
**“Benevolent Supremacy”:
Biblical Epic Films, Suez, and the
Cultural Politics of U.S. Power**

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When *The Ten Commandments* opened in 1956, the critical consensus was that DeMille had created a middle-brow, melodramatic, and highly suspect account of the biblical story of Moses. *Newsweek* described the film as forced and “heavy-handed,” while the reviewer for *Time* called *The Ten Commandments* – speaking in the epic terms of the film itself — “perhaps the most vulgar movie ever made.”¹ Despite the critical consensus against it, however, DeMille’s version of the exodus story was a remarkable box-office success. It would become the best known and most popular of the cycle of religious epics that swept the United States in the 1950s. For six of the twelve years from 1950 to 1962, a religious historical epic was the year’s number-one box office moneymaker.²

The Ten Commandments and other films like it—*Ben Hur*, *The Robe*, *Quo Vadis*—were offered up as pious activity. Ads for *The Ten Commandments* carried endorsements from a Baptist minister, a Rabbi, and the Cardinal of New York. And at luncheon in Manhattan just after the opening, DeMille told the guests: “I came here and ask you to use this picture, as I hope and pray that God himself will use it, for the good of the world...”³ But the Jewish and/or Christian plots of these films were narrated in a distinctly contemporary dialect, as tales in

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which moral virtue barely triumphed over elaborately staged sexual temptation. Thus critics, both at the time and in the scholarship since, have tended to see the epics' religiosity as something of a screen, arguing that the "sword and sandal" melodramas were simply a way to expose flesh in racy costumes under the cover of "biblical" content.

The popularity of the epic films is more complex, however. DeMille himself refused to see *The Ten Commandments* as a simple retelling of the biblical story—and even less as "mere entertainment." In its original release, *The Ten Commandments* contained an unusual prologue. In it, DeMille made a personal on-screen appearance in which he spoke directly to the audience, framing the religious narrative in terms of contemporary Cold War politics.

The theme of this picture is whether men should be ruled by God's law, or by the whims of a dictator like Ramses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? This same struggle is still going on today...

DeMille suggested that his film explained two visions of social organization. In one view—atheistic and statist—"men" were "the property of the state." In the other, people existed as "free souls under God." DeMille clearly invited his audience to equate the religiously-coded individualism of the latter with the United States.⁴ The prologue thus offered the film's anti-slavery theme as a straightforward cold-war allegory.

But contemporary events also suggested another connection: the premiere of *The Ten Commandments* in the fall of 1956 coincided almost exactly with the Suez crisis in the Middle East, in which modern Israelis and modern Egyptians faced off in a dramatic conflict. In response to Nasser's nationalization of the Suez canal company, the combined forces of

Israel, France, and Britain had launched an attack against Egypt, arguing for the need to protect international shipping. As the crisis escalated, *The New York Times* noted the “profound” coincidence and suggested that the modern conflict between Egypt and Israel “ha[d] its preamble in the Book of Exodus.”⁵ The Suez crisis and *The Ten Commandments* thus provided for each other a mutually-constituting interpretive lens.

Yet though culture and politics both spoke of the Middle East, they seemed, at least at first, to come to different conclusions about the Israeli-Egyptian conflict. DeMille’s film offered a view that was clearly favorable to the Hebrews in their struggle against the Pharaoh and their Egyptian masters. But when the United States intervened in the Suez crisis, it was on behalf of Egypt’s Nasser. Refusing to back the European allies, the Eisenhower administration put severe economic pressure to bear on Britain to stop the invasion, arguing that Britain and France’s heavy-handed power politics did not ultimately serve Western interests. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles put it, “What the British and French have done is nothing but the straight, old-fashioned variety of colonialism of the most obvious sort.”⁶

Despite the apparent contradiction between a movie that castigated an ancient Egyptian Pharaoh and a U.S. policy that seemed to support a modern Egyptian leader, I will suggest today that, in fact, both biblical epic films and the foreign policy positions of the United States toward Egypt formed part of an emergent understanding of the nature of, and justification for, U.S. power in the Middle East in the post-war period. It was the genius of U.S. foreign policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s to have a better appreciation of the potential of third world nationalism and anti-colonialism than the old colonial powers did, and to respond in a way that seemed to

