20,000 (many drawn from the Egyptian army) and upped his expenses from the $1.5 million of the first version to more than $13.5 million; critics jested that "he spent over $1 million per commandment."[3] But the money and four years spent allowed DeMille to expand this new *The Ten Commandments* into the biggest, grandest, and most awe-inspiring film of its kind.

DeMille had once remarked, "I use a big canvas," and the painterly metaphor is apt.[4] To him the parting of the Red Sea, the exodus of thousands of Hebrew slaves, the massive chase of six hundred Egyptian chariots, forty years of wandering through wilderness, and Jehovah's presentation of the tablets of law to Moses could not be sufficiently portrayed on a small scale. Bigness was an innate part of the film's design. The result was the colossal magnitude of *The Ten Commandments*. To portray the building of Sethi's desert city, DeMille combined full-scale sets, miniatures, and mattes for a panorama filled with laboring slaves, half-built sphinxes, high-rising pylons, and a tall stone obelisk. As Moses, the master architect, gives the signal, men with mallets smash the thick chain fastenings to release rough, six-inch-thick ropes. They unroll around a whirring windlass, and the scene is dominated by the thundering and hissing of wood, rock, and rope; the one hundred–foot obelisk begins to rise over the heads of the sun-browned slaves as several taut cables snap with a cracking sound. The few thousand slaves pull with all their might, urged on by Egyptian whips, but the wood support underneath the multiton granite breaks in half, and several slaves meet their death. The close-up camera now yields to a long-distance shot (of a miniature), and the mighty obelisk gradually rises the rest of its precalculated path and at last slides efficiently into its position between the pylons. Moses proudly explains to Pharaoh Sethi that sand now supports the obelisk, and nonchalantly adds that "a thousand slaves will remove that later." The scene is expanded by several more shots of other half-built stone monuments, all of them blending well with the tawny sand and granite colors that overwhelm the scene.

This scene does not occur in the text of Exodus. For that matter, the Bible does not mention Sethi by name, nor does it mention Moses as master architect (let alone prince) of Egypt. But DeMille's research staff (Henry Noerdlinger) and special consultants (including faculty and staff at the Department of Antiquities at Luxor, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Oriental Institute in Chicago) informed him of Rameses' building programs in the thirteenth century B.C. at Luxor and Karnak. Combining this information with Exodus 1:11—"And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pithom and Raamses"—and assuming that this pharaoh was Rameses II, DeMille decided to show this massive, one-sentence, biblical building program at one of its most exciting moments. He had his art directors Hal Pereira and Walter Tyler re-create actual Egyptian buildings, pylons, sphinxes, and an obelisk, and all the biblical and archaeological research was then molded into the story line of the film. The biblical setting essentially belongs to Exodus 1:11, and the Egyptian buildings authentically derive from those of Rameses and Queen Hatshepsut, but the noise, color, spectacle, and gigantic scale are DeMille's. His purpose: to show some-

86 DeMille's miniatures, mattes, and full-scale models are edited together to create the illusion of the colossal. This is a full-scale shot of Hebrew slaves raising Sethi's obelisk into place in *The Ten Commandments* (1956). The huge ropes snap, windlasses whirl, and the supporting wood beam breaks under the weight of the huge granite block (upper left). Several slaves will appear to fall over the foreground wall to their death. The scene is so absorbing that one hardly notices when the mattes and miniatures replace the full-scale. Such skill won the Oscar for special effects in 1956.

thing more than whipped and tortured Hebrew slaves, to show the grandeur and might of Egypt—the same might Moses and his Israelites would have to defeat in the months to come. After this scene, the viewer can truly appreciate the power of Nineteenth Dynasty Egypt so that the eventually victorious power of Jehovah will seem all that much greater.

Few matched DeMille in re-creating realistic and authentic historical spectacle; none matched him in fitting historicity into his plots. During this same building sequence Moses and Rameses—the two aspirants to Sethi's throne—accuse each other of incompetence. Sethi has been marveling at Moses' architectural project, but the envious Rameses

87 The obelisk-raising scene from DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956). This multimatted shot of full-scale and miniature stems from one sentence in Genesis, four years of academic research, and a lifetime of DeMillean imagination. The terrace is a reconstruction of Queen Hatshepsut's temple (1480 B.C.), called Sethi's in the film, and the obelisk and pylons are reconstructions of various ancient monuments. Although the scope of the scene is overwhelming, DeMille subtly employs the spectacle to further his narrative.

88 Queen Hatshepsut's temple as it appears today in the Valley of the Kings. Frustrated by his inability to shoot his 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments* in Egypt, DeMille exploited all the authentic sources he could in 1956.

89 The entrance pylon of the temple of Horus at Edfu, Egypt. DeMille had his art directors reduplicate the shape, size, and painted exteriors of several pylons. The large standing figure and double row of sitting figures on the temple were adapted for Sethi's monument in *The Ten Commandments* (1956).

now informs Sethi that Moses has illicitly opened the priestly granaries; he puts a small weight on the nearby balance. Then he informs Sethi that Moses has been supplying this "divine grain" to the Hebrew slaves; he puts a second weight onto the scales. Finally he informs Sethi that Moses has given the slaves one day of rest each week; he puts a third weight onto the balance, which finally sinks all the way to the bottom. In his defense before the now suspicious pharaoh, Moses replies that the strong, well-fed slave builds better bricks; he puts a huge brick on the balance which now plunges to the bottom on Moses' side. Mathematical calculation and architectural exactitude had been the underlying theme of the spectacular obelisk-raising sequence until Rameses' dispute with Moses. But now, because of DeMille's astute appreciation for historical realism, architectural exactitude and its mathematical balance have become the underlying strength of Moses' verbal argument.[5] At the same time, DeMille gives us a personal reason—ambition and jealousy—for Rameses' desperate hatred of Moses. In his fury Rameses swears the vengeance that will prevail throughout the rest of the film: "The city that he builds shall bear my name; the woman that he loves shall bear my child; so shall it be written, so shall it be done!"

And so the entire basis for the Egyptian plot that culminates in the spectacular parting of the Red Sea is established in this quarrel—the very quarrel that arose directly from a spectacular effects sequence, and that was developed via an authentic ancient balance. DeMille juxtaposed spectacle and authentic detail with human emotions and plot development. This ensures that his characters do not stand isolated before historical backgrounds or in historical costumes; they move realistically within a seemingly authentic atmosphere; they use both spectacular events and minor properties like true ancients. DeMille does more than re-create a real obelisk, sphinx, or architectural balance; he absorbs them into his historical vision.

