

The Ten Commandments



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced, directed, narrated and introduced by Cecil B. De Mille. Screenplay by Aeneas Mac Kenzie, Jesse Lasky Jr, Jack Gariss and Fredric M. Frank. Based on *Prince of Egypt* by Dorothy Clarke Wison, *Pillar of Fire* by J.H. Ingraham, *On Eagle's Wings* by A.E. Southron, the Koran and the Book of Exodus. Cinematography by Loyal Griggs. Art Direction by Hal Pereira, Albert Nozaki and Walter Tyler. Original Music by Elmer Bernstein. Edited by Anne Bauchens. Key Costumers: Edith Head & Arnold Friberg.

Cinematic length: 222 minutes. Distributed by Paramount/A Cecil B. De Mille Production. Cinematic release: October 1956. First DVD release 1999. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

<i>Charlton Heston as Moses</i>	<i>Yul Brynner as Rameses II</i>
<i>Anne Baxter as Nefretiri</i>	<i>Edward G. Robinson as Dathan</i>
<i>Yvonne De Carlo as Sephora</i>	<i>Debra Paget as Lilia</i>
<i>John Derek as Joshua</i>	<i>Sir Cedric Hardwicke as Sethi</i>
<i>Nina Foch as Bithiah</i>	<i>Martha Scott as Yoshebel</i>
<i>Judith Anderson as Memnet</i>	<i>Vincent Price as Baka</i>
<i>John Carradine as Aaron</i>	<i>Olive Deering as Miriam</i>
<i>Ian Keith as Rameses I</i>	<i>Eduard Franz as Jethro</i>
<i>Babette Bain as Little Miriam</i>	<i>Douglass Dumbrille as Jannes</i>
<i>Henry Wilcoxon as Pentaur</i>	<i>Woody Strode as Merops</i>

Review

This reviewer first saw this film under unusual circumstances. This was the late 1950s. A swollen abscessed tooth had to be extracted - with pliers. With dread I knew what was coming and that I was too young for a large dose of

morphine. Tablets only relieved the pain slightly. The dental appointment was for five-thirty on a Saturday afternoon, probably so no earlier customers would be put off by my screams. So what does my 1950s swollen tooth have to do with reviewing *The Ten Commandments*? Considerable actually. As a special treat and to take my mind off the aching tooth and the four hour long wait I went to a Saturday matinee showing. For over three hours from the first scenes to the last, the aching tooth did not exist. The Biblical story of Moses, who started as a prince of ancient Egypt, was exiled for murder and rebellious intent and then inflicted plagues on Egypt before leading the Hebrews out of Egypt to the promised land was what mattered. Not my aching tooth or the dreaded appointment. De Mille had taken me into another world. Fear and the outside world only returned when Moses was at Nebo and the final music welled. How many filmmakers can so absorb a child with their product that they overcome physical pain and give an engrossed attention span of nearly four hours? This is even more remarkable for two reasons: I knew the essential story so there was no suspense and the audience was equally engrossed.

Seen for a second time in 1973 in a very different world and in very different circumstances, all of De Mille's faults were apparent. His on screen introduction made it clear that *The Ten Commandments* was a cultural weapon in the Cold War. When De Mille and his characters talked of liberty in ringing tones, they almost certainly ultimately meant liberty in the sense that American magnates use the word – the liberty to do anything that makes money without government restriction. Sitting with other cynical left wing radicals and being in the same session as several fundamentalist Christians I had come to dislike we had fun pulling apart the film for there was much to laugh at.

The final beard worn by Moses looked suspiciously like teased out cotton wool. Even if it wasn't it must be Hollywood's most stagey wig and beard. The attempt by Queen Nefretiri to rekindle the romance with Moses got comments about "Do you know he's supposedly eighty?" from me and "This is a classic dream factory product" from another while a third labelled the scenes of the exodus to the promised land Zionist propaganda. The dialogue there included in pure Brooklynese "Marmee when are we going to the

promised land?” “Soon dearest” Wisely this snippet was edited out in the DVD version. Edward G. Robinson’s blackmail of sexual submission was seen then as melodramatically overdone and was ridiculed.

