

Go Down to L.A. Land

Hollywood and God's New Israel

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Abstract

This essay will examine the thesis that film has become the medium of changes in the American civil religion by comparing how the traditional comparison of America to biblical Israel has played itself out in two Hollywood films: Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, and Dreamworks' *The Prince of Egypt*. These films have preserved many of the historically important themes of American civil religion, including the close relation of freedom to justice and of individualism to social commitment, but also have "hollywoodized" these themes, contributing to a civil religion that is both more individualistic and more fideistic than in the past.

Introduction: A New Civil Religion?

[1] One of the most powerful motifs in the national religious identity of the American people has been the tendency to regard ourselves as "God's New Israel." Conrad Cherry's anthology of that title begins with an epigraph drawn from a 1799 sermon by Abiel Abbot, which states the comparison directly:

It has often been remarked that the people of the United States come nearer to a parallel with Ancient Israel, than any other nation upon the globe. Hence OUR AMERICAN ISRAEL is a term frequently used; and common consent allows it apt and proper (in Cherry: v).

[2] Indeed, the scholarly claim that the United States has a "Civil Religion" - that we are not only a religious people in the sense of widespread adherence to religious belief, but that we understand our identity *as* a people in religious terms - has been advanced largely out of the recognition of the historical importance of this specific equation between America and Israel. Robert Bellah makes this idea the centerpiece of his historical treatment of the biblical strand of America's civil faith in *The Broken Covenant* (1992). Bellah and other interpreters particularly stress the salience of the Exodus story as a lens through which Americans have viewed their national drama from colonial times through the civil rights era and beyond. The language of chosenness and deliverance has been used by Americans to invoke the better *and* worse angels of our nature - the worst moments of national arrogance and imperialism, and the best moments of building or renewing the just institutions worthy of a "City on the Hill." No wonder Benjamin Franklin thought the image of Moses crossing the Red Sea would make a fitting subject to be depicted on the Great Seal of the United States (Cherry: 65).

[3] Now the question I am interested in exploring is whether popular film does not in some sense reflect and encourage the development of our *new* civil religion. One way to see if this is so is to look for movies that take up the traditional parallel between America and Israel directly. If America is God's new Israel, then an American film *about* Israel is likely to be a film that is at

least indirectly about America as well. I therefore propose that we “go down to L.A. land” and look for signs of the new American civil religion in two successful Bible epics, each of which represents a classic example of popular Hollywood storytelling for its time. The films are: first, Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*, a lavish technicolor remake of his own earlier silent film, which continues to find new audiences through long running Easter television broadcasts; and second, Dreamworks’ recent 1998 animated feature *The Prince of Egypt*, which has already become a staple of countless parents’ video collections, though its appeal is by no means limited to children.

[4] We will find that the American national experience is subtly and not-so-subtly evoked in both of these Moses epics. The advantage of looking at films which point so directly toward the America/Israel parallel will be the opportunity to compare the new civil religion with the old. Where have the movies *preserved* the historically important themes of our national self-consciousness, and where has the new medium subjected those themes to the insidious influence of “Hollywood values,” through the process which a recent pop song (by the Red Hot Chili Peppers) aptly names “californication”?

Freedom and Justice: From Pact to Pluralism

[5] The first theme of civil religion I would like to explore is the relation between freedom and justice, a perennial issue for Americans. Freedom, as Robert Bellah points out, is a principal ingredient of almost everyone’s sense of what it means to be American (Bellah *et al.*: 23-25). However, the distinctively *religious* interpretation of liberty enters American consciousness through the puritan notion of America as a *covenanted* nation. In the image of the covenant, the liberation of a nation into freedom becomes strongly linked to a sense of its duty to uphold justice within society (Bellah: 20f). The responsibility of a free society to uphold God’s justice as well as to receive God’s favor was an essential ingredient in John Winthrop’s famous comparison of America to the biblical “Shining City on a Hill” (in Cherry: 43). The biblical strand of American civil religion in its classic form sees the coexistence of freedom and justice as the sign and test of America’s chosenness - the continued success of the American experiment is a testimony both to divine favor *and* to human moral resolve. If our two films renew the biblical strain of civil religion, we will expect to see the link of freedom and justice explored in some meaningful way.