One other scene emphasizes the magnificence of the Egypt that Moses must one day force into submission. Because biblical information about Moses is sparse between the time of his discovery amid the bulrushes and his slaughter of an Egyptian taskmaster, DeMille decided to establish Moses as a prince, the adoptive nephew of Pharaoh Sethi and cousin of Rameses. When Moses returns from a victorious campaign against Saba (Sheba) in the south, he enters a brightly sunlit throne room strewn with rose petals. He is dressed in shining Egyptian armor, and Sethi receives him dressed in full pharaonic splendor—a long white robe, the flail and scepter, and the *pschent,* the double crown of Lower and Upper Egypt. Moses presents for him a colorful spectacle: the king of Ethiopia (Woody Strode), whose powerful drummers set the rhythm for Ethiopia's tribute. Huge, rainbow-colored feather gowns, piles of glowing semiprecious stones, rich furs, dark logs of ebony, and branches of myrrh are laid onto the pharoah's gold floor. Such bright color and pageantry are typical of the scenes portraying the Egyptian royals—including, of course, the pre–burning bush Moses.

In stark contrast are the drab, depressing scenes of the Hebrews in bondage. After he discovers that he is a Hebrew, Moses descends from the golden sunlit splendor of the

previous scenes to the quagmire of his compatriots' existence in the brick factory's mud pits. Nefretiri (Anne Baxter), once his beloved Egyptian princess, summons Moses to her chambers. He wears a ragged loincloth, a scraggly beard, and a coating of caked mud. Nefretiri wears a bright green gown and carries a green fan made of soft ostrich plumes. The deep-voiced Nefretiri (not to be confused with the better known Eighteenth Dynasty queen, Nefertiti) teases the lowly Moses: "First friend of Pharaoh, keeper of the Royal Seal, Prince of Ammon, Prince of Memphis, Prince of Thebes, Beloved of the Nile God, Conqueror of Ethiopia, General of Generals, Commander of the Eastern Host, a Man of Mud!" She finishes with an alto laugh.

A man of subtleties as well as hokey showmanship, DeMille creates a powerful change of mood by using different atmospheric colors to film Egypt's plagues. The darkened sky from which the ominously silent hail begins to fall, the deep red blood that swims out from Aaron's staff into the divinely contaminated sacred waters of the Nile, and the sickly, pervasive, lethal green smoke of the Angel of Death change a wealthy kingdom into a dying land. The atmosphere and colors change again as the film shows the miraculous pillar of fire, the parting of the Red Sea (never called "Red" in the film because of the water's obvious lack of red coloring), and Moses on a crimson-toned Mount Sinai. The biblical pillar of fire came "between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was the cloud and the darkness here, yet gave it light by night there" (Exodus 14:20); the Academy Award–winning special-effects expert John P. Fulton created this chiaroscuro effect on the screen.

Even more brilliant, technically and imaginatively, was the parting of the Red Sea. DeMille had a 360,000-gallon water tank built, and the visual effect was created by pouring water from the tank and reversing the film. Smoky and threatening clouds swirl over the churning waters, and each cloud reflects the biblical darkness of storm and brightness of morning. When the frothing waters part, their imposing walls rise to dominate the whole assemblage of up to thirteen matted shots with a metallic sea-green hue. In the foreground before this impressive barrage of variegated tints, Moses' bright, God-inspired eyes and gray-streaked hair set off his red cloak. The environment in which the parting of the waters takes place differs so much from the light and colors seen elsewhere in the film that the special effects become even more marvelous and miraculous. Such brilliant use of color and special effects helped to make this scene one of the most recognizable, iconic, and inimitable sequences in the history of filmdom.

This grand assemblage of atmospheres and colors could not carry *The Ten Commandments* on its own. The special effects that make the plagues and the exodus so vivid are especially powerful because they are presented in service of fine acting and epic screenwriting. Perhaps no one ever played Oriental despots and kings like Yul Brynner (Rameses), and Anne Baxter is dagger-sharp yet kittenish as his wife Nefretiri. Rameses' father, Pharaoh Sethi, is played by Sir Cedric Hardwicke, who conveys the aging, kindly, but regal personality of "the old crocodile." Charlton Heston, fresh from DeMille's similarly

90 This interior scene from *The Ten Commandments* (1956) demonstrates DeMille's insistence on archaeological detail. Pharaoh Rameses II (Yul Brynner) wears the unstriped pharaonic *nemes* and sits beside a column with lotus designs (bottom) and cobra reliefs alternating with cartouches. The cartouche just to the left above Brynner's head is the authentic hieroglyphic insignia for the historical Rameses II. At right is the famed "seated scribe." Rameses' child (Eugene Mazzola) wears an authentic Egyptian hairdo, and his general Pentaur (Henry Wilcoxon), left, wears an authentic layered military headdress. The votive ax, far left, is also authentic.

spectacular and convincing *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952), carved out a unique niche in the history of the cinema by avoiding the commonplace, overstudied, pseudoprophetic approach to biblical figures. Instead, he played Moses with vitality and energy. The cinematic Moses does not mimic the Moses in Exodus—the Moses that stutters and bungles until he hears from Jehovah at the burning bush. But Heston adapts well to the young, princely Moses, the slaving, mud-caked Moses, the demanding, plague-bearing Moses, and the grizzled, lawgiving Moses. The part of Moses presented great challenges and difficulties, and Heston met them brilliantly. In Heston's own words, "It was an enormous role—like Christ—unplayable. It was beyond my capacities then, and it would be beyond my capacities now. I dare say it would be beyond Olivier's capacities."[6]

91/94 Ancient sources for DeMille's portrayal of the pharaoh's court: a seated scribe, who did his work sometime between 2563 and 2423 B.C., in the Fifth Dynasty; a carved relief from the Twentieth Dynasty temple of Rameses III showing the military headdress of shipboard warriors; a Twentieth Dynasty painting illustrating the hairdo of Pharaoh's son; and an Eighteenth Dynasty ax with a curved wooden haft, leather binding, and a curved, figured blade inlaid with precious stones.

95 Moses (Charlton Heston) has Aaron (John Carradine) change the sacred waters of the Nile to blood in *The Ten Commandments* (1956) as Pharaoh Rameses (Yul Brynner) and his general (Henry Wilcoxon) find their own blood boiling. The idol to the right is Amon, who is authentically half-ram, half-human. Rameses wears a *nemes* with a cobra-tipped *uraeus* (diadem), the priests are authentically bald, and the columns are authentically designed to represent bundles of papyrus. The priest at far left wears the *ankh* around his neck.

DeMille also assembled an accomplished supporting cast. Edward G. Robinson enlivened the part of the perfidious Dathan, and who could better portray the slimy, villainous Baka than Vincent Price? The script by Æneas MacKenzie and Jesse Lasky Jr. provides literate, amusing, and expressive lines for a variety of well-known actors and actresses. Memnet (Judith Anderson) tells Sethi's sister and Moses' adoptive mother, Bithiah (Nina Foch), that she is going to inform Moses of his Hebrew birth. Bithiah lashes back: "That tongue will dig your grave." A fine stichomythic exchange between Prince Rameses and the stool pigeon Dathan culminates with convincingly Egyptian phraseology. Rameses wants Dathan to find the rumored "Hebrew deliverer." Slipping a gold ring onto his spear point, Rameses offers the bribe to Dathan and calls him "a rat's ear and a ferret's nose." Dathan responds: "To use in your service, son of Pharaoh." When Moses sees the Hebrew slave Yochabel (whom he will later discover to be his real mother) about to be