set the United States apart from these powers. In 1959, left historian William Appleman Williams critiqued this position as “imperial anti-colonialism”; but eight years earlier, in 1951, Charles Hilliard’s right-wing tract had coined the phrase “benevolent supremacy” to describe this approach as a positive doctrine.⁷ Though policymakers and intellectuals were obviously crucial in articulating this framework, the post-war model of U.S. power depended upon the construction of values and meanings that were not invented by, or entirely under the control of, those policymakers. Instead, the narratives through which people in the United States fashioned their concept of what constituted their “national interest” (and their state’s appropriate international role) were structured through the *intersection* of cultural productions (such as films) with the political activities of state actors (presidents and militaries).⁸ The biblical epics were part of a larger set of representations that worked together to represent U.S. national interests in a language that joined religious symbolism with narratives of liberation to naturalize the idea that the United States was a benevolent *post-imperial* power.

The idea of the “end of empire” was a consistent fascination in American culture in the 1950s. Between 1951 and 1953, for example, the British royalty graced the cover of *Newsweek* eight times.⁹ (In that same period, the McCarthy hearings were reported in a cover story only once.) These articles often interspersed royalty lore with a frank discussion of the decline of British world power. In 1953, *Newsweek* published a long, strikingly ambivalent, cover story, which reported that Queen Elizabeth and her husband Philip were making their first official Commonwealth tour in a much-changed world. A world map of Elizabeth’s route was illustrated with stick figures of various dark-skinned natives at Jamaica, Australia, the Fiji Islands, and Africa. On the one hand,

Newsweek mused that surely these subjects were still loyal and “the sight of the royal couple would make millions in [the queen’s] outermost realms feel less lonely and more securely bound to the crown.” On the other hand, the article pointed out that this was not the same kind of Empire that her grandfather King George V had ruled: India was now a republic, Pakistan was preparing to follow, and nationalist tensions were apparent everywhere in Africa. The cover of the issue made the point explicit in a nice double-entendre; a full-page photo of the royal couple was captioned in large letters: “Elizabeth and Philip: At the Edge of Empire.”¹⁰

The biblical epic films were active participants in this U.S. version of the contemporary story of decolonization. Only by recognizing that fact can we begin to make sense of the near obsessive return to the problem of empire in almost every one of the epics—films whose plots are otherwise quite different.

Let’s look, for example, at the opening sequence of *Quo Vadis* (1952), which opens with an extreme long-shot of a winding road in a wide green vista, with horses and men marching in the distance. The camera cuts then to a frontal medium shot of a soldier on a horse, and then to drummers and other soldiers walking down the dusty road. Some of the soldiers are whipping men whose arms and legs are in chains. A male voice narrates, with the sound of the whip as punctuation:

Imperial Rome is the center of the empire, the undisputed master of the world. But with this power inevitably comes corruption: No man is sure of his life, the individual is at the mercy of the state, murder replaces justice...Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to bondage. High and low alike become Roman slaves, Roman hostages. There is no escape from the whip and the sword. That any force on earth can shake the foundations of this pyramid of

power and corruption, of human misery and slavery seems inconceivable...

But such a force has arisen, and it is the task of *Quo Vadis* to tell the story of Christianity as the “new faith” that will challenge the old Roman empire and point the way to a “great new civilization.” *Ben-Hur* has a very similar plot, in which Roman misrule is challenged by the “troublesome people” of Judea, and in which the presence of Christ signals the coming of a new order. In *The Ten Commandments*, the setting is imperial Egypt rather than imperial Rome, but the despotism and slavery are equally the hallmarks of the corrupt Ramses and the Egyptian court, and Moses represents the chosen people who will construct a better world.¹¹

Thus, the ancient histories told by the biblical epics were almost universally stories of this particular type: a history of “the people”—to use the common term from the narrative voice-overs—who are either Hebrew or Christian or both, as they engage in a valiant struggle against oppression and slavery. The plots inevitably expose the totalitarian nature of an older imperial form, be it Roman or Egyptian or other; they suggest that the old empire is in decline; and construct an alternative: a Hebrew/Christian nationalism, individualistic in its emphases, which is politically, morally, and sexually superior to the old order it will displace. Through a powerful set of parallels, overlaps, and re-figurations, the ancient histories claimed by the films are recuperated as a useable past, suitable for imagining “America” at the moment of European decline.