[6] This expectation is certainly not disappointed in the case of *The Ten Commandments*. As the title itself suggests, DeMille’s film is centrally concerned with the moral law which binds a free society to standards of justice. Released in the decade of the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the civil rights movement, and in the aftermath of World War II, *The Ten Commandments* is structured to emphasize the contrast between Egypt, a society in which the law is the expression of the arbitrary will of political power, and the Hebrews, a people for whom the liberation into freedom is protected through adherence to a universal law whose divine origin gives it authority over ruler and ruled alike. The contrast between Egyptian and Hebrew society throughout the film creates a neat political allegory that would not have been lost on its audience in 1956 - and just in case it was, DeMille himself took the extraordinary step of appearing before the camera in person to *tell* the audience the political moral of the story in a prologue deleted from the televised version of the film and the first video release, but restored in the 40th Anniversary Collectors Edition of the film:

DeMille: Ladies and Gentlemen, Young and Old... This may seem an unusual procedure - speaking to you before the picture begins. But we have an unusual subject: The birth of freedom - the story of Moses. . . . The theme of this picture is whether men are to be ruled by God's law, or whether they are to be ruled by the whim of a dictator like Ramses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today (DeMille).

If every storyteller were this direct about the contemporary significance of their tale, I guess that we interpreters might all be out of a job! Luckily for us, there is more to say about how the film addresses this question. Aneas MacKensie and Jesse Lasky's screenplay and DeMille's direction explore the relation between law and freedom in ways more subtle than this rather heavy-handed introduction would suggest.

[7] At one level, *The Ten Commandments* certainly is the cold war or post-fascist allegory that DeMille's commentary suggests. Ramses fits the model of the cold-hearted dictator motivated by power, and the labor of the Hebrew slaves for such a regime is described in DeMille's voiceover narration as "the ceaseless cycle of unending toil. . . . Bondage without rest, work without reward" (DeMille). The montage of images accompanying these words depict the slaves as machine-like workers, suggesting a parallel to the image of the Soviet Union as a nation where people are turned into automatons. A further allusion to Soviet and fascist horrors comes when the Pharaoh Seti orders that Moses be "erased" from memory, as in a Stalinist purge: "Let Moses' name be stricken from every obelisk and wall," he says, "let the name of Moses be heard no more in Egypt" (DeMille). When a dictator's word is law, human dignity, memory, and truth itself are held captive.

[8] By contrast, the Hebrews are depicted even before the exodus as a people who are possessed of a keen sense for the injustice of their situation and of their duty to each other. As a consequence, the Egyptians do not really succeed in degrading the slaves to the level of machines. Even in bondage, the Hebrews' belief that justice is inalienable keeps some of their dignity intact. For instance, when Prince Moses questions Joshua about why he intervened to save an old woman from death, asking "What is she to you?" Joshua replies defiantly - and universalistically - "An old woman." Moses' response, "You do not speak like a slave," confirms that Joshua has made the kind of human gesture reserved for the elite in his society (DeMille).

[9] *After* God grants the Hebrews freedom from bondage, they enter into crisis over what to *do* with that freedom, exemplified by the Golden Calf episode, a scene which DeMille shoots to emphasize anarchy more so than idolatry. The unity of the society is preserved when Moses reminds them that "There is no freedom without the Law!" (DeMille). To a 1950's America obsessed with the differences between the Communist Bloc and the Free World, such a message was part ideological affirmation and part puritanical remonstrance - the contemporary application being clear enough in either case.

[10] Lying behind this overtly political message, though, is a more subtle one about the source and scope of the law in different types of society. It is worth stating that the Egyptians are not portrayed as wholly immoral in the film. The old Pharaoh Seti possesses considerable wisdom and moral insight in the story, even to the point of anticipating some of the content of God's law. When scolding his son Ramses for plotting against Moses, Seti says, "In my judgment book, you have accused your brother falsely" (DeMille). The human judge and ruler *can* realize some of the

content of the commandments. The problem is that this insight is a product of arbitrary authority - it remains an entry in *my* judgment book, and hence it does not articulate its distinction from my other whims and wishes, nor does it escape corruption and reversal when the purposes of power are no longer congenial to that judgment - in the end, Seti still names Ramses as his successor.

[11] Moses, by contrast, becomes the symbol in the film of a moral insight that is not arbitrary but universal. As an Egyptian prince, he seems on the road toward becoming a kind Pharaoh in the mold of Seti, but on finding out his origin as a slave, he renounces power as the justification for ethics. Trying to keep Moses from “going Hebrew,” his adoptive mother Bithia asks a pointed question: “Cannot justice and truth be served better from a throne, where all men may benefit from your goodness?” (DeMille). This is not a bad question at all, really, but the decisive - and very American - answer given by the film is “no.” Like the deist framers of the U.S. constitution, Moses seeks a society guided by a moral law that is universal in scope and application. Throughout the film, we hear fragments of that law coming out of the mouths of many different peoples: Hebrews, Egyptians, Arabs (Midians), Ethiopians, and Nubians. But like those framers and their puritan counterparts, he also sees that this law is only compatible with a lasting freedom to the extent that its claims are *inalienable* by virtue of having their source in some higher authority than human judgment.