96/97 The funerary mask of Pharaoh Tutankhamen, "King Tut." The blue and gold stripes and cobra visor are re-created in *The Ten Commandments* (1956), but Yul Brynner does not wear the ceremonial beard-wig, which adorned all Egyptian heads of state, even queens. The Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1400–1360 B.C.) temple of Amon in Luxor features papyrus-bundle columns.

crushed by a huge block of granite, he argues with the Egyptian taskmaster that "blood makes poor mortar." He saves the woman, and she praises Jehovah: "The Lord has lightened my burdens." Moses, still a doubting Egyptian prince, advises with irony, "He would have done better to *remove* them." The film also includes a fair amount of narration that is partly biblical and partly in biblical style. DeMille himself narrates these lengthy transitional passages with fervor. The voice of Jehovah, contrary to reports, was not DeMille's; it was provided by Heston and part-time actor Donald Hayne.[7]

Also important to the flowing script were several oft-repeated ancient idioms. Most memorable was the byword of Rameses: "So shall it be written, so shall it be done." Another conveyed a hint of humor to several scenes: when Sethi hears the court crier announce his seemingly endless titles with the greatest pomp—much like the previously quoted titles with which Nefretiri mocked Moses—Sethi impatiently calls him "the old windbag." Then, on Sethi's death bed, he once again hears the bombastic crier praying to the Gods of the Dead. He whispers poignantly in weeping Nefretiri's ear: "The old windbag."

98/99 One of the reasons DeMille chose Charlton Heston to play the part of Moses in his VistaVision version of *The Ten Commandments* was that he *looked* like Moses. DeMille released this publicity shot, which bears a striking resemblance to Michelangelo's *Moses*. Directors of "ancient" films often rely on paintings and sculptures by the European Masters, as well as archaeological remains from antiquity. Michelangelo's was the most widely recognized depiction of Moses—until DeMille made his 1956 film.

Other touches of humanizing humor appear in *The Ten Commandments*. When the excited Hebrews are leaving Pharaoh's city in the great exodus, an ass balks in the middle of "the glorious chaos." His owner comically laments, "Four hundred years of bondage, and *today* he won't move!" But DeMille presumably was not laughing when he got a foretaste of his own earthly exodus. Climbing up the 107-foot entrance pylon (essentially unchanged in design from the one used in his 1923 version) to observe the Hebrews' exit, DeMille suffered a mild heart attack. In an impressive show of inspiration and determination, he continued up the rickety ladder, checked his camera angles and perspective, then descended the ladder unaided. Two days later he was on the set again, and he completed the last three weeks of location shooting in Egypt. So it was written, and so it was done.

Thirty-three years after his groundbreaking silent version of the film, DeMille's new *The Ten Commandments* expanded still further the possibilities of the epic film. Combining knowledge of cinema with a passionate yet intelligent love for the Old Testament, DeMille saw his life's ambition blossom into a colossal reality. His magnificent vision and command of the Exodus material more than compensate for the heroic exaggeration and the occasional narrative lapses that by nature accompany any epic—cinematic, operatic, or literary. In using more than nine hundred sources (and saying so in the credits), he filled the gaps in the biblical text with fictitious yet plausible conjectures—Moses' upbringing in the Egyptian court, his love for Nefretiri, his personal enmity with Rameses, the presence of a (late–Bronze Age) Trojan embassy at the (late–Bronze Age) Pharaoh's court. He also expanded some inconsequential parts of the actual biblical text into full-blown cinematic realities: the biblical Dathan appears only in Numbers, not in Exodus; the cinematic Joshua (John Derek) is a key to the motivation of the Egyptian Moses, yet the biblical Joshua is of no importance until after the exodus; and the biblical, personal grief of Pharaoh (Rameses) at the death of his first born is much expanded. Moreover, DeMille's unparalleled skill at directing huge crowds was evidenced in his control over ten thousand extras for the exodus scene alone, not to mention two hundred camels controlled by electronically charged wires. He also rented airplanes, had them flown to the south of Cairo, and had the wind from their propellers blow on the Israelites crossing the desert, then added the parted Red Sea later. DeMille's bold use of location shooting was enhanced when this old crocodile personally climbed Sinai to approve some of the film's final scenes, with their eerie red tint and murky lighting. All this skill and manipulation elevated an already effective script into the realm of filmic masterpiece.

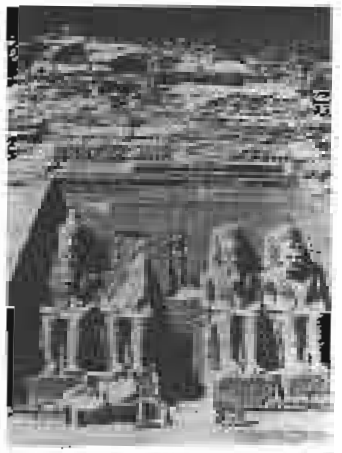
The crowning touch for *The Ten Commandments* was Elmer Bernstein's dynamic score. He composed several different themes that served as leitmotifs throughout the film. The basses and trombones sound the low, triumphant Ten Commandments theme during the overture, while the obelisk is being raised for Sethi's city, and when the Hebrews pass through the aquatic walls of the Red Sea. Bernstein also works the theme into such scenes as the burning bush and Mount Sinai sequences, but here it is sounded by soft violins amid angelic harmonies. The theme is heard so frequently and in so many different arrangements and instrumentations throughout the three and two-thirds hours of the film that it becomes a welcome and satisfying part of the whole experience. Like "So shall it be written, so shall it be done," it gives us something familiar to grasp onto at significant parts of the overwhelming narrative. The adaptability of Bernstein's artistry is evident in the Egyptian court scenes, with the orientalizing triangle, Nilotic flutes and harps; in the Israeli dance of Jethro's daughters; and in the marching exodus of the Hebrews.

When the film opened on November 8, 1956, it immediately impressed a number of people, except, of course, "the big city critics" with whom DeMille had had a two-generation-long feud. He was received by Pope Pius XII, West German President Theodor Heuss, Winston Churchill, and Queen Elizabeth. His four years of work and Paramount's

$13.5 million investment brought to a magnificent close the directing career of Cecil B. DeMille. *The Ten Commandments* was to be the magnificent triumph of one of Hollywood's founders and most memorable directors. In terms of scope, inspiration, color, and biblically (divinely?) inspired special effects, the film has still not met its equal.

In fact, no one dared again to touch the subject of Moses until Avco Embassy's 1975 *Moses, the Lawgiver,* starring Burt Lancaster. First released episodically for television, the film was later cut and released to theaters. Director Gianfranco De Bosio sensibly realized that he could not possibly reach DeMillean heights of spectacle and showmanship, so he tried to play down these crowd-pleasing elements. He did just that; the film has no spectacle, no dramatic substance, and is as a result quite verbose and static. One interesting

100 The crowded, joyous exodus scene from DeMille's 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments.* Rameses II's entrance pylon, complete with painted reliefs of plumed and caparisoned horses, pharaonic cartouches, soaring Nekhebet, and bow-shooting Pharaoh, is authentic, as is the avenue of sphinxes. The four seated statues next to the pylon are reproduced from Rameses II's rock-cut temple at Abu-Simbel.