Now on a 2017 viewing I’m not so sure, of that scene or about the whole film. Yes De Mille could come within a hair’s breadth of kitsch on some occasions and melodrama in others in this film. In his *Samson and Delilah* (1949) he went over into those territories. Yes it takes no great critical insight to read Zionist and right wing politics into this film, whatever De Mille intended. Yet other things are going on and whatever De Mille did intend as a subtext in 1956, communism by that time had proved itself a tyranny, as even many Communists in the West admitted. The image of De Mille as a fanatical anti-communist can be taken too far. As early as 1914 in *The Squaw Man* De Mille directed an interracial love story. Hints of this appear in *The Ten Commandments* when Moses introduces the Queen of Ethiopia and Nefertiri knowingly purrs “And to have conquered so beautiful an enemy.” Edward G. Robinson had been virtually blacklisted from 1948 onwards for his left liberal viewpoints and donations, but in his autobiography *All My Yesterdays* Robinson personally thanked De Mille for giving him the role of Dathan in this film, which revitalized his career. De Mille did this at a time when to go against the black listers was an extremely dangerous thing for anybody to do. A generation after communism imploded and two generations after the film was made and in which De Mille explained that he was depicting the age old battle between freedom and slavery, the Cold War subtext has faded away but the vividness of his epic story and its many virtues has not faded.

De Mille was a master storyteller and not only in the visual sense. Many have rightly commented on his skilled use of spectacle. Listen to his use of skilled use of sound and dialogue. When Pharaoh Seti (Cedrick Hardwick) lies on his death bed ritual singers convey the sadness and the mourning for Seti. If the sound had been a little louder, the tempo a little faster or more mournful it would have been lugubrious, but it is just right to convey a sense of fatalism and of an ancient civilization mourning a dying pharaoh. When against this background of chanting Ramses II (Yul Brynner) musters as much regret for his father as his egocentric personality can, Seti says that he will be a successful Pharaoh as he “can conquer anything except your own

arrogance.” He says that as a summary, a sad acceptance of a reality and a dismissal. It works.

In the scene where the Hebrews are trapped between the sea and Pharaoh’s charging chariots the aqua blue sea and sky suddenly become dark storm clouds and choppy grey storm waves. Pharaoh’s approaching chariots and Dathan’s urgent pleas to surrender all add to the building sense of doom, but the music and the sight and sound of the wind give the scene even more



The background changes as Dathan verbally conjures up the approaching threat



Charleton Heston in the extraordinarily powerful image that everyone remembers

power. When the three sitting women face rightwards to the wind which blows their hair accoutrements and clothing westwards, the cinematic imagery has a mythic power. Look at those three figures in a still and they look merely melodramatic. In the climax of that same situation when Charleton Heston as Moses parts the Red Sea the striking visual image becomes iconic. We might notice the strong contrasting colours, but what of the timbre in Heston's voice? Robinson's fear-filled despairing comments as a contrast? The music and the wind? De Mille knew how to create powerful images using colour, sound, music, dialogue and contrast that so engross that credibility or melodramatic elements do not even come into it.

His use of dialogue was usually succinct, frequently pithy and shrewd. When Baka the master builder (Vincent Price) signals to Lilia the water girl (Debra Paget) that he wants a drink she responds with that it is not for water that he thirsts, but she says this in a low aside to those around her. In a few seconds her low voiced comment, Price's leering face and her sullen compliance have not only delineated their characters and their relationship, they have said much about the sexual relationship of master and slave. When Ramses meets

with the Hebrew overseer Dathan Ramses tries to teach him who is boss with threats of execution and then abuse, telling him that he has the nose of a weasel and the ears of a rat, to which Dathan calmly and servilely replies that "They are in your service my lord." Ramses then replies that Dathan should use his eyes as well to find the rumoured deliverer of the Hebrew slaves. Dathan uses body language, facial expressions and silken tones to convey to Ramses (and us) that he has the upper hand as he knows that Ramses rival to the throne, his adopted brother Moses, has killed Baka the master builder while defending Lilia. He also knows that Moses is the rumoured deliverer and that Ramses last chance to be appointed heir apparent to the throne relies on two things, discrediting Moses and finding the deliverer. He can give Ramses both and catlike plays with him revealing (to the audience) a just hidden contempt for Ramses and the fulfilment of all his very material desires for Baka's palace and governorship. Ramses also reveals himself to be a man with more force and impatience than astuteness. He will clearly not be a wise ruler.

