



DRAMA · HISTORY

The Ten Commandments

1956 · Directed by Cecil B. DeMille

Biblical Epic

Historical Epic

Classical Hollywood

A Hebrew infant is raised inside Pharaoh's palace as an Egyptian prince, with every advantage of rank. As he grows, his place in Egypt and his sense of who he is begin to pull against each other. DeMille tells the story of Moses on the largest scale Hollywood could manage.

DIRECTOR	Cecil B. DeMille
YEAR	1956
RUNTIME	3h 40m (220 min)
COUNTRY	USA
GENRES	Drama, History
CAST	Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, Anne Baxter, Edward G. Robinson, Yvonne De Carlo
MUSIC	Elmer Bernstein
IMDB	7.9 / 10 (83,457 votes)
ROTTEN TOMATOES	82% (critics)
TMDB SCORE	78 / 10 (1,936 votes)
WHERE TO WATCH	Stream (US): Paramount Plus Premium, Paramount Plus Essential, Paramount+ Amazon Channel, Paramount+ Roku Premium Channel Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, Plex Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 **The defining Hollywood biblical epic, by its master**

Cecil B. DeMille's last film, and a remake of his own 1923 version, is the fullest statement of the genre he helped create. It is the template for the biblical spectacle.

2 **Studio spectacle at its absolute peak**

Thousands of extras, vast sets, location work in Egypt, Technicolor and VistaVision. It shows what Hollywood offered against television in the 1950s, and its effects work won the film's only Oscar.

3 **A very different kind of storytelling**

Declamatory acting, tableau staging and a sermon-like tone feel unlike modern cinema. Seeing it on its own terms shows how epic, faith and showmanship once fitted together.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

The summit of the Hollywood biblical epic and of the roadshow spectacle, and the closing statement of a career that ran from the earliest feature films to the widescreen era.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a piece of grand theatre and showmanship, where gesture, colour and scale carry the meaning as much as psychology does.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How actors are placed in the frame like figures in a religious painting, with stylised gestures and formal, declamatory speech.
- The use of colour in costume and set design to separate the Egyptian court from the Hebrew slaves and from the desert.
- How the story is built around personal rivalry and romance in the palace before the larger public drama takes over.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

When a film treats a sacred story as a human drama, where do love, rivalry and ambition sit next to faith?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** By the mid-1950s television was cutting into cinema attendance. Studios answered with scale: widescreen formats, colour, long running times and event-style releases that a small screen could not match.
- **Technology:** Paramount's VistaVision gave a large, sharp image, and Technicolor saturated it. Optical effects, mattes and tank photography were pushed hard for the film's set pieces.
- **Dominant styles:** Religious and ancient-world epics were booming after *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953). They offered spectacle, moral seriousness and a form of respectability under the Production Code.
- **Director's moment:** DeMille had made a silent *Ten Commandments* in 1923. Here he returned to the story as a veteran showman, and he appears on screen to introduce it personally.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

The Ten Commandments (1923)

DeMille's own silent version, a hit that established him as the master of spectacle and gave him a story to return to.



FILM

Ben-Hur (1925)

The silent biblical-era epic that set the model for huge sets, crowds and a faith-inflected spectacle.



TRADITION

Illustrated Bibles and religious pageantry

DeMille's tableau staging and moral rhetoric draw on Victorian biblical illustration and stage pageants.



THIS FILM

The Ten Commandments (1956)

NEW AT THE TIME *It combined biblical material with an unprecedented scale of production, shooting partly in Egypt and using then-state-of-the-art effects, as a prestige event rather than a genre programmer.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in Eisenhower's Cold War America, when religious revival and anti-communism shaped public life and an old Hollywood showman staged his last, biggest spectacle.

- **Cold War and religious revival:** 1950s America saw rising church attendance and the addition of "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954. Set against "godless communism", a story of freedom from tyranny fit the public mood.
- **DeMille's politics:** DeMille was a vocal conservative and anti-communist. He appears on screen in a prologue to present the story as a struggle between liberty under God and rule by a tyrant.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** In his seventies and in declining health, DeMille was remaking his own 1923 silent film. It was his final film as director, and he approached it as a summation of his career.
- **Audience and cost:** Hollywood was losing viewers to television and suburban life. Paramount backed an enormous, long production, shot partly on location in Egypt, as a way to bring families back to cinemas.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Slow and stately, with a long running time. There are an overture, an intermission and exit music in the original roadshow format.
- **Style:** Theatrical and operatic: formal dialogue, broad gestures, heightened emotion and sermon-like narration. Its seriousness is sincere, not ironic.
- **Performance:** Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner lead with statuesque presence, while supporting players such as Edward G. Robinson and Anne Baxter play with melodramatic relish.
- **Format:** Technicolor and VistaVision, framed widescreen. Elmer Bernstein's large orchestral score carries much of the emotion.
- **Effects:** Effects are from the 1950s: mattes, tanks and optical compositing. Their craft impresses even where they are visibly of their time.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

8+ SUGGESTED AGE

Rated G in the US and U in Britain, but FSK 12 in Germany; given the 220-minute length, biblical themes and some intense scenes, 8 suits watching together.