[12] God, then, primarily functions as the sponsor of the law in *The Ten Commandments*, the nonhuman source of the codes that protect human dignity and rights and make a free society a living possibility. The film goes to some lengths to dissociate this law from the particularism of a national ethic - what the commandments do is put the seal of a nonhuman, enduring authority on those moral insights that God also makes available to wise minds outside the context of the chosen community. The special status of Israel and by implication America lies in the fact that here, universal moral insight is not the captive of always corruptible human power, but rather is seen as an inalienable birthright that is written on human hearts *and* in a charter document - a law or constitution that protects and transmits these insights for everyone.

[13] The signature line of the film, “So let it be written-so let it be done” (DeMille), thus means something very different depending on whether that writing expresses the arbitrary and erasable edict of the Pharaoh which destroys freedom, or the universal and hence permanent wisdom of God which preserves it. At its best, then, *The Ten Commandments* connects with the most worthy part of the American civil religion tradition which insists that America the chosen nation be held to the *responsibility* of its covenant without being seduced by the arrogance of its power. It does this even as it constantly teeters and occasionally falls onto the side of jingoistic rhetoric and cold war propaganda - a danger we’ll take up later.

[14] By contrast with the cold war ethos of *The Ten Commandments*, the 1998 audience of *The Prince of Egypt* is *not* strongly imbued with a sense of national crisis, with the Soviet “evil empire” having disappeared as the most obvious analogue to Egypt in the story. Reflecting this change in American self-image, any strong sense of political allegory is downplayed in the more recent retelling of the Exodus story. But this is not to say that the question of how our society can be both free and just has disappeared as a theme in the newer picture. Rather, the question has been recontextualized in terms of concerns more familiar to our own time - where before the central opposition was “Freedom or Slavery?” now it is “Diversity or Ethnocentrism?” Justice is still a central concern, but justice here finds its application in the creation of a harmonious pluralistic society, rather than in the covenant that creates one nation under the law.

[15] The dignity and pride associated with the cultural and ethnic identity of particular communities is stressed in *The Prince of Egypt* to an extent much greater than in the earlier film. Where the earlier film partook of the universalism of the civil rights era and the “free world” in proclaiming “many creeds, one God,” *The Prince of Egypt* is less concerned with any sameness of essential content than with the goal of peaceful coexistence between people from different cultural and religious groups. One precondition for attaining this goal is that we take our distinctive cultural identities seriously. The lighthearted youths Moses and Ramses are in the process of appropriating those traditions for themselves at the start of the film, and their attitude becomes a matter of concern to their father, who admonishes: “Do you even understand the ancient traditions?” The empire of Egypt is as much about the preservation of a *culture* as it is about the extension of political power: “I’m a sovereign prince of Egypt,” Moses sings, “the son of a proud history that’s etched on every wall . . . this is my home” (Dreamworks). This concern that ethnic identity be preserved is echoed throughout the film. While *The Prince of Egypt* shares and extends *The Ten Commandments*’ self-conscious concern to represent diverse *racial* phenotypes among its cast of thousands, it adds an attention to the specificity of different *cultural* expressions as well. Untranslated Hebrew lyrics show up in two of the film’s songs, for example, and there is a kind of celebration of the vitality of local customs exemplified in a scene where Moses is invited to eat and dance according to the ways of his future father-in-law Jethro’s clan. His joyful participation in these rituals stands in stark contrast to a parallel scene in *The Ten Commandments*, where Moses and the audience remain voyeurs of an exhibition which is merely exotic and which degenerates into an excuse to leer at the dancing girls - the level of intercultural understanding one might associate with a Hope and Crosby “Road” picture!

[16] In line with this increased attention to cultural particularity, the great *injustice* with which *The Prince of Egypt* is concerned is a kind of ethnocentrism in which one appreciates the greatness and protects the interests of one’s own community, but is unwilling to allow everyone the same expression of their cultural dignity. This is the sin of Egypt. Seti and later Ramses do understand the importance of their own traditions and feel a genuinely admirable sense of responsibility to their people and heritage, but they are incapable of seeing other cultures as anything other than potential obstacles to or tools for their purposes. Justice demands that all peoples have an equal opportunity to live and pursue their dreams of happiness in its diversity of forms, as Moses explains to Tsipporah when announcing that he must return to Egypt. “Look at your family. They are free. They have a future, with the promise of a life of dignity. That is what I want for *my* people” (Dreamworks).

