

# Scripture Filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille

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## SCRIPTURE FILMMAKER CECIL B. DeMILLE: BIBLICAL, RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL?

### Abstract

*The legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille was a master of the American biblical epic who shaped the public's perceptions of Judeo-Christianity in his role as Hollywood's Sunday school teacher. Despite his exceptional narrative talents as a sacred storyteller, critics praised or condemned his Bible films according to whether they deemed him a biblical, religious or spiritual filmmaker. But what sort of Scripture filmmaker was DeMille exactly, were the critics' condemnations fair and valid, and what of the DeMille style today? Utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens, a selective review of the critical literature and a reading of CB's biblical oeuvre were performed to address this issue of category confusion. It was concluded that DeMille was primarily a biblical filmmaker, not a religious or spiritual filmmaker, whose scriptural oeuvre was frequently mislabeled and unjustly assessed as a consequence. Further research into storytelling, Cecil B. DeMille studies and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.*

### Introduction: The Cinema as a Significant Site for Storytelling

POPULAR films during this second century of the "Age of Hollywood" (Paglia 12) have become a veritable *lingua franca*, especially amongst Western youth. Indeed, "more than just media inundation, we have come to live in a *media-mediated* culture, where our understanding of life, reality and our own experience is filtered through video frames" (Mercadante par. 9) and wherein the "cinema and television are our culture's fireside storytellers. In place of Samson, Apollo and Beowulf, we have Batman, Captain Kirk and Indiana Jones" (Merryman 300), or as Doug Fields put it regarding religion: "The ancient Hebrews told patriarchal stories. Jesus told parables. The medieval church staged morality plays. And Hollywood has become our culture's premiere storyteller" (Fields and James 19).

The continuing influence and everyday effect of popular films, whether aesthetically, emotionally, intellectually, physically or psycho-spiritually rooted, whether grounded in narrative fiction or documentary drama, can thus be very potent, life-affirming, and last a life-time. As Peter MacNicol confessed: "Films have not only delighted me, transported me, enchanted, terrified, and informed me; they have, in the best instances, shaped me. No priest or homily so calibrated my moral compass as did movies. No classroom lecture so humanized me as did Hollywood" (Malone and Pacatte xi). Furthermore:

Because literature is no longer the dominant form of expression, scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture in which we live than do the giants of literature or philosophy. We may be at the point in the development of Western culture that the Great Books series needs to be supplemented by a Great Films series. (Kappelman 119-20)

After all, "many movies are the 'big books' of our culture" (Salier 5), but regrettably, "Singly and collectively we have undervalued cinema as one of our era's liveliest storytellers about our own humanity" (Sinetar 28). One particularly undervalued film genre is the biblical epic (Babington and Evans 1993; Forshey 1992) and its putative pedagogic potential for disseminating sacred stories within the classroom, home or pulpit (Bausch 2002). Not only can this celluloid genre be *simultaneously* entertaining, spiritually uplifting and morally instructive, but "Great movies are like incarnate sermons" (Godawa 10).

### DeMille: Hollywood's Paramount Sermonizer

Producer-director<sup>(1)</sup> Cecil B. DeMille<sup>(2)</sup> (1881-1959), affectionately known as CB, was a seminal cofounder of Hollywood and a progenitor of Paramount Pictures who became the "Golden Age of Hollywood summed up in a single man" (Mitchell 17). This American auteur helped convert an obscure Californian orange grove into an international movie centre that became *the* synonym for filmmaking worldwide and earned him the honorary title: "The Father of Hollywood" (Kroon 337) amongst many other accolades (Birchard; Cherchi Usai and Codelli; DeMille and Hayne; Edwards; Essoe and Lee; Eyman; Higashi *Guide, Culture*; Higham

*Cecil*; Koury; Louvish; Noerdlinger; Orrison; Ringgold and Bodeen). Moreover, as an avowed pop culture professional (DeMille and Hayne 195), "De-Mille was one of the few Hollywood directors of his era to enjoy a marquee billing more prominent than that of his actors, a true mark of his popularity with audiences" (Keylor and McGuire 356).

During that Golden Age of moviemaking, this directorial disciplinarian and veritable "Patton of the movies" (Eyman 4) became the undisputed master of the biblical blockbuster - his signature genre, as dramatically demonstrated by *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The King of Kings* (1927), *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956). His epic efforts have resulted in "the near impossibility of mentioning his name without the epithet "master of the biblical epic" attached to it" (Apostolos-Cappadona 450) and other honorific tags such as "king of the biblical epic" (Swiss 185) and "high priest of the religious genre" (Holloway 26). Not only were all four of his films financially successful and watershed productions in their respective days, but nowadays, they are indelible cultural touchstones of both Hollywood history and the sacred cinema genre. Indeed, his page-to-projector adaptations of Holy Writ are included in mainstream Scripture textbooks as a deferential matter-of-course (e.g. Geoghegan and Homan 136, 370-71; Gunn 4, 188-90, 201, 308; Keene 140; Lang 14-15, 112-13, 295; Longman III 111; McCann 92; Taylor 366-67) because he *was* "virtually the Sunday school teacher for the nation" (Beck 27), which led Douglas Brode to claim that "televised DeMille is essentially the Bible for the TV generation" (68).