101/103 Exodus sources: the entrance pylon and the avenue of criosphinxes (ram-headed sphinxes) at Rameses II's temple of Amon at Karnak; a painted wooden box on which Pharaoh Tutankhamen is shown riding his chariot against the ringlet-bearded Assyrians while Nekhebet, the protective deity in vulture form, soars above two cartouches (pharaonic name-seals); and the rock-cut temple at Abu-Simbel. Built by Pharaoh Rameses II, the temple was moved piece by piece and reconstructed elsewhere when the Aswan Dam was built.

aspect—academically, not cinematically—is De Bosio's Red Sea sequence. By 1975 biblical scholars had suggested that a historical Moses would have led his people across the marshy Sea of Reeds in northern Egypt rather than through the deep-watered Red Sea, and so *Moses, the Lawgiver* shows about 150 cloth-draped extras ho-humming their way across shallow waters. Once again we see that historical authenticity and cinematic vitality are not always compatible.

Perhaps appropriately, *Moses, the Lawgiver* revived enough interest in Moses to inspire a slow-witted spoof, *Wholly Moses* (1980). A much better comedy based on the Pentateuch is *The Green Pastures* (1936), which included the story of Moses and Rameses; here, however, it was a Moses in checkered shirt and trousers marveling at the bush "dat ain't burnt up," and "His Honor Old King Pharaoh." These films will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8. More germane here is DreamWorks' *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), which in a revival of accomplished animated features and computer-generated special effects offers architectural splendors, crowd scenes, and deity-generated special effects of a scope that surpasses even DeMille's. The scene in which Moses threatens Pharaoh with his staff-turned-serpent grows into a magnificent and tuneful display by the Egyptian priests (singing "You're Playing with the Big Boys Now"); the Red Sea parts in a physically plausible hydraulic explosion; and young Rameses and Moses race their chariots along precariously high catwalks stretching from one colossal monument to the next. Perhaps the most creative scene is the dream sequence. The purpose of the clever expository episode is to inform the previously naive Moses that his Hebrew family gave him away to the house of Pharaoh. To deliver the message, the dream brings Egyptian wall paintings to life, animated with parading soldiers and refugee hordes of helpless commoners, making the great Ramesid monument of Medinet Habu quite static by comparison.

The producer, Jeffrey Katzenberg, who had been in charge of a number of successful Disney animated features before leaving to form DreamWorks with David Geffen and Steven Spielberg, aimed beyond the juvenile audience. He boasts of consulting with more than seven hundred scholars, clergymen, and assorted authorities—shades of DeMille, but two hundred sources shy—and he toned down the humor and eliminated the talking animals that characterized *The Lion King* and his other successes. The result is a reasonably intelligent film that forces the viewer to confront the incongruity of animated characters and sets and the sobriety of the theological message.

Judges

Far removed from the Pentateuch's revolutionary plague-inflicting, lawgiving Moses, Judges' revolutionary Samson fought his people's tyrannical overlords with hirsute brawn, a clever wit, and a few breaths from Jehovah's nostrils. Also unlike Moses, Samson had a moral weakness that led him more than once into romantic disaster. Moral weakness? Romance? Disaster? Sounds like a good idea for a movie. And so it was, first in Pathé's

104 Authenticity does not necessarily a movie make. Here the Israelites cross not the biblical Red Sea, but the authentic Sea of Reeds—a marsh to the north of Egypt. Modern disbelief in miracles and insistence on scientific rationale are incompatible with the parting of the waters of Exodus (and DeMille), but cinematic illusion and dramatic effect are incompatible with 150 drab extras ho-humming their way through unmiraculous miracles in this early made-for-television film, *Moses, the Lawgiver* (1976).

1903 *Samson and Delilah,* then in Theo Frenkel's 1911 version, then in Universal's 1914 production (which cost a mighty $100,000), and then in Alexander Korda's 1922 Austrian version. Korda's film starred Maria Corda, Alfredo Galoar, and the Hungarian Paul Lukas (born Pál Lukács). Like DeMille's first version of *The Ten Commandments,* Korda's film followed the post-*Intolerance* tendency to combine ancient and modern sequences. The film was apparently a financial failure, but it at least gave Korda his first lesson in assembling huge, international costume epics. Korda's assistant producer was young Mihály Kertész (Michael Curtiz); Curtiz went on that year to make his modern/ancient version of *Sodom und Gomorrah.*

DeMille first conceived an idea for a film about Samson in 1935. He ultimately chose the book *Judge and Fool* by Vladimir Jaborinsky and then set to work adapting novel and Bible for his 1949 film *Samson and Delilah,* starring Victor Mature. Because the

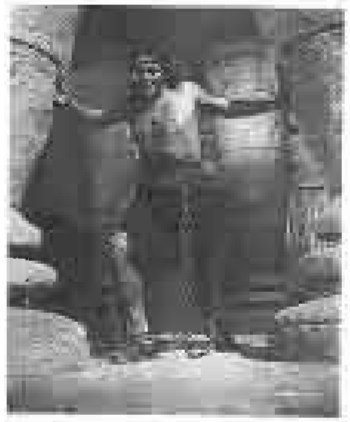
story of the adult Samson consumes only three chapters in the Old Testament, DeMille had to flesh out the story—in more ways than one. Taking the clue from Judges 15:2 that Samson's first wife had a younger sister, he expanded the role of Semedar (Angela Lansbury) as the sister of Delilah (Hedy Lamarr). This created the opportunity for much romancing and sibling jealousy, in addition to the semibiblical burning of Semedar, her father, and their house. The other episodes from the Bible appear as well—the riddle of the lion and honey and the thirty-garment bet, the three lies to Delilah about the source of Samson's strength, the blinding of the hero, the gristmill drudgery, and the collapse of the temple of Dagon onto a few thousand sporting Philistines.

The screenplay by Jesse Lasky Jr. and Frederic Frank milks every possible metaphor and irony out of this robust tale of love and deceit. After Samson confesses to Delilah that the answer to his riddle is "honey in a lion's belly" (Judges 15:18), the two kiss. Samson flatters her, "You're sweeter than honey," and Delilah responds in kind, "Oh, stronger than a lion." One unforgettable Samsonian line is preserved verbatim from the Bible: when Semedar tells the answer of Samson's riddle to the Philistines and they in turn inform Samson that they know the correct answer, Samson protests, "If ye had not plowed with my heifer, Ye had not found out my riddle" (Judges 15:18). Following Sophocles' lead in *Oedipus Rex*, the screenwriters emphasize the irony of Samson's blinding and the haircut that made him vulnerable: "When my eyes could see, I was blind to your deceit, Delilah," he says, and "If I haven't the strength to fight you Philistines, I need no eyes to see you." Of course, the usual run-of-DeMille apothegms and ancientish hokum appear as well: the Philistines devising treachery are warned, "The trouble you brew today you will drink tomorrow!" And when Delilah rushes to Samson's arms after he has slayed the lion barehanded, he jocularly protests, "Hey! One cat at a time!"