[17] The freedom that is desired here is not so much the freedom of individuals from slavery and oppression, although that is perhaps a precondition for true freedom. No, the freedom celebrated here is something more akin to Marlo Thomas’ “Free to be You and Me” - a staple of children’s culture in the 1960s and 1970s. It is the freedom to live without being demeaned because of one’s cultural, racial, or gender identity, and beyond that, to be allowed to celebrate that identity. This is a concern that is of course reflective of the current state of our pluralistic society. Having conquered some of the most obvious evils of prejudice, we now find ourselves asking whether we can graduate from the “everyone’s the same” ideology of the previous struggle to some new understanding that allows us to say “we’re different, but we can still live together.”

[18] *The Prince of Egypt* weighs in to suggest that the blessing of this type of *freedom* can only be maintained through a revolution in conscience that maintains some meaningful standard of *justice*. Since unlike DeMille’s film the law is never actually *read* in *The Prince of Egypt*, we are

left to understand that this standard amounts to some version of the Golden Rule, which applies to societies as well as individuals. Understanding everyone's equal right to self-expression liberates us to a richer appreciation of our own tradition that is *joy* as well as pride, while denying that right to others limits us to an over-protective pride which sees enemies everywhere. When Prince Moses first finds himself on the other side of the cultural divide upon learning the secret of his Hebrew birth, it leads him to reevaluate the "proud history," that he had been singing about moments before. In the spectacularly animated dream sequence where Moses imagines himself as a living character in the hieroglyphic tableau of the palace walls, he comes to realize the proud advance of his own civilization has been accompanied by cruelty, and he comes to understand why Pharaoh's voice always sounds weary and stoic. By contrast, the Midian and Hebrew cultures that *do* understand the demand of equal justice also exhibit a joy and vigor in the free exercise of their own tradition that is absent from Egypt.

[19] As in *The Ten Commandments*, this link between freedom of cultural expression and equal justice is explicitly associated with God. In one of the musical scenes, Jethro instructs Moses that the moral insight that will show him where true worth and honor lie will require that he learn to look at himself "through heaven's eyes." This explicitly moral lesson is accompanied by images that depict Moses being initiated into the cultural ways of Jethro's clan, where he joins a vital and free way of life that must nonetheless be learned, like a dance. God's role here is to serve as the symbol of a more expansive perspective on life that liberates one from the solipsism that leads to cultural exclusivity and allows us to affirm our part in something larger than ourselves:

Little Girl: Psst. . . . Sit with me!

[Moses starts to eat fruit from bowl]

Little Girl: Psst. . . . Not yet!

Jethro: My Children, let us give thanks for this bountiful food, and let us also give thanks for the presence of this brave young man whom we honor here tonight.

Moses: Please sir, I wish you wouldn't. I've done nothing in my life worth honoring.

Jethro: First you rescue Tsipporah from Egypt, then you rescue my younger daughters from brigands . . . it seems you do not know what is worthy of honor.

Jethro (singing):

A single thread in a tapestry, though its color brightly shines,
Can never see its purpose in the pattern of the grand design,
And the stone that sits at the very top of the mountain's mighty face,
Doesn't think it's more important than the stones that form the base,
So how can you see what your life is worth or where your value lies?
You can never see through the eyes of man,
You must look at your life, look at your life, through Heaven's eyes.

Little Girl: Dance with me! (Dreamworks)

[20] The social message here is that "Heaven's eyes" see a measure of moral worth that is indeed universal in its scope and applicability, but unlike the "free souls under God" of DeMille's civil faith, there is no question here of having to give up or attenuate one's belonging to a particular cultural community. Its not a question of belonging *to* the state or tribe, but rather of

participating - learning to join the dance, a symbol of collective freedom that suggests that communities as well as individual souls can be free. This can be seen as a way of reinterpreting the deistic language of a universal God that pervades our civil religion to take account of present-day concerns about pluralism and diversity. The “Heaven” that watches over the nation in *The Prince of Egypt* is not the universal Father of many creeds, as in *The Ten Commandments*, but neither is it the protector of one tribe or nation to the exclusion of others. Rather, it is the eye that is capable of seeing human value in its many forms and colors, and the hand which weaves those diverse strands into a tapestry which transcends the limited vision of its human components.