Similarly when we first see Nefertiri on her balcony, jubilantly waving to the returning Moses, the love of her life, she is just a fraction too zestful, too invigorated, hinting that this is somebody who will be too intense, too dynamic - and perhaps dangerous if the world does not go her way. That initial impression seems at variance with her kittenish banter in the next scenes with her father and then Moses, but the initial impression gains reinforcement in her first scene with Ramses. Clearly she dislikes him intensely and his insistence that they will be married as is customary increases the intensity of her dislike.

This is a Lubitsch touch, for while audiences can easily interpret her dislike for his personality, he is probably her brother or half- brother, as pharaohs were expected to marry their sisters. How exactly these two are related to Seti is never quite spelt out. Considering the passionate kissing scene between them as one of her castrating games and their later marriage and son, making their relationship clear would have been unwise, given 1956 censorship codes.



Edward G. Robinson as Dathan The facial expression captures the character, smug, astute, calculating and cruel

Yul Brynner as Ramses. This face also reveals the inner man as suspicious, bossy and hostile.





Ann Baxter as Nefertiti



Both portraits are from Wikia

Nefertiri is indeed dangerous. She personally kills her aged and faithful servant Memnet when she threatens to reveal that Moses has Hebrew origins and goads Ramses into trying to kill the fleeing Hebrews. When ironically she stands on the same balcony from where she once welcomed Moses returning from Ethiopia, she now watches as the chariots she thinks will kill him rush off. From the scene's angle it looks as if the chariots emerge from her, a replacement for her dead son killed in Moses's last plague. We do not see her face, but her streaming hair, outstretched arm and arched back convey a powerful malevolence.

De Mille knew how to gain and balance by pitting performers' styles and characters in contrast to each other. Nefertiri is very much at home and located centre stage in the extravagantly colourful, luxurious and powerful world of Pharaoh's court. She is loud, witty, and flirtatious and aggravates to control. Sephora (Yvonne De Carlo) the daughter of a shepherd whom Moses marries is her exact opposite, modest, subservient, soothing, calm and level headed. Apart from cinematic contrast, this is psychologically astute as lovers on the rebound are often attracted to the opposite of the person who went before and inflicted pain or disappointment. These contrasted characters appear throughout the film, Lilia has to deal with the repulsive but powerful lechers Baka and then Dathan: both men are the opposite of the energetic, young slave Joshua. Seti is calm, perceptive, restrained and appreciates the virtues of others. Not one of these qualities emerge in Ramses when the two royal ones are together.

This use of contrast also applies to spectacle. De Mille is famous for it, yet not all his images are spectacular and they are not used merely to dazzle, but with acumen. In the first third of the film when Moses is a prince of Egypt extravagance is almost everywhere, from the arrival of a triumphant Moses and his subsequent presentation of Ethiopian royalty and tribute, to the court scenes, to the building of Seti's monument, everything is on an epic proportion. Even so with the film's first remarkable blood red shot De Mille shows us the human cost of Egypt's grandeur. Is the red used to symbolize the blood of the slaves, or mixed with the orange and yellow to recall an

atavistic past? The pitiless expressionless statue of the pharaoh god, dragged by hundreds of slaves, shows the cost of worshipping stone idols.

When Pharaoh (Ian Keith) hears rumours that a messiah has been born amongst the Hebrew slaves he orders a massacre of their babies and we see and hear the horror of that order, not in a spectacle, but in one woman being chased while another sits catatonic, clutching her murdered child and screams sound in the background.