The epics construct their moral and political logic through the organization of space. In *Ben-Hur*, for example, the protagonist, Judah Ben-Hur (Charleton Heston), moves through three different types of space: imperial staging grounds, slave prisons, and nationalist havens. These moral geographies mark distinct social and political meanings. The imperial spaces,

such as the parade routes that Roman soldiers follow through Jerusalem, or the Roman baths where the military governor Mesalla and his officers relax, are marked by white, harsh lighting, as well as by a preponderance of long shots and panoramic views. The colors are brilliant, and sometimes sumptuous, but never warm—bright reds and whites predominate. Slave spaces, such as the slave galley where Judah Ben-Hur is condemned to row Roman war ships, are dark, crowded, and sweaty. The slave spaces literally lie under the sites of Roman authority, inevitably linked to it as the dark side of unjust power.

The third type of space offers an alternative order to the imperial/slave nexus. It is best described as “nationalist” space; it represents the democratic character of the anti-imperial opposition as well as the hope of freedom for those who struggle against Rome. Judah Ben-Hur’s home before the Romans destroy it is one such space; shot with soft lighting, with the sets designed in warm colors and the characters dressed in simple, flowing garments, it marks democracy as an aesthetic. The home of the Sheik who helps Judah prepare his revenge against Mesalla is another: the glowing bronze and rich reds—very unlike the harsh reds of Rome—make it a welcoming place, where the characters are filmed in medium close up, and the conversation is gentle and playful.

The coding of nationalist space is particularly important, because it mitigates against any reading of *Ben-Hur* or other epics as simple statements of anti-Arab sentiments and/or Zionism—a reading that is in some ways quite plausible. The founding of Israel in 1948 is certainly part of the films’ conversation with their own historical moment. In *Soloman and Sheba* (1959), for example, the Moabite King boasts that he will drive the Hebrews “into the sea,” while Solomon proudly announces that his country, so recently a barren desert, has

been transformed: “It is a joy to make the desert bloom,” he sighs.¹²

But the biblical epics also did something more complicated. They drew upon, but also transformed, the associations that would have conflated the Hebrews of the narrative with the modern Israelis who had just so visibly formed their nation in Palestine. Sheik Ilderim is particularly interesting in this regard. He is one of the few “Arab” characters in a genre that is obsessed with the ancient Middle East as the site of an enabling Hebrew-Christian nationalist tradition. And it would be easy to interpret the character as just a bumbling negative stereotype. Played in brown-face by the Welsh-born actor Hugh Griffith, who won an Oscar for the role, the Sheik is in some ways a cartoonish figure, generous but often silly. His flamboyant behavior and rough manners are matched by his rather outlandish affection for his horses, whom he calls his “children” and his “beauties.” A close reading of his role, however, quickly highlights the limitations of any ideological reading of these films based simply on an analysis of “negative stereotypes of the (Arab) other.” The Sheik is, after all, one of the heroes of the film. He generally represented as a kindly character, albeit rather foolish and comic. Focusing only on the stereotypical aspects of this representation will tell us almost nothing about the important ideological work the character does within the film as a whole.

Sheik Ilderim is important because he is a central part of *Ben-Hur's* anti-Roman contingent. He is presented in privileged terms within the film, aligned with the warm colors and human scales of the film’s “nationalist space.” The narrative places the Sheik as Judah’s strongest backer; he provides his horses and gets Judah into the all-important chariot race where he will confront the Roman Mesalla. While we might argue that one of the founding myths of Israeli nationalism is

that “good” Arabs would agree to be incorporated within the new state as supporters and allies, it is also the case that the film aims to figure the Sheik – implicate him, if you will – in its overall argument for a post-imperial alliance. Near the end of the film, just before the chariot race is to begin, Sheik Ilderim suggests that the fight against Roman imperialism is a shared battle; placing a star of David around Judah’s neck, he urges him to win the race: “The Star of David, to shine out for your people and my people together, and blind the eyes of Rome!” Ben-Hur’s victory against Mesalla is clearly a nationalist victory, not just for Jews, but for Arabs, and also (implicitly) for all those who stand with them against imperial rule—that is, for America as well.