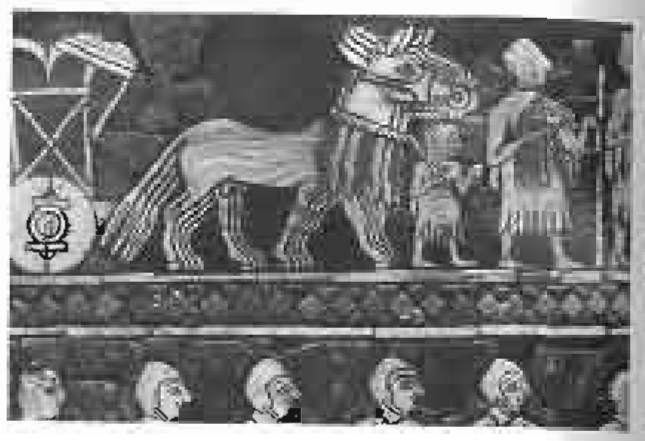
Samson and Delilah was quite spectacular compared to its contemporaries; the audiences of 1949 and 1950 apparently thought so, buying $11 million worth of tickets. If the color and spectacle in *Samson and Delilah* pale in comparison with DeMille's subsequent *The Ten Commandments*, the difference was due in part to a limited budget and less exotic setting: rocky, sparse Palestine lacks the richness and color of Nilotic Egypt. But the underlying reason was that the colorful biblical spectacle simply didn't exist as a film genre in 1949. *Samson and Delilah*, in fact, created the genre and served as the prototype that was to culminate in DeMille's hands seven years later.

The story of Samson offers opportunities to the special-effects man. For some reason DeMille and technician Gordon Jennings decided to omit the scene in which Samson burns down the Philistine cornfields and vineyards by tying torches to the intertwined tails of 150 pairs of jackals (Judges 15:4; Huston later used the scene out of place in *The Bible*). But we do see Samson receive the gusting inspiration of God in a windy mountain pass, burst the thick ropes that have been wound tightly around his shoulders and arms, pick up the spectral jawbone of an ass, and crush vast numbers of helmeted skulls in the name of Jehovah.

105 The enchanting, beguiling Philistine beauty, Delilah, as captivatingly portrayed by Hedy Lamarr in DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949).



106 Samson (Victor Mature) begins his well-situated destruction of the temple of Dagon in *Samson and Delilah*. Scholars know that Delilah's Philistines were actually a seafaring people who might have come to Philistia from Minoan Crete, so DeMille used the inverted Minoan for these Philistine columns.



107 DeMille orientalized his putatively Minoan Philistines by painting scenes from the Standard of Ur on the interior walls of his temple of Dagon in *Samson and Delilah*. The Standard is Sumerian (Mesopotamian) in origin and dates from circa 2700 B.C.

As DeMille was to make the architectural balance an unobtrusive yet vital prop in that early scene in *The Ten Commandments*, so he subtly introduces the equine jawbone long before Samson's miraculous victory. A Philistine dwarf earlier had taunted Samson with the mandible, little suspecting how many human skulls that lifeless jawbone could still consume. One anecdote about this jawbone is full of insight into DeMille's approach to historical films. DeMille looked at numerous paintings by the European masters to find the most appropriate depiction of this jawbone scene in Judges 15:15. He saw that all the paintings showed Samson smiting the Philistines with half the jawbone. DeMille immediately ordered his properties man to find the jawbone of an ass. Before long he had one in his un-Samsonesque hand and was repeatedly and forcefully swinging the bone, creating piles and piles of imaginary Philistine corpses in his Hollywood office. By actually trying out the fabled technique, DeMille instantly realized that the full jawbone made a more forceful weapon than did the half, so he used the full jawbone in the film. But before Samson could get his hands on the jawbone, DeMille had the dwarf practice ventriloquism with its moving parts.

Paramount spent more than $3 million on the film itself and another million on advertising. Advertising expenses ranged from lecture tours by the noted historian Arnold Toynbee to Kellogg's gimmicky "Samson-sized Cornflakes." For the lead roles DeMille sponsored talent contests, but Mr. America of 1947 yielded to an overweight Mature, and numerous aspiring Hollywood queens fell before the glamour of the Viennese Lamarr. Mature lost thirty pounds, but he apparently suffered from several phobias, including an understandable lack of enthusiasm for filming the lion-killing sequence with a genuine lion. The resulting combination of shots—Mature vs. stuffed lion, stuntman vs. real lion—disappoints the DeMille aficionado. This was an important role for Mature, who went on to play in five additional "ancient" roles, and he so identified with this role that years later, long after his retirement, he returned to make a cameo as Samson's father in the 1984 made-for-television version. (This was the first of two made-for-television versions; the second, directed by Nicholas Roeg in 1996, starred Eric Thal and Elizabeth Hurley.) Hedy Lamarr played her part with the proper wiliness and alluring poses, aided during one sequence by a gown made of almost two thousand peacock feathers. George Sanders perfected the villainy of the Saran of Gaza, with his pointy beard, vengeful sneers, and insidious conniving.

The Italian revival in the early 1960s had to have its own *Samson* (1961), of course, but this is a horrible film. Even worse were most of the sequels that it spawned or the predecessors that it followed: *Samson and the Sea Beasts* (1963), with Kirk Morris fighting post-Renaissance pirates in the West Indies; *Samson in King Solomon's Mines* (1964), with Reg Park in ancient Africa; *Samson and the Treasure of the Incas* (1964), much like *Hercules Against the Sons of the Sun* but with Alan Steel; *Son of Samson* (1960), which is actually a Maciste film *(Maciste nella Valle del Re); Samson and the Seven Miracles of the World* (1961), with Gordon Scott battling thirteenth-century Tartars; and *Samson and the Slave Queen* (1963), also called *Zorro vs. Maciste,* in which Alan Steel (credited as Sergio Ciani) lives now in the era of Philip II, King of Navarre. Several of these and other "Samson" films have titles translated from the original Italian "Maciste" titles; American distributors knew that American audiences would associate Samson or Goliath or Son of Hercules with heroic strength much more readily than Maciste. Similarly, a Mexican film character known as Santo became known in the United States as Samson, but films like *Samson vs. the Vampire Women* (1961) and *Samson in the Wax Museum* (1961) have nothing to do with long hair, biceps, Palestine, or antiquity.

Much better than these is *Samson and Gideon* (*I Grandi Condottieri,* 1965), which is sufficiently biblical to include Samson's angelically announced birth and his stealing the gates of Gaza. The jawbone and temple of Dagon sequences are modeled after DeMille's, but the remake's temple and its destruction suffer from a Styrofoam toyishness. Samson is muscular but not muscle-bound, and he even displays some Semitic chest hair for once. His left-handedness is disturbing—the ancients were very partial to righties—though not as disturbing as his water-soaked Nylon shag wig. The first half of the film features the

story of Gideon from earlier in the book of Judges (6–8). It shows a folksy, mildly humorous approach similar to *The Bible*'s Noah sequence, though less sophisticated; the film's finest moment is Gideon's humorous reduction of his cowardly army to a faithful and dependable three hundred.