When Moses's mother Yoshebel (Martha Scott) decides to save her baby by setting him adrift on the Nile we see the humble mud brick abode of a Hebrew family, which is contrasted to the marble palace several times. In contrast to the massacre we see Princess Bithiah (Nina Foch) and her ladies in waiting amiably on a pleasantly sunny day on a floral decorated white stone patio by the river side. Dressed in diaphanous white, their costumes match the weather and the mood. Carefree, joyously chatting, no massacre taking place nearby affects their idyll. Entranced by the baby Moses she decides to adopt him and Moses is now in the royal family. He stays there



Contrasting locales and costumes. Seti's court and Moses's family at home





Moses in the bulrushes. Memnet shows Nefertiti the Levite swaddling cloth, proving Moses is Hebrew.

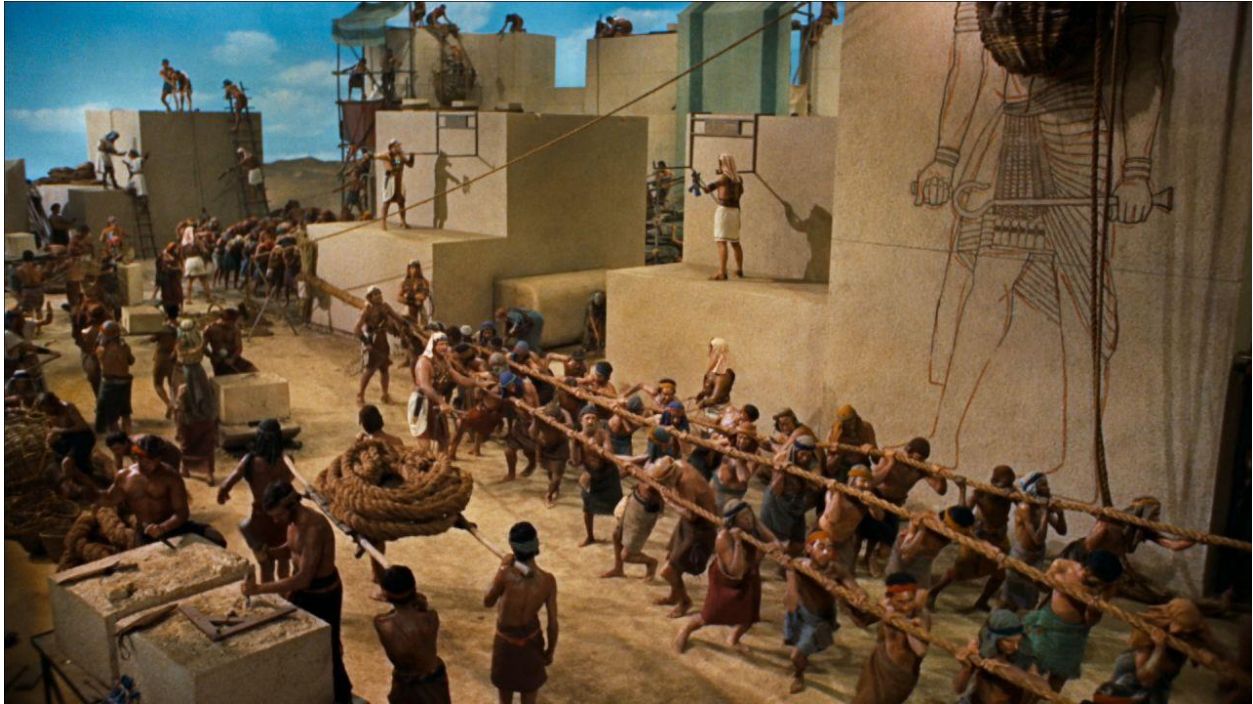




John Derick & Debra Paget as Joshua & Lilia



Judith Anderson as Memnet [Wikia](#)



Building Seti's monument. Arguing with Baka over the mistreatment of Joshua





advancing in his given roles, until he find out that he is a Hebrew, murders Baka and is exiled.