Official ratings: US G · UK U · Germany 12 · France TP

- **Good for:** Spectacular sets, huge crowds and colourful costumes, along with big-screen drama and music. Children who enjoy epic storytelling or Bible stories may be absorbed, especially if you watch in two sittings.
- **May unsettle, peril:** Some sequences are tense and urgent, with large groups in danger. Moments of threat to children appear, though they are not graphic.
- **May unsettle, scary imagery:** Supernatural effects and ominous sights are staged with dated but eerie visuals, which may frighten sensitive younger children.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Stylised, non-bloody violence, including cruelty toward enslaved people and some deaths. Brief and not gory, but it can be upsetting.
- **May unsettle, pace:** At over three and a half hours with an intermission-style structure, long stretches of formal dialogue may test younger viewers' attention.
- **Explain first:** It is a 1956 Hollywood retelling of a biblical story, with theatrical acting and grand speeches typical of the era.
- **Explain first:** The story is set in ancient Egypt, where slavery and absolute rulers are central, so a little background helps.
- **Explain first:** Special effects are from the 1950s, so they look old-fashioned. It can help to mention that before you start.

Talk about it after: *>When is it right to stand up for what you believe is fair, even when it is difficult, and what might make that hard?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film frames the Moses story as a contest between freedom under God and tyranny under a human ruler, a Cold War-era moral that DeMille states outright. It can also be read as the story of a man who must lose his privileges to find his purpose.

THEMES

- **Freedom against tyranny:** The prologue states the question directly: whether people belong to the state or are free before God. The Egyptian court stands for absolute human power, and the Exodus for liberation.
- **Identity and calling:** Moses is raised in privilege, then must accept an origin he did not choose. The film makes his transformation personal before it makes it political.
- **Rivalry and envy:** Moses and Rameses are brothers in everything but blood, competing for the throne and for Nefretiri. This private conflict gives the epic a human centre.
- **Law and responsibility:** The commandments arrive as a founding moral law, and the film shows that a free people must also learn to bind themselves.
- **Pride and faith:** Rameses cannot yield even when evidence mounts against him, and the Israelites doubt when faith is tested. Pride and doubt are shown as universal failings.

Key scenes

DeMille's on-screen prologue

The director steps before the curtain and frames the film as a sermon on liberty. It reveals the showman-preacher approach and the Cold War reading he wants viewers to carry through the film.

The burning bush

This is the film's turning point, where Moses changes from fugitive shepherd to prophet. It is staged with light, music and voice, showing how the film handles the unfilmable with restraint and awe.

The plagues and the Passover night

Effects, sound and a drifting green mist make the judgment on Egypt a horror-like set piece. It also forces Rameses's choice into personal cost, and the story into its most dramatic point.

The parting of the Red Sea

The film's most famous effects sequence, which won the film's only Oscar. It combines tank footage, mattes and sheer scale, and became the benchmark every later screen miracle was measured against.

Filmmaking

- **Direction:** DeMille stages in tableaux, with large crowds arranged around central figures and a clear moral emphasis. His style descends from Victorian illustrated Bibles and the stage pageant, and he follows it with great consistency.
- **Special effects:** John P. Fulton led the effects work, combining water tanks, matte painting and optical printing. The sequences were made with painstaking craft long before digital tools, and they carry real physical weight.
- **Design and colour:** Sets, costumes and Technicolor saturation make Egypt a place of gold, blue and stone. The scale is deliberate: the palace is meant to feel like a world worth giving up.
- **Music:** Elmer Bernstein's score is one of the grand orchestral works of the era. It ties the romance, the court intrigue and the divine scenes together with recurring themes.
- **Performance:** Heston's physical authority, Brynner's cold arrogance and Baxter's seductive scheming match the film's operatic register. Realism is not the aim, so the acting should be judged as stylised drama.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

An Egyptian ruler orders all Hebrew male infants killed. One baby is set adrift on the Nile and found by Pharaoh's daughter Bithiah, who raises him as her own son in the palace. He grows up as Moses, a gifted general and builder, favoured by Pharaoh Seti and loved by the princess Nefretiri. His success makes him a rival to Seti's son Rameses.

Moses learns that he was born a Hebrew, and he chooses to share the lot of the slaves rather than hide behind his privilege. Dathan, a Hebrew overseer who wants Moses's position and Nefretiri's favour, betrays him. Rameses, now Pharaoh, banishes him into the desert.

In Midian Moses marries Sephora and lives as a shepherd. At the burning bush, he is called to free his people. He returns to Egypt, confronts Rameses and brings down a series of plagues, ending with the death of Egypt's firstborn, including Rameses's own son. Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go and then pursues them. At the Red Sea the waters part for the Israelites and close over the Egyptian army.

At Mount Sinai Moses receives the tablets of the law, while below, Dathan leads the people to worship a golden calf. Moses shatters the tablets, and the idolaters are punished. The people are condemned to wander for forty years. Moses at last looks toward the Promised Land, hands leadership to Joshua and departs, no longer among them.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **A remake by its maker:** DeMille directed a silent *Ten Commandments* in 1923. For the 1956 version he kept the biblical story central, and treated it as a chance to do it with colour, sound and far greater means.