DeMille had earned his honorific titles and industry accolades because he "had an extraordinary capacity to reach a mass audience with his narrative story-telling power" (Higham *Interviewed* 11), and as Steve Jenkins speculated, DeMille's "oft-proclaimed belief in the moral worth of his epics ('Who else - except the missionaries of God - has had our opportunity to make the brotherhood of man not a phrase but a reality?') may well have been as sincere as his passionate post-Second World War campaign against communism" (179). Not only was DeMille sincere, he was also an accomplished lay biblical scholar who had grown up imbibing the Bible as a youth (DeMille and Hayne 28) under the auspices of his Episcopal lay minister father Henry (DeMille and Hayne 13), and who then read it regularly as an adult (de Mille 61) to become "a great Bible student" (Frost 137) according to Billy Graham.

In short, DeMille was on a proselytizing mission using the silver screen as his sermonizing tool-cum-creative palette in betwixt his secular productions as the "greatest showman on earth" (Sinyard 145) controlled by public demand and hard-nosed film financiers who were not necessarily enamoured by beard-and-bathrobe productions. As he claimed near the end of his life: "my ministry was making religious movies and getting more people to read the Bible than anyone else ever has" (Orrison 108). For example, during production of the 1923 *The Ten Commandments* he handed out copies of the Good Book to get his cast and crew in the right reverential mood and to enable him to conduct impromptu Bible lessons (Higham *Cecil* 111-12, 160), whilst at the other end of his directorial career, during production of his *magnum opus*, the 1956 *The Ten Commandments*, he had researched, published and distributed to academic libraries worldwide copies of *Moses and Egypt: The Documentation to the Motion Picture The Ten Commandments* (Noerdlinger 1956). This research-cum-PR book was "an illuminating compendium of facts, beliefs, and textual histories concerning state-of-the-art scholarship on Moses, the Jews, and the world of Egypt at the time DeMille was filming" (Leitch 54).

### **The Devaluing of DeMille**

As "neither a critical nor a political favorite" (Ford and Mitchell 76), DeMille did not generate the serious academic attention that he deserved, furthermore, "DeMille's reputation as the creator of lurid, sensationalist epics often meant that his considerable story-telling talents were critically undervalued" (Andrew 74). This is especially disappointing because many commentators have come to consider DeMille a "master storyteller" (Whissen 78), "a master of visual storytelling" (Stephenson 414), and "a master storyteller and craftsman" (Bernheimer 49) who had creatively fused in one unique package the "born showman and consummate storyteller" (Sennett 72). Even as an acknowledged founder of Hollywood, a movie pioneer and the "King of the epic Biblical spectacular" (Finler 32), DeMille is only *slowly* being appreciated for his unique fusion of genius and genre, as evidenced by Giannetti and Eyman who claimed:

De Mille's greatest gift, aside from an uncanny instinct for popular taste, was his storytelling. A good De Mille film is akin to listening to a saga told by a literally-minded, vigorous grandfather

with a remarkable gift for elaboration. De Mille's bread and circuses could be gauche and absurd, but *he never dropped a stitch in a story*. Critic Carlos Clarens has noted that De Mille's characters did not function as metaphors, had no inner lives or deep meaning, but were still compelling precisely because of their vivid behavioral coloring and De Mille's perpetually forward narrative. His genius for external drama, so obvious in all of his later films, disguised the fact that *he was more than a maker of garish comic books sprung to life*. (Giannetti and Eyman 40) [my emphasis]

The writer concurs with this claim *except* Carlos Clarens' comment that: "De Mille's characters did not function as metaphors, had no inner lives or deep meaning." Although his biblical characters may have looked simple on the surface they were in fact very complex, multi-layered, interlocking and artfully crafted by DeMille-the-subtextual-engineer, as deftly demonstrated by his construction of the old Story Teller as a John the Baptist-figure in *Samson and Delilah* (Kozlovic 2006a), his Samson as a Christ-figure in *Samson and Delilah* (Kozlovic 2003) and his Moses as a Christ-figure in the 1956 *The Ten Commandments* (Kozlovic 2006b); all of which lay undiscovered for over half-a-century. As DeMille's directorial peer, George Cukor, ruefully confessed:

long time ago I thought what he did was a big joke, just preposterous, and I couldn't understand why the audience went for it in such a big way. There were always all sorts of orgies with belly dancers, veils and all the trappings. The eroticism was a joke. Then I saw *The Ten Commandments*...it was preposterous from the word go but I suddenly saw something new there, something which had escaped me before: *the story telling was wonderful*. The way that man could tell a story was fascinating - you were rivetted to your seat. That's exactly what he was: *a great, great story teller*. It was often ridiculous with all those excesses and froth but the man did *tell a story*. That was De Mille's great talent and the secret behind his popular success. (qt. in Long 27) [my emphasis]