That exile ends the Egyptian spectacle and the next third of the film is literally very arid as Moses is forced into the desert with nothing but his Levite cloak, the staff used to bind him and a day's ration of food and water. In the scene where this happens Egypt's border stele, a pyramid and the green lands are in the background, placed there to show the separation in his life. They work as both realities and symbols of the division in his life. De Mille narrates what the images show. Moses is put through the grueling test of the desert, deprived of everything he once knew, including his identity as an Egyptian prince. He finds the well of Jethro, a man with six unmarried daughters, marries the eldest Sephora (Nefertiri's opposite and prospers.

The last third of the film has spectacle galore as it concerns Moses returning to Egypt to free the Hebrew slaves. This is the reurn of the repressed on an epic scale and once again De Mille uses contrast shrewdly. The sinister black night where the first born die, ends with Pharaoh giving the slaves their freedom. The next shot is of an bright dawn where the exuberant sounds from a blown rams horn summon the Hebrews to flee Egypt. The placing of



*Yvonne De Carlo as Sephora. Below
Moses assists Jethro (Edward Franz) in bargaining deals with traders*





Lilia as the unhappy and reluctant mistress to Dathan. Nefertiri tries to rekindle a romance.







After the Hebrews cross Moses directs the Red Sea crashes in to Pharaoh's chariots



On Sinai Moses returns with Joshua to give the people the cmmandments

the horn blower acentre screen, between the paws of a sphinx with what is literally a new dawn was a stroke of genius.

Once again Moses heads east into the desert with only his staff and Levite cloak – and according to Heston in his *Into the Arena* eight thousand extras with their herds of sheep, cattle and goats following him. It is a sense of tumultuous chaos, crammed with the noise of the herds and the thousands of people, Bernstein's thunderous score and De Mille's exultant narration – and it works. The cameras move along the procession, placed where another walker would be, with a few crane shots and medium close ups. Everybody is included children, shepherds, rich merchants, slaves in tatters, the body of Joseph carried by his chanters. Even the 1973 cynics and hostiles were overwhelmed into silence.

For spectacle this could not apparently be beaten but wait until Moses parts the Red Sea! Much of this scene was actually filmed in Paramount's long concrete parking lot, which says a great deal about the abilities of the special effects department, who rightly won a 1956 Academy Award in that field.

Amazingly this was the only oscar the film won. Not a single performer, or De Mille, Bernstein or the writers were even nominated. Perhaps this was because the competition was fierce. *Epics Around the World in Eighty Days*, *The King and I*, and *Giant* were big winners in the Oscar stakes. *War and Peace*, a fine film, only gained two nominations, *The Ten Commandments* gained seven: 1956 was the year of the epic. The oscars did not reflect critical praise, public popularity or financial success. Critics talked of Hollywood hokum, but this goes too far. In many small details the filmmaker got it right. Building illustrations and decorations were brightly coloured: the unpainted versions in so many Hollywood movies set in the ancient world reflect how they look now, not how they once were. Ramses putting on the eagle's wings armour and the blue helmet when he goes to war is what the Pharaohs did. The dancers at Seti's celebration are based on a tomb depiction. Moses's Levite cloak has correct colours for that tribe. Much of *The Ten Commandments* was filmed on location in Egypt and the scenes set near and on Sinai were filmed there. This reduced costs. So did the use of many costumes, props and sets left over from the 1954 filming of *The Egyptian*.

Despite other low costs, the eight thousand extras being mainly poor Egyptians, the aid from the Egyptian army and De Mille's thorough long term planning and then his night before pre-planning, this was the most expensive film ever made up to that point. Given the value of 1956 dollars it still might be, but it was the most profitable film of 1956, the second most profitable of the 1950s and still, sixty years on comes in as the sixth most profitable film of all time.

Sadly his masterpiece was his last full work. De Mille suffered a heart attack during filming, but gamely returned to work a few days later. Although he did financing and some work with Heston, Brynner and some of the crew from *The Ten Commandments* in a 1958 remake of his 1938 film *The Buccaneer* as a major figure his career had virtually ended two years before.

Whatever his faults as a film maker he knew the essential secret to the art: people like an epic story well told.



Cecil Be de Mille 1882-1959

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