Individualism and Social Commitment: Miracles and Blunders

[21] If at one level *The Prince of Egypt* is about the freedom of communities, it is also unmistakably a film about *individuals*, a coming of age drama about two young men, Moses and Ramses, who come to assume adult responsibilities in very different ways. This focus leads us to consider another important dimension of American civil religion, namely the balance between individualism and social commitment that formed the main theme for Robert Bellah *et al.*'s *Habits of the Heart*. The authors of that book identify the central *problem* of the current version of our civil religion as consisting of a pervasive individualism which thins out our conceptual resources for talking about our collective experience: “When each of [us] uses the moral discourse [we] share, [we] have difficulty articulating the richness of [our] commitments” (Bellah *et al.*: 20-21). The authors emphasize that it is not that Americans lack social commitments - what we lack is the language of values and ideals that would allow us to reflect on those commitments the way we reflect on our individualism. The most important *task* for contemporary voices in the American civil religion therefore becomes that of creating or renewing the linguistic and conceptual sources that will allow us to understand our identity as individuals and our connection to community as inextricably tied to one another. Do our films have anything to contribute to this renewal?

[22] In its biographical focus on Moses' struggle to find his true self among the multiple attachments and destinies available to him, *The Prince of Egypt* certainly reflects the contemporary predicament of an individual finding the real meaning of commitment in a pluralistic society. Moses' problem is not just *whether* he will come to commit himself to the destiny and traditions of some social group, but *which* group he will join. A Moses who is presented as a boy who must choose between two families, two social circles, and two ethnic identities is no doubt a mirror in which many young people in our diverse and fragmented society can see themselves. And unlike the older and more self-possessed Moses of *The Ten Commandments* who must do the same thing, this adolescent Moses is quite terrified by the choice. His problem, like people growing up in our own society, is to figure out his responsibility to the communities he chooses as he weighs his own options and values. How will he preserve his integrity as an individual without having his freedom and identity extinguished by being swallowed up by the community, or broken by choosing the wrong one?

[23] For the solution to this problem, *The Prince of Egypt* turns again to God, who in this case serves as the guarantor that the quest for meaningful identity pursued with integrity - which we know also means “with justice” - will not be in vain. As if to acknowledge that the link between individual endeavor and group destiny is not easily bridged or understood, Moses' achievement of the courage to affirm his social role is associated with the power to work miracles which God grants him. “You shall do my wonders,” God tells him on the mountain, “I shall be with you”

(Dreamworks). Moses comes down from the mountain glowing - not literally as he does in DeMille's film, but emotionally with the *acceptance* that he can now take on the weighty responsibilities of leading his people even though he still feels all the uncertainties of a child. The difference is he no longer feels alone in the quest - God will be with him. This assurance allows him to do great things for his people while staying the "same ol' Moses," retaining the emotional sensitivity that marked his individual personality as a boy.

[24] Moses' ability to balance individuality and responsibility is contrasted to the way his brother Ramses handles the responsibility of becoming Pharaoh. The reliance on personal pride and power and the narrow scope of his commitments has crushed Ramses' spirit so that he is no longer fully the person he was - trying to do it himself, he has *become* the role and lost himself. In the contrast between Moses and Ramses, the film suggests a path toward balancing self and community. Recognizing that this balancing act is often beyond the capacity of individuals, the film associates it with an act of God. As if explicitly to frame the Exodus story as a tale about each individual's *personal* quest to work out this balance with God's help, the Israelites walk through the Red Sea singing lyrics that proclaim, "Who knows what miracles you can achieve? If you believe, somehow you will!" (Dreamworks).

[25] This affirmation that self-discovery and community responsibility can coincide is embodied in the film through an overwhelmingly positive portrayal of the Hebrew nation as the community chosen in two senses: chosen by the individual as the focus of his or her identity, and chosen by God as the nation where the "miracles" of personal fulfillment and commitment to community coincide. The match with the popular image of America as "God's own country" of opportunity and personal choice, but also community spirit and patriotism, could not be more precise. The film suggests that in the right kind of community, with the right attitude and God's help, one can do or be anything and still participate in the community. This of course describes the beliefs of most Americans about their own nation as well.