This essential filmmaking feature was also what DeMille himself firmly believed in, namely: "The greatest art in the world is the art of story-telling and we are its component parts - from the actor to the lowest stage hand" ([Letter] 3), which he regularly put into practice, including covering his ears with his hands when mood music was playing because a director "must remember first, last, and always, the one essential of a successful picture - the *story* he is trying to tell" (DeMille and Hayne 122). Indeed, DeMille was a master storyteller of mythmaking proportions according to Craig W. Oler:

Through his use of motion picture technology to retell the stories of the past, DeMille provided a familiar view of man's past which spoke to the needs of an urban working class audience. The seeming reality of DeMille's historic motion pictures kept alive the stories previously told by the shaman, the priest and the magician. This combination of the captivating quality of moving pictures and familiar dramas place DeMille and his motion pictures among the minstrels, storytellers, and wizards whose role it is to explain the present through a retelling of the stories of the past... DeMille's success as a film maker grows out of his ability to keep alive an interpretation of the world similar to the ordering that occurs in the telling of folk narratives. (Oler 38-39)

Or as an anonymous Protestant church leader put it regarding his religious reputation: "The first century had its Apostle Paul, the thirteenth century had St. Francis, the sixteenth had Martin Luther and the twentieth has Cecil B. DeMille" (Manfull 357).

But what sort of Scripture filmmaker was DeMille exactly: biblical, religious or spiritual, and were the critic's condemnations fair and valid as a consequence of their category confusions? Utilizing humanist film criticism as the guiding analytical lens (i.e. examining the textual world *inside* the frame, but not the world *outside* the frame - Bywater and Sobchack chapter 2), a selective review of the critical DeMille, film and religion literature was performed and integrated into the text to enhance narrative coherence (albeit, with a strong reportage flavour), alongside a reading of his biblical *oeuvre* to address this important issue of category confusion and evaluative misidentification.

### **DeMille: A Biblical, Religious or Spiritual Filmmaker?**

A serious problem that mars a fairer evaluation of DeMille's biblical cinema is the common confusion between the various taxonomic categories within the religion-and-film field (aka spiritual cinema, holy film, cinematic

theology, cinematheology, theo-film, celluloid religion, sacred cinema, film-and-faith, film-faith dialogue), for example, the "genre of the 'religious film' probably conjures up in most people's minds the image of Charlton Heston in a Biblical spectacular, Jennifer Jones as a popular saint, or Audrey Hepburn in a convent" (Pavelin *Films* 25). Although some religion-in-film taxonomies exist (Lopez 1993), if directors are temporarily limited to the following three basic modal categories, namely: (a) biblical filmmaker, (b) religious filmmaker, and (c) spiritual filmmaker, as frequently stated or implied within critical commentaries, then, which category best fits DeMille scriptural *oeuvre*? He claimed that his "ministry was making religious movies" (Orrison 108), which encompassed his saint story *Joan the Woman*, his Roman/Christian epic *The Sign of the Cross*, his medieval Christian adventure *The Crusades*, his medical missionary biopic *The Story of Dr. Wassell*, and his atheism film *The Godless Girl* in addition to his Bible movies. However, the writer argues that when specifically referring to his four filmic adaptations of Holy Writ, then DeMille was foremost a *biblical* filmmaker, *not* a religious or a spiritual filmmaker, and thus he should be critically evaluated according to the tenants of that particular taxonomic category.

At the risk of sounding naive for making such an obvious assertion when discussing DeMille's biblical *oeuvre*, it is nonetheless vital to address precisely *because* of its obviousness, the misidentification mistakes made by critics, and the evaluation errors committed thereafter. Regrettably, DeMille was repeatedly assessed according to the type of Scripture storyteller he was *not*, rather than by the type of Scripture storyteller that he *was*, and then unfairly "punished" for *their* category confusions-cum-erroneous judgments. The following is a brief explication of these three basic categories and their relationship to DeMille's biblical cinema.

### **The Essential Attributes of a Biblical Filmmaker**

DeMille clearly understood the distinction between his biblical films and his religious films. For example, when writing about his silent *The Ten Commandments* (1923) for *The Jewish Times and Observer* he claimed: "This is not a religious picture" (DeMille *Producing* 1), and prior to making *Samson and Delilah* (1949) he stated: "I had not made a Biblical film since *The King of Kings*, nor any with a religious theme since *The Sign of the Cross* and *The Crusades*" (DeMille and Hayne 364), thus clearly indicating that DeMille saw himself as a biblical (but not a religious) filmmaker when adapting canonical Scripture for the silver screen; even if other critics confused these categories (e.g. see Marcus 123).