The stories of Saul, David, Goliath, and Bathsheba from the two books of Samuel have appeared in nearly a dozen films, from Kalem's *David and Goliath* (1908) and Vitagraph's *Saul and David* (1909), through the Italian *David, King of Israel* (1912) and J. Gordon Edwards's *The Shepherd King* (1923), to the colorful *David and Bathsheba* (1951) and three modern Italian versions, to a recent made-for-television film. *David, King of Israel* offers a primitive dramatization of the young David, who slays Goliath with his sling, cuts off his head, and parades the severed head, which has been fixed onto a spear shaft. The film also includes a brief portrayal of the Absalom episode—even the tree branch that abruptly halts his flight. Otherwise, unconvincing mattes of Jerusalem's walls and Palestinian palm trees stand behind over-robed actors with ringlet beards, and the scenarios are too quick and characterless. Edwards's *The Shepherd King* boasts some hand-colored sequences and a huge crowd of fifteen thousand extras hired from the army of Emir Abdullah of Transjordania.

Twentieth-Century Fox's *David and Bathsheba* took the two-chapter episode of romance and sin from 2 Samuel 11–12 and made it the central event of the life of David. Needless to say, a 1950s Hollywood screenwriter (in this case, Philip Dunne) had ample opportunity for drama and sex when given as a starting point this suggestive yet unembellished biblical passage: "And it came to pass at eventide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and inquired after the woman. And one said 'Is not this Bath-Sheba, the daughter of Elam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanliness; and she returned unto her house. And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said: 'I am with child' " (2 Samuel 11:2–5).

The film supplied a reason for David (Gregory Peck) to go to his rooftop: a quarrel with Saul's daughter, Michal, one of the wives in David's harem. Some teasing shots of Bathsheba (Susan Hayward) bathing were bound to be worth a few million in box-office receipts. Bathsheba's meeting with David is so confidential that Bathsheba can tell David that she had *wanted* him to see her bathing. And the scene in which Bathsheba tells the monarch that she is with child involves a whole new set of complicated bickering.

But after David confesses his sin before Nathan the prophet (Raymond Massey) and then asks Jehovah for forgiveness, the last half of the film gathers momentum as a direct result of the slow-paced romancing of the first half. Peck is convincing as a once-heroic monarch who now must face an angry constituency and atone for his sins. Nathan and David raise some interesting questions about justice and injustice in their quarrel, and

the king compares the strengths of his merciful and merciless God. Although the film never becomes theologically profound—nor was it meant to be—it does reach a unique climax: the drama's protagonist faces religious and philosophical torment instead of the more hackneyed military or physical crisis.

The essence of the religious drama of *David and Bathsheba* is revealed when David admits his horrendous sin to himself and walks to the tent of the Ark of the Covenant (1 Chronicles 16:4 ff.) to meditate. Jehovah's raining and thundering sky intensifies David's guilt, and the king makes a lengthy speech about mercy and forgiveness to his God. He concludes with, "Look not on this sinner, but on the boy he was," and places his hands on the sacred Ark. The lightning and thunder introduce flashbacks of David as a boy. He is chosen from all of Jesse's sons to succeed Saul as king of Israel and is then anointed by Samuel; he polishes Saul's shield and volunteers to meet the gigantic Goliath of Gath in combat; he whirls his sling and implants a smooth pebble into the huge Philistine's forehead, and this long-forgotten moment of boyhood triumph returns to the penitent, adult David on his knees before the Ark of the Covenant. Instead of emphasizing the Goliath episode as a pleasant introduction to a glorious military career, Dunne and director Henry King selected to begin the tale in medias res and save the Goliath episode for the climax of the film. The episode is used to epitomize the guilt-ridden agony that the older David experiences; he started as such a wondrous and God-loved boy, and now, in contrast, he has fallen so far.

The narrative about David in the Old Testament consumes so many pages and years and involves so many different aspects of the king's life that no film could include them all and expect to maintain its dramatic tension. Many episodes are sensibly omitted in *David and Bathsheba*—David's quarrel with Saul, his early days with Michal, the problems of succession after his reign, the final entry of the Ark into Jerusalem, just to name a few. But the many omissions leave the film with inadequate action before the final scenes. In the only early scene even suggesting action, David imagines hearing the noises from the battle at Gilboa, where he has sent Uriah to his death. Moreover, because David's romance with Bathsheba emphasizes their conversational ability more than any romantic fervor, monotony prevails throughout much of the film, until its religious climax.

David and Bathsheba oscillates between the ends of the authenticity scale. The bath of Bathsheba fails to convey the biblical mood because the censors insisted that this naked wife of Uriah the Hittite be obscured by a screen. At first the filmmakers tried a translucent screen, which preserved the sensual, flesh-toned curves of the naked adulteress-to-be. But fearing the censors, they opted for an opaque, wooden screen that might have been expected to make the whole scene as inticing to David as Goliath's sweaty boots. Speaking of the giant from Gath, the wrestler Walter "The Polish Giant" Talun heaved his 6-foot-8½-inch, 320-pound frame across the screen with impressively mammoth strides.

Also commendable is the inclusion of the scene in which Uzza tries to save the falling Ark of the Covenant from hitting the ground but is cruelly struck dead by an ungrateful

108 The prophet Nathan (Raymond Massey) and King David (Gregory Peck) examine the newly arrived and authentic-looking Ark of the Covenant in a scene from *David and Bathsheba* (1951). Exodus 25:10–22 describes the ark as made of wood, overlaid with gold, equipped with four rings to accommodate staves by which the ark could be carried; above it sat two cherubim. Such detailed authenticity in "ancient" films is often combined with inauthenticity. The ancient Jewish star was five-pointed, for example, but the film audience expects the modern six-pointed symbol, and authenticity in this regard might seem inauthentic.

Jehovah (2 Samuel 6:6–7). Even Jehovah becomes a more convincing cinematic "character" when portrayed with human imperfections.

As Fox's answer to Paramount's multimillion-dollar *Samson and Delilah*, *David and Bathsheba* controlled its share of the "ancient" market until the arrival a few months later of MGM's *Quo Vadis?* The Fox film became one of the top-grossing pictures of 1951 ($7,100,000) and therefore inevitably spawned Italian imitators. *A Story of David* (1960) leads Jeff Chandler through a number of biblical and nonbiblical adventures, and the Italian-Spanish production of *Saul and David* (1964) put its $750,000 budget to efficient use, clinging carefully, if romantically, to the biblical narrative. *David and Goliath*

109 The young David (Leo B. Pessin) slays Goliath during the flashback episode in *David and Bathsheba*. Goliath is played by Walter "The Polish Giant" Talun, a professional wrestler, whose size is considerable but believable. The shot is framed to maximize the scope of the Philistine army in the background.

