

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Directed by Cecil B. DeMille
Produced by Cecil B. DeMille
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1956

A director's final picture is usually a bit underwhelming. Often the budget is stretched, the direction flaccid. Somehow, at age 75, Cecil B. DeMille managed to save the best for last. *The Ten Commandments* is bigger, bolder, and more bodacious than anything he made before. While in the 1920s DeMille's tales of sex and greed, featuring long sequences of disrobing and bathing in opulent surroundings, were counterbalanced with finger-wagging moralizing in order to placate the censors, at the end of his career he leavened his tales of thunderous religiosity with beautiful women and a twitching longing for carnal delights. He hadn't forgotten his salesmanship. But now he had something to say.

The Sword and Sandals epics made a lot of money. *The Robe*, released in 1953 as the first CinemaScope film, grossed a staggering \$17.5 million. *The Ten Commandments* couldn't have been made at a more propitious time.

DeMille was a vocal supporter of loyalty oaths for the Director's Guild of America and, along with Screen Actor's Guild President Ronald Reagan, was determined, via organizations like The Committee to Proclaim Liberty, to expose the pernicious legacy of the New Deal and keep leftist propaganda from polluting Hollywood's product. Like much of America at the time, being religious was a way to be anti-communist. The Soviets were atheistic, so to prove the United States was different, that it was more worthy to lead the world, a renewed emphasis on civic religion was necessary. (For example, this is why "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954.)

The Ten Commandments is a call for America to embrace its Judeo-Christian heritage, a lowest-common-denominator morality that will promote social stability and keep the Communist menace at bay. By this measure it succeeds beyond all expectations, and in spectacular style. It stands in sharp relief to John Huston's *The Bible* (1966), which, though perhaps more faithful to the Holy Scriptures, is anti-inspirational—it's clinical and dull when it should be grand, painting in broad strokes and bold colors the opening chapters of man's eternal struggle. *The Ten Commandments*, with the misty Angel of Death, the showdown with Ramases at the Nile, the slinky Nefretiri, the tension of the obelisk-construction time crunch, the Golden Calf orgy, the majesty of the burning bush, the grease-woman rescue by Joshua, and the parting of the Red Sea, could hardly be described as dull. It's a long movie, but always interesting. In fact, *The Ten Commandments* might be the pinnacle of Hollywood showmanship, which is appropriate given that DeMille helped get Hollywood started. He was the first to shoot a feature in that Los Angeles neighborhood, renting a barn to film *The Squaw Man* in 1914.

While this picture takes severe liberties with the Biblical account of the Exodus, it boasts jaw-dropping special effects, bravura acting from Charlton Heston and Yul Brenner, and memorable dialogue. Surprisingly deft characterizations are in evidence, a particularly good

example being Nefretiri's third act turn against Moses when her son's life is threatened. DeMille's concern for eroding moral standards is evident in lines like, "And I know that His light is in every man" (we are all made in the image of God and should embrace accordingly high standards); "His god is God" (the Ten Commandments have authority because of their source); "Those who will not live by the law shall die by the law" (so look out); and "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land and unto the inhabitants thereof" (it's the inscription on the Liberty Bell sourced from Leviticus 25:10).

The less palatable parts of Exodus are ignored. There's no scene of Moses smashing the Golden Calf to powder and forcing the Israelites to drink it, no scene of God threatening to kill Moses (his wife Zipporah placates God's wrath by circumcising their boy on the spot), no scene of Moses begging off God's call *five times* and asserting that he is "slow of speech," nor does the film acknowledge the 40 years that pass between Moses's exile and his return to Egypt (this would render ludicrous Nefretiri's attempts to seduce her lost love).

DeMille refashions Moses as a cynic who demands to hear from God, Himself, in order to believe. He is a warrior, a lover, a man of humility and graciousness. Despite his heritage he never plots against Egypt before his exile. Rameses's callous calumnies are never actually proven. It would have been possible to merge the Hebrew and Egyptian nations into a super-race under Moses's leadership. The spirit of the Hebrew slaves was at such a low ebb that they probably would have abandoned their faith in order to be free. But Sethi cannot overcome his prejudice against the Hebrews, and refuses to advance his indolent people. He forgets what he intoned: "The man best able to rule Egypt will follow me. I owe that to my fathers, not to my sons." Moses was the best man.

DeMille was a survivor who probably identified with Moses. Making this film was a massive undertaking. DeMille suffered a heart attack during production and was urged to abandon the film by his doctor. The director soldiered on, and finished on top.

Looking back, with the Cold War a distant memory, what is most striking about *The Ten Commandments* is that the birth of the Hebrew nation is the birth of Western Civilization. Dreaming of the Deliverer, Joshua challenges the status quo: "God made men. Men made slaves." So freedom is the true natural order. Later in the film, casting off the oppression and godlessness of Pharaoh, Moses thunders that man must be governed by law—not oppressed by the whims of ignorant men.

And the only incontrovertible source of law is God. Capturing the thrilling upheavals of this juncture of history, DeMille is determined to prove that if the American people have anything to be proud of it's that God's law is upheld as a reproof for the despots of the world who care nothing for freedom, just as Israel's law, written by God, stands in sharp relief to Egypt's law, written by capricious men. DeMille felt America was on the same path, that for every well-intentioned social-welfare program the government was acquiring more control through taxes and regulations. The road to security was also the road to slavery. If the American people were left to govern themselves in keeping with the Bible, DeMille knew America could thrive and win the Cold War.

Years before, James Madison ruminated on the prospects on his fledgling nation: "We have staked the whole future of the American civilization [...] upon the capacity of each and all

of us to govern ourselves, to control ourselves, to sustain ourselves, according to the Ten Commandments of God."

In his final confrontation with Dathan, at the Golden Calf, Moses reminds his kinsmen that there is no freedom apart from the law. So DeMille challenges us to accept the paradoxical as true: We can find freedom by submitting to God's rule, for the self-governed man is the free man. And the self-governed man heeds the light of God, burning within.