His own PR department also committed category confusion within their *Samson and Delilah* booklet by claiming that *The Sign of the Cross* [1932], a Roman/Christian epic, was "his fourth *biblical* production. In 1923 he made "*The Ten Commandments*"; "*King of Kings*" followed in 1927. Then the thirties brought "*The Sign of the Cross*," and today, fourteen years after it, he has produced from the Book of Judges, Chapters 13-16, the transcendent tragedy of "*Samson and Delilah*" (Anonymous *Cecil* npn) [my emphasis]. However, the writer strongly suspects that this misidentification "error" was an act of PR puffery by his marketing department to: (a) establish the holy pedigree of his Samson saga, (b) to highlight DeMille's inter-filmic consistency (auteur-like), (c) to strengthen his religious credentials and cinematic lay preacher reputation, (d) to enhance his box-office receipts as a consequence, and (e) as an advertising precursor to his forthcoming sound version of *The Ten Commandments*, especially considering that "DeMille always had three or four projects going at once" (Wilcoxon and Orrison 45).

Tellingly, DeMille does not mention the spiritual qualities of his biblical films, apart from indirectly referring to their generic capacity to generate awe-and-wonder as the primary emotional sensibility, and which were pronounced in his Moses movies during the burning bush revelation, the cosmic writing of the Ten Commandments, and the dramatic parting (and collapsing) of the Red Sea. These three filmic moments came closest to what Gerald Loughlin inscrutably described as purely spiritual cinema, namely: "a way into the light which resides in the dark; a glimpse of the invisible in the visible, in the depths of the seen" (303).

At times, DeMille was sometimes unfairly criticized for *not* being spiritual enough in his biblical films. For example, Alan Pavelin claimed that: "the main merit of *The Ten Commandments* [1956] is as spectacle rather than as education or religious inspiration. God manifests himself through physical wonders rather than through the salvation of souls...[and that this] film is a rattling good entertainment rather than a spiritual work of art" (*Fifty* 85). Similarly, Henri Agel considered that: "Hollywood biblical spectacles like *The Ten Commandments* (DeMille 1956) only pretend to express the sacred but are in fact no more than a reconstitution of a great historical event without any sacred reality" (Quicke 241). Philip C. Rule made a

similar complaint, despite admitting the intrinsic difficulties of biblical filmmaking *per se*. As he argued:

Even the endless stream of Bible films treat religion as an institution rather than as a lived human experience. Cecil B. DeMille, his army of predecessors, and his subsequent imitators, succeeded at best in giving the audience the dried husk rather than the living kernel of salvation history. Scripture, which is the vivid account of man's dealings with the living God, becomes in the hands of most directors a naively conceived script for often inaccurate costume spectacles. What lives in sacred Scripture for those who hold it as a living record, a unique part of their religious tradition, does not easily translate into another medium. (Rule 42)

However, this particular criticism only succeeded in ignoring DeMille's down-to-earth pop culture orientation, emotive characterizations and binary filmmaking philosophy that focused upon intimate human elements against a background of the grandiose, rather than dry religious institutions. Rule's criticism might validly apply to DeMille's precursors and imitators, but *not* to DeMille himself.

Not only are the biblical, religious and spiritual filmmaking categories ontologically different, but they are not always necessarily synonymous, nor do they have to cover the same territory. As a canonical biblical filmmaker, DeMille is required to portray scenes and events from the Holy Bible (but *not* the Apocrypha, Gnostic texts, or any other extra-biblical documents). These may or may not have had obvious religious or spiritual import, but hopefully they imparted a sense of religious awe whilst acting as religious instruction, especially in an educational setting.

However, as a biblical filmmaker, DeMille had to be as accurate as practical regarding scriptural passages and biblical history, with appropriate creative interpolation and extrapolation when the sacred texts are silent or precise factual details are either confusing or inadequate (Kozlovic 2010). For example, DeMille made the Pharaoh of the Exodus, Rameses (aka Rameses II), which even Egyptologists did not know at the time, but which some Egyptologists and biblical scholars today have since considered was "very probable" (Kitchen 235) and "the most likely candidate" (Geoghegan and Homan 101). As DeMille-the-dramatist argued regarding this historical filmmaking principle:

The duty of an historian is to give an accurate report of known and proven facts. The duty of an historical dramatist, however, is to fill in the crevasse between them. The absence of legs from both Alexander and his horse Bucephalus in the damaged Pompeian mosaic of the Battle of Issus is no proof that legless men or horses existed. It is for the dramatist to fill in all the missing pieces of the mosaic of history. (qt. in Johnson 154)

DeMille had also emphasized this fact-filling point during his curtain-call prologue to the second *The Ten Commandments*, and yet again within his PR trailer for the film, all of which made audiences "aware of the way in which the narrative was conjectural, and constructed from a variety of sources" (Eldridge 148). DeMille's biblical epics were thus filmic focuses of faith that creatively engaged with the Holy Scriptures and modern Western beliefs, attitudes and expectations in a linear, logical and highly entertaining fashion that were purposely designed to leave one uplifted and emotionally satisfied in a true believer fashion.