(1961) starred Orson Welles as Saul and Ivo Payer as David. The shallow and clumsily King Jamesian script falls short of Welles's histrionic abilities, yet his portrayal of the brooding, vengeful Saul does give the film what little dramatic energy it has. A number of other "Goliath" films were made in Italy in the early 1960s, all falling into the post-Hercules muscleman genre. The best known of these are *Goliath at the Conquest of Babylon* (also called *Hercules and the Tyrants of Babylon*, 1964); *Goliath and the Barbarians* (1959), with Steve Reeves in Northern Italy, A.D. 568; and *Goliath Against the Giants* (1962), with Brad Harris and Fernando Rey. Like "Samson" films, two of these "Goliath" titles are translations for the original Italian "Maciste."

Of surprising quality was *The Story of David*, a 1976 made-for-television movie, part of which was shot on location in Israel. The four-hour film consists of two parts; in the first Timothy Bottoms plays the young David in his struggles against Saul (Anthony

Quayle), and in the second Keith Mitchell plays David as the adult and then aging patriarch. The film suffers from the monotony and lack of artistry endemic to made-for-television films and miniseries, but the script, the acting, the biblical authenticity, and the intrinsic quality of the biblical David episodes make this a worthy film. The biblical text is followed to the letter: Saul rends Samuel's robe (1 Samuel 15:27); the populace chants the verse "Saul hath slain his thousands, / And David his ten thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7); and there is even the dowry of foreskins (1 Samuel 18:25–28), as well as the appropriate Goliath, Saul, and Jonathan episodes. The teleplay also surpasses the normal television fare in that it deals with material not ordinarily seen in the family hour. When Saul asks David to acquire the Philistine foreskins, for example, David comments, "I fear men without foreskins, but never foreskins without men." When Bathsheba has some important news to announce to David, she tells him, "I am four weeks late; for ten years I am with the moon always." One other somewhat corporeal line was delivered as a joke around an evening campfire: "The lion of Judah roars. Why? Because you eat beans for supper and your bellies grow full of wind." (The film postdates *Blazing Saddles* by two years.)

Guided by Professor David Noel Freedman of the University of Michigan, the filmmakers paid careful attention to historical authenticity. For David's singing, the instrumentation was limited for the most part to harp and tambourine; the vocal part called for the appropriate microtonal mordents in David's delivery. One particular literary and biblical triumph was a subtle remark by David to his court scribes that the book they are writing — the nascent Bible, that is —"should not overlook the faults" of the early Hebrew leaders. Adding to the authenticity, Goliath and the Sea-Peoples actually speak in a different tongue from that of the Hebrews, military discussions focus on exotic peoples as the Hittites and Hurrians, and such archaic curiosities as primogeniture quarrels, harem bickering, and charlatan prophets inject a unique feeling for ancient patriarchal life. At the same time, such elements as monarchs who are publicly pious but privately pragmatic lend an element of timelessness to the tale. Effectively shot in the dry, dusty areas of Israel and often on the ancient citadel of Jerusalem itself, *The Story of David* is one of the very few "ancient" movies in which historical authenticity and intelligent biblical interpretation outweigh lack of spectacle and monotonous delivery — two drawbacks that become particularly hazardous when viewed not in CinemaScope but on a television screen, with commercial interruptions.

The Story of David was certainly superior in many ways to Paramount's 1985 release *King David* starring Richard Gere, whose performance garnered him a Razzie Award in the "Worst Actor" category. Also of interest insofar as it attempts to humanize otherwise legendary figures and events is another made-for-television film, Turner's *David* (1997) starring Nathaniel Parker as David, Jonathan Pryce as Saul, and Leonard Nimoy as Samuel.

From the first book of Kings, Hollywood somehow derived *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), a film that reveals both the advantages and disadvantages of production in that California hamlet during the late 1950s. The upside of the film's Hollywood origins includes competent special effects in the Jehovah-bred destruction of Solomon's temple and in the battles against the Egyptians. In one of those battles (shot in Valdespartera, Spain) we are treated to Solomon's brilliant tactic of using his Israelite army's burnished, sun-reflecting shields to blind the Egyptian attackers. The wisdom of Solomon is further evidenced, of course, by the king's judgment upon the two women who claim the same child. The sets of *Solomon and Sheba* are colorful, especially those of the Sheban encampment, the Egyptian court, and the Jerusalem temple. The temple displays the biblical "molten sea" in its forecourt and cherubim in the interior, but it also has some inappropriate reliefs from Persian Persepolis and is inaccurately towered like an eight-story ziggurat. But such objections could be considered pedantic.

More serious disadvantages of the film's late-1950s Hollywood origins are its irreverent and irrelevant digressions from the biblical text and its inevitable concentration on a vapid romantic plot. The three screenwriters and director King Vidor understandably conflated the Queen of Sheba's biblical visit to Solomon (1 *Kings* 10:1–13) with Solomon's biblical yearning for foreign women and strange gods (1 *Kings* 11:1–8). Thus Solomon (Yul Brynner) falls in love with the Queen (Gina Lollobrigida) and begins to worship her god Ragon. This romance and pagan worship then lead to civil strife when Solomon's exiled brother Adonijah (George Sanders) leads the Egyptians against the Hebrew army. Ultimately, of course, the Hebrews win a miraculous and smashing defeat, and Sheba returns to her kingdom a devout believer in Jehovah, the biblical narrative by this time completely crushed under Hollywood's chariot wheels.

This mishing and mashing of biblical history did not approach the romantic heights that the filmmakers hoped for. The title characters act stiffly as royal lovers, and the "orgy" of Ragon should be classed as one of the more anticlimactic climaxes in the history of the cinema. Lollobrigida's foreign accent ("Geeve heem to mee"), her nude bath amid improbably adhesive suds, and her wardrobe of what one critic described as "Oriental Undies" are all alluring, but they do not create any of the romantic sophistication that we might associate with Old Testament royalty.[8] Brynner had the difficult task of replacing Tyrone Power, who died halfway through the filming. He is fabulously kingly, as if by nature, and he does his best to play the degenerating Hebrew monarch who had seven hundred wives, three hundred concubines, and a fascination for foreign gods. Even so, he fails to find the character of Solomon completely, for the screenwriters gave him little to work with. Biblically inexplicable are the substitution of Ragon for Sheba's authentic and much better known female deity, Ishtar (Attar), the unpatriotic characterization of Adonijah, and the conversion of Sheba to Judaism. Unfortunately, the proverbial wisdom of Solomon was conspicuously lacking behind the camera.

Vitagraph's *The Judgment of Solomon* (1909) contained only a brief vignette, but the West Arabian queen has been depicted variously in other films. The first was Fox's *Queen of Sheba* (1921), directed by J. Gordon Edwards and starring Betty Blythe (Sheba) and Fritz Lieber; its climax was, mirabile dictu, a chariot race between Queen Vashti (of

110 The Egyptians foolishly tempt the strength of Solomonian wisdom in this scene from *Solomon and Sheba* (1959). The Hebrews have spent the night polishing their shields, so the reflected sun blinds their assailants and sends them into a conveniently situated chasm. The chariot is the Egyptian type, which held a driver and one warrior; Hittite chariots held a shield bearer as well. But one wonders just what this soldier intends on doing with his sword; it will not reach beyond the equine rumps.