[26] A reflection on the content of the film suggests that this blessed coincidence of personal choice and belonging to a group is something about which we should be both cautious and thankful. For one thing, the viewer of *The Prince of Egypt* who is also a reader of *Exodus* is bound to feel that something has been left out of the story. The conspicuous absence of a golden calf episode or scenes of dissention among the Israelites suggests that the film may be *too* optimistic about the resolution it announces. On the other hand, the film does offer real hope for a pluralistic society if God indeed produces the miracle of combining my personal attachments and group responsibilities in diverse and flexible ways. In one pointed difference between the two films, Tsipporah in *The Ten Commandments* clearly assimilates to her husband's Hebrew identity, repeating to Moses Ruth's promise that "your people will be my people, your god my God." By contrast, in *The Prince of Egypt* the film ends with Tsipporah saying "look at *your* people Moses - they are free!" (Dreamworks) as if to suggest that she and Moses have maintained a "mixed marriage"! If the deliverer can do this, then we can likewise live out personal choices *and* fulfill group responsibilities in our own "mixed" society, or so the story promises.

[27] The idealized Israelites of *The Prince of Egypt* stand in considerable contrast to the more "stiff-necked" Hebrews portrayed in *The Ten Commandments*. As we mentioned above, DeMille's movie is animated by the assumption that we are living through an overwhelming crisis of national survival and morality, in which the question of national identity is the question of whether individuals will choose to limit personal freedom by accepting the yoke of the law. In

the face of this crisis, the struggle for *personal* identity represented by Moses' biography is underplayed, and Moses' inner life comes off as opaque and flat in comparison to what one sees in the more recent picture. If the complexity of Moses' character tends to get swallowed up in his role as the vessel for God's law, so that all one sees is the constancy of his moral insight being exercised in different situations, then the other characters are equally larger or smaller than real-life individuals: The lechery of Baka or Dathan, the cruel power games of Ramses and Nefertiri, the courage of Joshua, the loyalty of Lilia - most of the characters seem more exemplars of some human passion than real human beings with frailties and misgivings, and the over-the-top acting of stars like Yul Brynner and Anne Baxter contributes to create characters that to contemporary eyes are at turns captivating and hokey. Witness the following dialogue between Ramses and Nefertiri:

Ramses: (kisses Nefertiri) I know you my sweet. . . . You're a sharp-clawed treacherous little peacock. But you are food for the gods, and I am going to have all of you.

Nefertiri: None of me! Did you think my kiss was a promise of what you will have? No, my pompous one. . . . It was to let you know what you will *not* have. I could never love you.

Ramses: Does that matter? You will be my wife. You will come to me whenever I call you, and I will enjoy that very much. Whether you enjoy it or not is your own affair . . . but I think you will (DeMille).

[28] Now, Cecil B. DeMille in his own lifetime was occasionally subject to the critique that despite his pretensions to high-mindedness, he was really just titillating his audiences with lurid morality plays - and with dialogue like this, one cannot deny totally the justice of those charges. Still, as in the case of the cold war allegory we discussed earlier, there is a kernel of genuine insight into the relations of individuals to their community, hidden amidst the hour and a half of love triangles, palace intrigue and testosterone that begins DeMille's movie. If *The Prince of Egypt* was in part a story about families and the tragedy that comes when they are split apart by the differing destiny of their members, in *The Ten Commandments* there is no such tragedy, either between Moses or Ramses or between the other characters for that matter. The scene quoted above exemplifies a point that is reinforced throughout the first half of the film: in Egypt, human relations are made fundamentally corrupt by the personal quest for power. This is not only true for the cruel sexuality fueled by personal rivalry that characterizes the love triangle between Ramses, Nefertiri, and Moses. It also holds true for other human relations, even the most intimate family ties of fathers, mothers, and sons. Recognizing the treachery of his son Ramses, Seti comments that "ambition knows no father" (DeMille). Ambition certainly does dominate Ramses' character, and his arrogance suits the political message of the story. But power also taints the more tender emotions of life in Egypt. When Bithia draws the baby Moses from the water and is asked by her maid if she knows what the Levite cloth swaddling the child signifies, she changes the cloth and replies "If my son wears it, it will be a royal robe!" This royal prerogative to transform situations in accordance with your wishes reaps its consequence when Moses must decide what to do after finding out the secret of his birth. Nefertiri counsels him: "You can be whatever you want to be . . . when you are Pharaoh, your will will be law." But Moses, who feels love both for Nefertiri and his mother Bithia, nonetheless comes to the conclusion that "Love can't drown truth" (DeMille).