### **The Essential Attributes of a Religious and a Spiritual Filmmaker**

Unlike a biblical filmmaker, a religious filmmaker can focus upon Scripture but *also* non-biblical subjects like saints, nuns and priests, which may have no intrinsic religious dimension (or artistic value) at all according to Philip C. Rule:

*Going My Way, On the Waterfront, The Bells of St. Mary's, One Foot in Heaven*, and an endless number of other films people the screen with priests, ministers, and nuns, but they do not reveal a religious dimension in human life. They rather use institutional religion as the material for plot. Thus there is "religion" in these films but no truly religious dimension, no awareness of the sacred, of God's presence, or of people acting in a certain way because of that transcendent presence. Because they tell us how people of a certain place view religion, such films are more often of sociological or anthropological interest; but they have little or no intrinsic religious or even artistic value in some cases. (Rule 42)

Alan Pavelin similarly argued that "religious films" about ostensibly biblical characters within Bible films,

Christ films and hagiographies can also be non-religious. Why? Because the "traditional 'religious film', whether Biblical epic or hagiography, has usually lacked authenticity. The use of 'stars' to portray Christ or other biblical characters (most notoriously in Nicholas Ray's *King of Kings*), choirs of heavenly angels, and extreme sentimentality are not in my view conducive to a sense of religious awareness" (*Theology* 205). Conversely, a spiritual filmmaker may not mention the Bible or feature *any* religious characters at all, but still deal with powerful scriptural themes such as sacrifice, forgiveness and redemption in a purely secular context in settings far away from Ancient Israel (Godawa 2002).

Furthermore, Philip C. Rule argued that: "While such films as *Going My Way*, *Ben Hur*, *The Ten Commandments*, have fallen drastically short of touching the truly religious dimensions of human life, there have been secular themes that approach what we mean by the religious and the sacred: the western and the ghost story" (43). However, this stance mistakenly confuses the subject matter with the emotional or spiritual experience that such films can trigger. There is nothing automatic or intrinsic in westerns or ghost stories that will make them truly religious any more than overtly biblical or religious films automatically *prevent* them from generating profound religious experiences. It is only a question of how well the filmmakers can do this "awe" or "religious experience" task. The above stance is a form of reverse discrimination, an anti-biblical epic bias that DeMille in particular had to contend with throughout his directorial career. Nevertheless, whatever his other merits or characteristic traits, DeMille should be judged according to the type of Scripture storyteller that he was, and *not* for the type he was not, or even tried to be.

### **The Intent and Status of DeMille's Bible Films**

DeMille's biblical epics generated profound inner experiences that stayed with viewers for life and even encouraged some audience members to become professional clerics (DeMille and Hayne 259-61). As Billy Graham confessed: "Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* probably taught me more about the life of Christ than did a great deal of the Sunday School training I had as a boy" (Pepper 106). How many westerns or ghost stories can claim the same profound life-changing effect or direct religious impact? Not only did DeMille evoke the legitimate volcano-god of the Old Testament and the gentle Jesus of the New Testament, but DeMille-the-showman-storyteller helped DeMille-the-lay-preacher employ the Bible as it was *meant* to be used, namely, as "a religious instruction book. It is not essentially a theological document, a political document, an economic document" (Lee 5), and as the Apostle Paul affirmed: "For whatsoever things were written afore time were written for our learning" (Rom. 15:4)<sup>(3)</sup>, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). Indeed, Jesus' earthly mission was *not* primarily as a theologian, but as a religious educator who frequently used stories and parables to provide instructional models for right human behaviour, that is, he operated as *the* sacred storyteller for Christianity using the oral technology of his day.

Similarly, DeMille-the-religious-educator was concerned with correcting contemporary American behaviour that he deemed had gone socio-politically awry, and so he used his Bible films to dramatically convey the consequences of human choice, even if he had to infuse them with romance to do it successfully. His cinematic sermons thus gave the public what it wanted (entertainment) doing what he wanted (social engineering), and he did it so successfully that he became a Hollywood legend in the process. Indeed, the theme of freedom was a favourite DeMille hobbyhorse that bled into his other genre offerings, but which coalesced most powerfully within *Samson and Delilah* and the second *The Ten Commandments*. It was also a good reason for producing the first *The Ten Commandments* in addition to placating the women's groups, moral vigilantes and fulminating fanatics suffering flock shock and who wanted to shut down 1920s Hollywood because of the *cause célèbre* scandals concerning Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle's rape and manslaughter trial, William Desmond Taylor's murder, the drug addiction-cum-death of Wallace Reid, plus numerous lesser contretemps (Anger); thereby protecting all their filmmaking futures with his biblical morality tale.