111 A ninth-century B.C. stone-relief depicts an Assyrian chariot entering the fray, complete with driver, spoked wheels, and spear box. This Assyrian knows how to fight from a chariot—with bow and arrow.

Esther provenance) and the Queen of Sheba! Curiously, the film is too embarrassed to mention that Solomon had seven hundred wives, yet it displays scores of thinly clad women, unidentified but vaguely royal. The second depiction of this legendary Semite was an Italian *Queen of Sheba* (1953), which rises above the dullness and ventriloquized dubbing of the contemporary Italian films *Fabiola* and *Messalina,* but its story is absurd. Rehaboam (Gino Leurini), the son of Solomon (Gino Cervi), leaves Jerusalem to spy on Balkis, the Queen of Sheba (Leonora Ruffo). He naturally falls in love with her, and a few complications and battles precede an avalanche that brings the pompous, dry romance to its unfortunate close. *Queen of Sheba* does boast some effective camera angles—particularly a shot of a battering ram pounding its insistent weight directly toward the camera lens. The costuming is a garish blend of authentic Assyrian garb and the wildest contemporary Roman fantasy, with a touch of Minoan (thanks to *Samson and Delilah*). Director Pietro Francisci *(Hercules)* had not yet found his unique recipe for comic, light, tongue-in-cheek heroism and romance. Four decades later came two made-for-television versions, one in Italy, RAI's *Solomon* (1997), starring Ben Cross as Solomon and Max von Sydow as David. An American *Solomon and Sheba* two years earlier featured an African American, Halle Berry, as the Queen of Sheba, thus becoming the first film version to acknowledge that the historical queen was dark-skinned.

In 1953 Lippert produced a fourth film based on the first book of Kings, *Sins of Jezebel.* This bland production starred Paulette Goddard as the Baal-worshiping queen who clashes spiritually and physically with the prophet Elijah. One of the many books about the twelve prophets suggested one film—*Jonah and the Whale,* but the project was hardly launched before financial difficulties swallowed it completely. *The Story of Ruth* (1960), however, found enough material in its four-and-one-half-page biblical source to show 131 minutes of fairly successful drama and biblical narrative. The book of Ruth tells us nothing about Ruth's childhood as a Moabite, so writer Norman Corwin and director Henry Koster hypothesize that she was a priestess of the (authentic) Moabite god Chemosh. The sacrifices of children to Chemosh, to which the cinematic Ruth objects and which, not surprisingly, are shown with great relish, are more or less historically sound and add colorful spectacle to the film. Unfortunately, the crudely enacted sacrifices are not very competent cinematically.

The Bible tells us that "Mahlon and Chilion died both of them" (Ruth 1:5), being no more specific than this. *The Story of Ruth* goes on to invent a dramatically plausible slave pit for Mahlon (Tom Tryon), who is the husband of Ruth. With this plausible metabiblical material established, Ruth joins her mother-in-law Naomi and sojourns to Judah. The touching biblical narrative about Ruth's gradual acceptance by her kinsman Boaz is expanded into a lengthy tale of anti-Moabite feelings and intrafamilial trickery. The biblical council of Elders (Ruth 4:2) becomes a jury to decide whether or not Ruth is a Moabite, and the "nameless kinsman" of the Old Testament becomes a rather messy and distasteful Tob (Jeff Morrow). The biblical scene on the threshing

floor is preserved, but with an insidious twist. All these minor variations on the Old Testament's text make *The Story of Ruth* a less charming but more involved story. Clever and harmless tricks played by Boaz and Naomi on Ruth give the narrative several intricate turns, and the ultimate manipulation of the Leverite law—spending the night on the threshing floor with kinsman Boaz—brings the trickery motif to its satisfactory culmination. All in all, *The Story of Ruth* treats the Old Testament with respect but not stultifying reverence.

Several other films have been based on the later books of the Old Testament. From Esther comes *Esther and the King* (1960); from Daniel come *Belshazzar's Feast* (1905, 1913), *Slaves of Babylon* (1953), and, in part, *Intolerance* (1916); and from the story of Judith in the Apocrypha come four different films. But because these films concern life in Persia and Mesopotamia as much as they do biblical life, they will be discussed more appropriately in Chapter 6.

Two other films, both made in Italy, are based on apocryphal sources, *I Maccabei* (1910) and *Il Vecchio Testamento* (*The Old Testament,* 1962). Both narrate the story of the second-century B.C. Maccabee family in its heroic struggle against the Hellenistic King Antiochus IV of the Seleucid Empire. *Il Vecchio Testamento* is full of the muscularized feats and shallow romance characteristic of its Italian genre. *I Maccabei,* directed by Enrico Guazzoni (*Quo Vadis?* [1912], *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* [both 1914]), is a travesty of historical authenticity. The Antiochids wear Egyptian garb, and the entire plot revolves around Antiochus's wife Astarte (historically Laodice; Astarte is another name for the goddess Ishtar) and her unrequited love for Judas Maccabeus. As we have seen, a film that so unmercifully rearranges a biblical plot is apt to fail, for it has lost its claim to biblical stature and sophistication and must stand on its own, costumed, romantic merits.

Of the approximately fifty films based on the Old Testament, a handful are truly fine films. The films that fail seem to suffer from similar imbalances—too much romance and dialogue, too little action and excitement *(The Story of Ruth);* or too much excitement and action with too little romance or thought *(Sodom and Gomorrah);* or too much reverence for the biblical narrative with too little concern for dramatic considerations *(Moses, the Lawgiver);* or too free an adaptation of the biblical narrative *(Solomon and Sheba),* sometimes with an additional lack of dramatic tension *(Joseph and His Brethren).* Part of the difficulty stems from the general public's knowledge of the Bible and its marvelous stories; if filmmakers digress too far from the biblical narrative, they inevitably produce a plot that seems inauthentic and far-fetched. On the other hand, if the filmmakers restrict themselves completely to the Old Testament narrative, they will almost inevitably produce a dry and undramatic enactment. The made-for-television films of the past three decades have taken the middle path and are as a group fairly good. But true cinematic directorial giants are needed to find an artistic balance, and in this Old Testament branch of the genre DeMille and Huston stand taller than the rest.

In addition, depicting prophets, patriarchs, miracles, and Jehovah's presence poses another problem for all filmmakers. Movie audiences, conditioned by a century-long association between the ancient world and the epic cinema—expect such characters as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Solomon, and Sheba, and events such as the slaying of Goliath or the crossing of the Red Sea, to be larger than life and portrayed with the titanic qualities that only a few thousand years of maturation can develop. A historically conscious adult David described this maturation process. In *David and Bathsheba* he acknowledges, "I must admit that Goliath seems to grow a little bigger every year." To be sure, a Goliath or Hebrew king or any biblical character or event that fails to possess the demanded cinematic stature is doomed to failure. For all their contrivance, DeMille's parting of the Red Sea in 1956 and his Samsonian destruction of the temple of Dagon, Huston's folksy Noah, and George C. Scott's chillingly prophetic Abraham will be remembered as the most representative and iconographical Old Testament depictions of the twentieth century.

Jon Solomon

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To Lois, *quasi quasar universi mei*