[29] The fact that even love goes wrong in Egypt suggests a larger point about individualism and commitment. The individual power to make what you want to happen happen, which the Egyptian royalty take to the extreme, amounts to a kind of illegitimate imitation of the power of God. The film suggests that the exercise of such personal prerogative will destroy the very attachments to others that we desire, whether the desire is tender or cruel. The ability to find our genuine individual *destiny*, as opposed to just the fulfillment of our wants and desires, requires that we accept limitations to our actions, that we renounce the self-delusion of power that says we can do and be anything we want. Only after this humility is accepted does it become possible to cultivate true community and genuine love, as Moses finds out after he leaves Egypt. Surely there is a message here for contemporary Americans who are constantly tempted toward the extremity of individualism which says that our personal path is for ourselves to choose alone. The film, like the authors of *Habits of the Heart*, reminds us that real attachment to community and others will require that we temper the claims of individual ambition, and that doing so will enable us to find the true destiny that links us to others, as opposed to the dream of individual power that isolates us from them.

The New Civil Religion: A Shining City in Beverly Hills

[30] I think we can affirm, then, that film is capable of continuing the themes and concerns that have characterized American civil religion as that term has been understood by its principal interpreters. Both in the case of the overtly political question of freedom and justice in a society and for the more personal question of individualism and commitment, *The Prince of Egypt* and *The Ten Commandments* use the parallel between Israel and America to suggest truths about our national life that would be familiar both to the authors of the classic statements of American civil religion and to its interpreters. Moreover, the two films themselves suggests subtle shifts in the emphasis of those themes over time, shifts that in our increasingly aliterate society perhaps *should* be sought in visual media.

[31] But we are not only looking for the themes of our civil religion *in* film, but also testing the stronger claim that film has *become* the expression of the new American civil religion. For this, we must consider how the equation of America and Israel in these two films is affected by the collision of the Exodus story with the values and themes typical to Hollywood movies. In what ways has the movie medium *become* the message in these films such that the civil religion tradition does not just adapt, but enters a new phase such as that which occurred for instance when the enlightenment language of rights and freedom fused with the Puritan language of covenant and compact? What new language, visual or verbal, does film bring to the development of civil religion, and how decisively does this new chapter alter the tone of the book?

[32] One significant shift that the medium of popular film brings to the American civil religion tradition is its tendency to *personalize* its themes. In contrast to some of the media which transmitted the civil faith in the past - the sermon, the political speech, the pamphlet or tract - a movie is unmistakably narrative in form, presenting its themes through the lives of individual characters. Because it is also a drama in which that narrative must be carried through dialogue and visual action alone, the tendency to translate ideas into lives is even more pronounced in a film than it would be in a written story. Finally, because a film is as much the consumer product of a corporation as it is the artistic creation of a filmmaker, the imperative to include elements designed to appeal to specific demographics, including the elements of star appeal and love interest, further contribute to encouraging a restatement of the America/Israel equation that is

remote not only from the group exhortation of a sermon or speech, but also from the narrative style typical to the biblical text itself. Accordingly, in both of our films we find the sparse prose of the biblical text being filled in with storylines designed to add personal human interest to *Exodus'* tale of God and Israel. In *The Ten Commandments*, almost half the film is devoted to developing the relationships between Moses and the Egyptian court, including a fierce rivalry with brother Ramses and a love triangle with Ramses and Nefertiri. In *The Prince of Egypt*, we similarly find the story transformed into a tale of two brothers. In each case, the poetic license taken with the story has its own purpose within the narrative structure of the film - they are not *simply* there to provide "human interest," as some of our previous analyses have indeed shown. Still, the net effect of adding these characters and plotlines is to push each film toward focusing on a *human* drama rather than on the drama of God and the nation which is so crucial to the whole notion of a civil religion. In DeMille's film, for instance, there is a constant tension between the civic and political *theme* of the movie to which the filmmaker called our attention in his prologue, and the lively retelling of Moses' life as "a story of triumph and defeat . . . of love, and sacrifice, and murder" (DeMille) which DeMille promised the audience in the same prologue. The second purpose tends to win out in the movie, which perhaps accounts for why DeMille felt compelled to flag the social and political message of his film so directly.

[33] Focusing on the personal largely at the cost of excluding the political is practically an obligatory strategy for a Hollywood film industry whose own first commandment is "Thou shalt entertain!" One can see its effect in both films. Although each movie does contain some subtle reflection on the relationships between individuals and communities, freedom and justice, these themes are constantly in danger of becoming lost in the dramatic focus on Moses' personal biography. *The Prince of Egypt*, for instance, for all its attention to diversity and community, never really succeeds in breaking free of the language of American individualism: the connection of personal choice to social destiny remains an unexplained "miracle," and moreover it is presented as one which "you," the individual, achieve. As a result, the social and national dimension of the story hangs on by a thread whose breaking would reduce the film to an inspirational tale of personal achievement with no necessary implications for national life or even for religion. Likewise, as the scene quoted earlier suggested, the use of the first half of *The Ten Commandments* to convey important points about the relationship of power to social justice and personal life can easily be overlooked as we are overwhelmed by the dynamic screen presence - or, for contemporary viewers, perhaps the high camp - of its stars.