At other times, DeMille was derided for being *just* a showman; yet, this is precisely the aesthetic style he chose instead of a religious, transcendental or spiritual style. Rather than acknowledge his artistic choice, DeMille-the-master-showman was sometimes accused of chicanery. For example, Paul Schrader considered that CB was not a "true" spiritual filmmaker and claimed: "the course of action for the religious propagandist was clear: he would simply put the spiritual on film. The film is "real," the spiritual is "on" film, ergo: the spiritual is real...A classic demonstration of this false syllogism occurs in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956)" (163). However, DeMille was never a spiritual filmmaker nor claimed to be! Schrader's derogatory

tag of "religious propagandist" was just an unkind way of saying "true believer," and as Rabbi Jakob J. Petuchowski argued regarding this seminal Moses movie: "the film version of the *Ten Commandments* has done nothing that is not also done by so-called fundamentalists. The film, like the orthodox believers, simply took the biblical words literally" (29). As a passionate true believer, what else is DeMille supposed to do?! Furthermore, biblical spectaculars *can* go beyond being escapist metaphors and authentically manifest the sacred (see Nayar 2010).

Sometimes, DeMille was accused of making spectacles instead of theological discourses about scriptural truth; even though he was an avowed pop culture professional, *not* a discourse theologian (i.e. he was criticized for failing the expectations of someone *else's* filmmaking agenda). For example, David J. Bort complained that the silent *The Ten Commandments* was "a combination of commonplace moralism, frequent vulgarity, general ostentatiousness, and little if any spiritual or religious depth. Only in *The King of Kings* did DeMille succeed in projecting anything that could be truly termed religious" (439). In short, Bort was describing DeMille's showmanship style (that apparently did not match his idea of sacred cinema) rather than judge it according to its intrinsic artistic merits, DeMille's chosen biblical filmmaking modality, and intentional religious instruction goals (let alone take into account the practical limitations of his day, the socio-cultural and censorial climate he laboured under, and the limited technological sophistication of the eras he transversed).

### **The DeMille Biblical Epic: A Restrictive Mould?**

Having set the American Mould for biblical epics, DeMille imposed a burden upon all other producers, directors and scriptwriters. The necessity of making a profit and the reality of the very profitable DeMille films meant that any variations from his winning formula were viewed suspiciously by profit-conscious financiers. Consequently, DeMille's style became the genre benchmark. As Jayne Loader argued, the much-loved Hollywood biblical spectacular:

...appeals visually to the prurient, even sadistic, impulses while condemning verbally these acts and images with lines delivered by its Christian characters or the ubiquitous voice-of-God narrator. But what do audiences remember from movies like *Sign of the Cross* [1932], *Ben-Hur* (1959), *The Robe* (1953), *David and Bathsheba* (1951), *Samson and Delilah* (1949), and *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954)? The images or the words? I know what I remember: the bad old days, lovingly depicted; the chariot races; the dance of the seven veils; the orgies; the golden calf; the sacrifices and slave auctions; the ravished Christian maidens; Salome kissing the severed head of John the Baptist; the barely-repressed homoeroticism; and the shaved chests and oiled, oversized muscles of Steve Reeves and Victor Mature. In the world of the biblical spectacular, evil is glamorous, colourful, sexy, memorable. Goodness and virtue are boring, forgettable, and dull. (Loader 201)

DeMille deserves his honorific epithet "master of the biblical epic" (Apostolos-Cappadona 450); not just for his avoidance of biblical boredom, plot forget-ability or emotional dullness, but for striking a successful balance between the sacred and secular, the literal and imaginative, the spirit and letter of the Bible better than anyone else ever did before him or after.

However, not everyone in Hollywood liked his winning formula. For example, director Howard Hawks claimed: "I learned what not to do by watching Cecil DeMille" (Girgus 111). Screenwriter Philip Dunne claimed: "I am not fond of what the motion picture industry calls "biblical epics," in particular the compounds of sex and sadism masquerading as religion-according-to-De Mille" (118). Yet, Dunne's own biblical movie efforts such as *David and Bathsheba* and *The Robe* were themselves firmly rooted in the DeMille vein and tried to achieve the same phenomenal box-office successes (albeit, unsuccessfully). Thereby, confirming DeMille's directorial uniqueness and simultaneously generating a potent source of anti-DeMille bitterness and personal condescension disguised as professional film criticism from members of the "'hate De Mille' cult" (Feldman and Feldman 1).