- **Shooting in Egypt:** Part of the film was shot on location in Egypt in 1954, with large crowds of extras for the Exodus sequences. The rest was made at Paramount in Hollywood on large sets.
- **Casting Heston:** Heston's resemblance to Michelangelo's statue of Moses is often given as a reason DeMille chose him. His infant son, Fraser, played the baby Moses. The film made Heston a leading epic star.
- **The Red Sea effect:** The sea sequence was created by John P. Fulton using tank footage, mattes and optical compositing. It earned the film its Oscar, and is the part of the film audiences most remember.
- **DeMille steps forward:** DeMille appears before the film begins and speaks directly to the audience, framing the story as a drama about human freedom. It is a rare example of a director acting as host to his own epic.
- **Myth:** The 1956 film is the only Ten Commandments DeMille made, or it retells the whole 1923 film. **Reality:** DeMille made a silent version in 1923. That film used a biblical prologue followed by a modern-day story, while the 1956 version stays with the biblical narrative of Moses.
- **Myth:** It won the Oscar for Best Picture. **Reality:** It was nominated for Best Picture but lost to Around the World in 80 Days. Its single win was for Best Special Effects.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

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FILM

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TRADITION

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THIS FILM

The Ten Commandments (1956)



FILM

Ben-Hur (1959)

The next great Hollywood biblical epic carried the roadshow spectacle model forward, with similar scale and moral seriousness.



FILM

The Prince of Egypt (1998)

An animated retelling of Moses whose sea-parting and Moses-Rameses brotherhood clearly follow DeMille's template.



MOVEMENT

Hollywood roadshow epics

Long, event-style spectacles with overtures and intermissions continued through the 1960s, reaching their peak and excess in the early part of the decade.

Reception and reputation

The film was a major commercial success on release and drew large audiences in roadshow engagements. Critics were divided: many admired the spectacle and scale, while others found the acting stiff and the dialogue stagey. It was among the most popular films of its year.

Its reputation rests on spectacle and showmanship rather than subtlety. Critics have often found it overblown, yet it endures as the clearest picture of what Hollywood believed epic cinema was. Its annual television broadcasts made it a seasonal ritual for generations of American viewers.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 7 nominations, 1 win (Best Special Effects). Nominated also for Best Picture, Cinematography, Art Direction, Costume Design, Film Editing and Sound Recording.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Holiday TV ritual:** US network ABC has broadcast the film annually since 1973, usually around Easter and Passover. Its long runtime and religious subject made it a seasonal viewing tradition for many American families.
- **Commandments monuments:** DeMille promoted the film in partnership with the Fraternal Order of Eagles, whose program placed granite Ten Commandments monuments on public grounds across the US. Such monuments later figured in church-state court disputes, including *Van Orden v. Perry* (2005).
- **Moses as Heston:** Charlton Heston's staff-raised, white-bearded Moses became popular shorthand for the biblical lawgiver. Yul Brynner's imperious Rameses and his line "So let it be written, so let it be done" are also widely quoted and imitated.

Its lasting influence

It set the benchmark for the Red Sea sequence and for biblical spectacle, shaping *Ben-Hur* (1959), later religious epics and animated and live-action retellings of the Exodus. Its approach to scale influenced the whole tradition of Hollywood roadshow epics.

WHAT NEXT?

SEE ITS INFLUENCE

Ben-Hur (1959)

The most direct heir: another sweeping religious-era epic, more psychologically restrained, with the famous chariot race in place of the Red Sea as its centrepiece.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

Ben-Hur (1925)

The silent epic that established the model of faith, spectacle and vast crowds. It shows what DeMille built on and how far scale had grown.

JUMP FORWARD

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

The epic grown more complex: the same widescreen scale and desert vistas, but with an ambiguous hero rather than a certain moral.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

Cleopatra (1963)

The Hollywood ancient-world spectacle at its most extravagant, which shows the roadshow epic model near its financial limits.

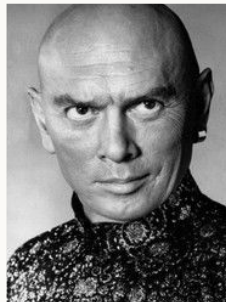
FULL CAST AND CREW



Cecil B. DeMille
DIRECTOR



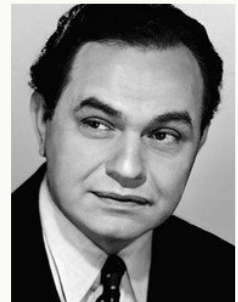
Charlton Heston
ACTOR
as Moses



Yul Brynner
ACTOR
as Ramses



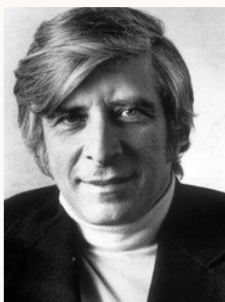
Anne Baxter
ACTOR
as Nefretiri



Edward G. Robinson
ACTOR
as Dathan



Yvonne De Carlo
ACTOR
as Sephora



Elmer Bernstein
COMPOSER