[34] If we can see that this kind of "hollywoodization" affects the capacity of either film to convey the themes of American civil religion, we must also start to acknowledge that hollywoodization has to a great extent *become* the message of American civil religion. If Robert Bellah can lament the fact that Americans' extreme individualism has robbed them of the moral language in which to talk about their connections, we can hypothesize in turn that this very individualism which seems on the rise in the twentieth century is in part a Hollywood product. To a nation now in its fourth generation of being raised on movies and television, the interpretation of the "American Dream" in primarily individual terms seems natural. This should not surprise us, given the personal way in which Hollywood narratives are framed. As the more collective media of religious sermon or political oratory lose their wide audience, the individualizing power of movie culture should only increase.

[35] The feature of these two movies in particular which can lead one to conclude that our civil religion has been "hollywoodized" has to do with the cinematic spectacle that is such a big part

of the experience of each film. Certainly the most enduring image most people associate with *The Ten Commandments* is the scene of the parting of the Red Sea - a special effects marvel for its time which still looks pretty good today. Likewise, *The Prince of Egypt* utilizes the latest advances in animation techniques to create an absolutely spectacular visual experience during many parts of the film. Certainly, this attention to visual drama is part of what makes both these films so enjoyable to watch. At the same time, though, the concentration on visual effects works a kind of transformation on the religious message of each film. Though the God who is the author of the law and the center of the Hebrew community is also at the center of each film, God's actual manifestations on screen tend to encourage us to view God primarily as the "mighty hand" who provides miracles and wonders, or as the mysterious voice from heaven which exceeds human comprehension, as dramatized in the Sinai scenes of both pictures.

[36] This tendency to emphasize a God of Miracles can have the effect of subverting the civic message that I have tried to emphasize in both films. As we have already indicated, *The Prince of Egypt* stops short of explaining how personal destiny combines individual wants with social responsibilities, and suggests that this balance comes through a "miracle." The narrative emphasis on the miraculous as a source of magical power at Moses' disposal, however, can tend to obliterate the hard-won insights about the need to limit and balance one's personal ambition, and replace them with a religion of wish fulfillment in which the sponsorship of God and one's connection to the community become only a less honest and direct way of pursuing personal power. In *The Ten Commandments*, the repeated emphasis on God's "mighty hand" as a display of divine power subverts the message of the film to the extent that it tends to uncouple power from justice and thus to reduce the distinction between Israel and Egypt. If God's most noteworthy acts in the film are displays of power, what makes the reign of God different than the reign of Pharaoh? To an America that oftentimes seems more proud of its military achievements than the substance of its democracy, this is a serious question indeed, and one to which Hollywood may not be prepared to give an answer. If the "Shining City on a Hill" evoked by John Winthrop clearly linked national favor to national *responsibility* and social justice, it is not at all clear that the same "Shining City" as declared by Ronald Reagan - the Hollywood President - maintains this crucial balance. If the "New Israel" is special to Americans only or primarily because of the spectacle of its glory, then the use of that image to capture our national destiny is of dubious value indeed. This is a danger which has hardly been *created* by the movies, but the cinematic form does contribute to the distorted dream of manifest destiny in its own specific way.

[37] We can therefore see Hollywood contributing to the emergence of a new civil faith that is simultaneously more *individualistic* and more *fideistic* than the classic statements of American religious destiny forged by earlier figures such as Winthrop or Lincoln. When we catch the glimpse of contemporary American "Habits of the Heart" that our privileged position as teachers so often affords us - when we see the contradictory combination of "me first" and "America first" that our students seem so able to hold without conflict, the desire to be free to follow every wish combined with the passionate desire for an unambiguous authority, the undergraduate moral philosophy that can affirm *both* that "everything is a matter of personal preference" *and* that "some things are just wrong" - it may be that we are witnessing the interpretation of American social life offered by a Hollywood civil religion that could only be described as a caricature of the real thing. But as I hope the previous sections of this essay have shown, the movie medium need not be the whole message. Even in the City of Angels, one can find those better angels who insist on placing justice and responsibility onto the scales, next to freedom and

individualism. It is still possible to find in the very heart of L.A. Land messages which can continue and even creatively reinterpret the best traditions of American civil religion - even if our shining city now has "Hollywood" written on its hill.

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