Nowadays, it is *de rigueur* to mention DeMille in passing whenever biblical films are discussed, itself a semi-ritualistic act of homage. For example, John McCarty referred to the "DeMille-like Biblical Epic, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1963)" (151) whilst reviewing *The Bible: In the Beginning...* which he considered "was a Huston film whose visual beauty out-shined anything the director had done previously - not to mention the films of DeMille" (McCarty 153). For Malcolm Boyd, John Huston's film had "all the earmarks of a DeMille

spectacular" (*Babel* 1083) whilst Judith Crist not only referred to "the De Mille school of Biblicals," but devoted the last 20% of her review of *The Bible: In the Beginning...* to reminiscing about DeMille's silent *The Ten Commandments* (and another sign of CB's profound impact upon the genre). Indeed, Huston actively resisted directorial parallels with DeMille and complained: "Every day I'm being asked if I am a believer and I answer I have nothing in common with Cecil B. DeMille" (Madsen 212), and that he did not do "the C. B. DeMille kind of research" (Pratley 146) whilst also "assuring the curious that he was not trying "to do a DeMille"" (Nolan 226).

Tellingly, *The New York Times* critic complained that *Sodom and Gomorrah* was "an obvious but feeble imitation of "The Ten Commandments" of Cecil B. de Mille, and it is much more concerned with salt-mining than it is with debauchery or lust" (Anonymous *Sodom* 3372). Alexander Walker concurred: "it is disconcerting to find people who were reputedly so corrupt and depraved should have had such a dreary time of it...Heigh-ho! afternoons must have dragged in Sodom" (72), that is, they sorely missed DeMille-the-very-entertaining-salacious-cineaste. Mistakenly, director Robert Aldrich tried to out-do DeMille by *not* fulfilling the audiences' sexual expectations implicit in the *Sodom and Gomorrah* storyline, and simply because he lacked DeMille's deep biblical knowledge, his skill in sexual titillation and subtextual engineering, or in adroitly managing the censorial forces of his day.

As for the sacred subject matter, biblical epics will live as long as Judeo-Christianity lives, but the epic to end all epics has still to find its maker, notwithstanding *The Passion of the Christ*, and so the 1956 *The Ten Commandments* will have to do until that exemplary film arrives. Even after fifty years it still impresses far more than it depresses, and as Lisa Mitchell noted: "Cecil B. De Mille's work is increasingly appreciated. People seem to be recognizing that his movies - particularly *The Ten Commandments* [1956] - are morality plays, and need to be seen in that light. As in Shakespeare's use of extreme language, De Mille's lush, stylized *tableaux* evoke a primordial truth of feeling" (17). However, biblical, religious or spiritual films have not reached their full potential to date.

### **Post-DeMille Judeo-Christian Filmmaking**

As Father Peter Malone pointed out: "There are two kinds of "religious" film now. One can be rightly described as religious because it deals with man's acknowledgment of God and understanding of himself as a creature. The other kind of religious film is that which deals with a religious subject but has no real feeling for man's religious attitudes at all" (133). DeMille has traditionally been dumped into the second category, but with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of his biblical storytelling power and aesthetic artisanship, he more rightfully fits into the first category. Technically speaking, he also fits into the first part of the second category, but not the latter half, even though Peter Malone thought so and said: "It is a byword, of course, that the Biblical films are often the last films that one would call religious. They are considered as exploiting pseudo-religious sentiment and sensation as well as sex and violence" (140). Regrettably, Malone has only clouded the waters by confusing the differences between biblical, religious and spiritual films.

Somewhat ironically, the DeMille biblical epic planted the seeds of its own self-destruction. As Millicent Marcus pointed out, the genre dedicated to representing the Bible on film was:

...the religious superspectacle, from the silents (*Ben Hur*, *Quo Vadis*), through Cecil B. DeMille's biblical productions (*The Ten Commandments*, *King of Kings*, *The Sign of the Cross*), to their 1950s and 1960s remakes. With its material extravagance, operatic overstatement, enormity of scale, and star-studded casts, the genre substitutes grandiosity for grandeur in its quest for a style adequate to its narrative content. After all, the greatest story ever told requires the greatest expenditure of technical means for the telling. Once the early industry seized upon the biblical subject matter as a pretext for spectacle, and once the Hollywood studio system put its imprimatur on the genre, religious filmmaking became an excuse in ever-escalating opulence, a challenge to exceed in lavishness all previous productions, and thus to up the ante for all future competitors. (Marcus 123)

Thus precipitating the inevitable post-DeMille collapse of the genre: "That movie audiences were ready to move on to something else became apparent with the release of *King of Kings* (1961), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and John Huston's *The Bible* (1965). The cinematic Bible bubble had burst" (Moore 240). DeMille's death in 1959 was not only the end of a legend and the demise of the Golden Age of Hollywood, but



it also signalled the beginning of the end of "the De Mille school of Biblicals" (Crist 186). After DeMille's death, Malcolm Boyd considered his celluloid contributions to Christianity and was not too pleased:

Again and again one hears that, in spite of all its failures and shortcomings, this kind of "religious" movie nevertheless brings the Bible to the attention of millions who would otherwise have no incentive to become interested in it. (Was Mr. de Mille, in this sense an evangelist for God in Hollywood?). One might be prone to accept this argument; yet further thought demands that it be rejected. The fact that millions of moviegoers are being confronted by, for example, *The Ten Commandments* [1956], presents a problem of the first magnitude. Hundreds of thousands of youngsters will receive their "Christian education" from Mr. de Mille and his associates rather than in church schools (or with considerably more force than most church schools can muster). Why is this bad? Because the impression of the nature of God there presented is clearly unbiblical; he is a technological creation of man, cut down to the size of mechanical miracles; one sees and hears a fairy-story deity whose only claim to holiness is in terms of the modern cultural measurement: overawing size and overpowering sound. (Boyd *Criticism* 231)

And yet, firstly, watching DeMille's Bible films *is* better than not seeing any films at all; particularly because of its valid emphasis upon the volcano God of the Old Testament unadulterated by the gentle Jesus of the New Testament, and secondly, because DeMille *is* a legitimate evangelist for God in Hollywood who continues to provide valuable Judeo-Christian education; even if only as a springboard for criticism using the *via negativa* pedagogic approach (i.e. finding the "good" therein by pointing out the "bad").

Similarly, J. G. Harrell considered that a theology of filmmaking was possible, but warned Christian filmmakers against following pagan, opportunistic, commercial patterns (aka DeMille). Instead, "the maker of religious films must, out of respect for God, produce works characterized by truthfulness, integrity, perfectness, inspiration" (931). Yet, even this high-minded holy specification requires counterbalancing by earthy pragmatism to make effective and well-patronized commercial cinema. As K. Lloyd Billingsley argued:

Christians must understand that doctrinal orthodoxy, spirituality, and good intentions do not confer dramatic talent. Faithful church attendance does not equip one to conceive compelling stories with a beginning, middle and conclusion; with living breathing characters; with a sense of surprise and pacing, and dialogue that crackles; with an abiding sense of mystery that hints at the transcendent, as in Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*; and with a satisfying payoff which lingers in the audience's mind for more than half an hour. (Billingsley 191)

Indeed, "Critics who spent years panning the spectaculars of Cecil B. DeMille found virtues in his work when compared to *The Bible*" (Forshey 146), especially because John Huston "seems to have taken his visual clues about vice and licentiousness from Fellini rather than DeMille" (Forshey 157).

## Conclusion

DeMille's biblical cinema had achieved its phenomenal box-office success (if not critical praise) by remaining true to his Episcopalian Christianity and fundamentalist principles as a true believer. Because his scriptural *oeuvre* was frequently mislabeled as religious or spiritual instead of biblical, it was unjustly assessed by critics who failed to appreciate the distinction between these three modal categories. However, a more fairer and sympathetic examination of his biblical films taking into account his chosen category of Scripture filmmaking will mitigate many of the critics' condemnations and lead to a rectification and renewal of DeMille's reputation as a filmmaker full of depth and meaning hitherto undervalued. Overall, biblical cinema is a valid and viable field that is highly relevant to the proverbial children of the media simply because it is a natural and unavoidable part of their cultural turf, social heritage and meaning-making mechanism, which would be churlish to deny. Further research into storytelling, Cecil B. DeMille studies and the emerging interdisciplinary field of religion-and-film is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.

## Notes

1. Many scholars have spelled Cecil's surname as "De Mille" or "de Mille" or "deMille," however, the correct professional spelling is "DeMille" (DeMille and Hayne 6), which will be employed herein (unless quoting others).
2. DeMille's career was so long and complex that to describe, let alone justify each aspect would be prohibitive, therefore, concise hyphenated compound terms will be used herein to help disentangle his various roles and avoid needless repetitious explanation or reader boredom.
3. The Authorized King James Version of the Bible (KJV aka AV) will be used throughout because it was frequently employed by DeMille (Higashi *Culture* 180), most of the biblical phrases that are embedded in Western culture are from it, and it is still one of the most widely used English translations today (Taylor ix, 71).

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## **Filmography**

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- Joan the Woman*. (1917, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
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- One Foot in Heaven*. (1941, dir. Irving Rapper)
- Picnic at Hanging Rock*. (1975, dir. Peter Weir)
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*The Ten Commandments.* (1956, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)

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