The potential multi-vocality of the associations evoked in such moments is not so much a textual *problem* as it is part of the genre’s richness and power. In the context of the 1950s, it would not have seemed incongruous for Rome and ancient Egypt to simultaneously suggest the failures of both the British empire and the Soviet Union—to be both Cold War and anti-imperial signs. Similarly, the collective identity of “the people” is able at once to evoke the “formerly subject peoples” who have freed themselves from the “slavery” of empire, *and* the United States as the nation or people that will replace the old empire with a new type of rule—righteous and benevolent. In the chain of substitutions and exchange within the films, the trope of “the people” equates “Americans” and “oppressed subject peoples” as anti-colonial signs. In this context, the often-noted practice in which film directors cast British actors as Romans or Egyptians, and American actors as the Christians, Hebrews, and slaves, has a profound, even if unconscious, political salience.

Conclusion

For a few years in the post-war period, the United States did succeed in representing itself, in some instances and for some audiences, as a new and more benevolent type of global power, separate from both the Soviet Union's present and Europe's past. At Suez, the United States established its new predominance in the Middle East precisely through its willingness to back a nationalist leaders against the old imperial powers, even as the CIA and U.S. military were involved in supporting anti-nationalist actions elsewhere in the region. Contemporary commentators and historians alike have seen the dramatic and unexpected U.S. response as decisive in saving Nasser from the combined forces of Britain, France, and Israel. The U.S. administration had no real love for Nasser; those relations would vary considerably during the next two decades. However, Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles agreed with the leaders of Britain and France that Nasser needed to be weakened, that he had opened the Middle East to Soviet influence, and that he had become too independent and arrogant.¹³ In particular, all three powers were concerned about Soviet influence and worried that Nasser's brand of Arab nationalism, if it spread, might threaten Western access to the cheap and abundant supplies of Middle East oil.

It was the question of appropriate means that divided the United States and its European allies. Eisenhower wanted to weaken Nasser while avoiding military actions that might not play well on the third world stage. Eisenhower and his administration saw the emerging nationalism in the Middle East as a bell-weather for changes in the rest of the world. At a National Security Council meeting on November 1, 1956 (two days after the start of the Israeli crossing of the Sinai),

Eisenhower put the point succinctly: “My emphatic belief is that these powers are going downhill with the kind of policy that they are engaged at the moment in carrying out. How can we possibly support Britain and France if in doing so we were to lose the whole Arab world?”¹⁴

The U.S. shielding of Nasser was part of the production of a new discourse of power in the Middle East—one simultaneously mindful of rising Soviet power, anti-colonial insurgency, and European (particularly British) imperial decline. U.S. actions at Suez were yet another site for the construction of new and benevolent world-wide authority. Two months after the crisis was over, the president announced the Eisenhower Doctrine, a proposal for economic and military assistance to nations in the Middle East, linked to an assertion that “the armed forces of the United States [could be used] to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations...against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism.”¹⁵ This framework would, in a general way, structure U.S. relations with the Middle East for at least two decades. The policy of making alliances with decolonizing Arab states would not preclude a strong alliance with Israel, particularly after the 1967 war.¹⁶ The operative terms were the (U.S.) refusal of empire, the right of “free peoples” to choose their destinies, and the consensual partnership between American power and a subordinated third world nationalism. The perversely quotable John Foster Dulles put it best, when he complained: “I’ve been greatly worried for two or three years over our identification with countries pursuing colonial policies not compatible with our own.”¹⁷

The model of ‘benevolent supremacy’ thus played a role on the world stage, but it was particularly meaningful *within* the United States, as a *self-representation* for Americans about

their growing international power. In this way, the epics were significant, because in their moment, they drew on biblical stories, religiously-inflected moral lessons, and ancient history as the foundation for building multi-faceted, associative meanings for contemporary politics and international relations. Biblical epics mattered, not just for what they said about the Middle East, but for what they made the Middle East say about the world.

Notes

¹ “The Ten Commandments,” *Time*, November 12, 1956, 122. See also “In the Grand Tradition,” *Newsweek*, November 5, 1956, 112.

² For the first four years of the decade (1950-53), an epic with biblical themes was first or second every year. 1950: *Samson and Delilah*, no.1, \$11 million. 1951: *David and Bathsheba*, no. 1, \$7 million; 1952: *Quo Vadis*, no.2, \$10.5 million; 1953: *The Robe*, no. 1, \$20-30 million. 1956: *The Ten Commandments* brought in \$34 million. Cobbett Steinberg, *Film Facts* (New York: Facts on File, 1980), 21-22. *Ben-Hur* (1959) was the biggest box-office draw of the decade 1951-1960. It won eleven Oscars, including Best Picture. Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1993), 5-6; Lee Scott Theisen, “‘My God, did I set all of this in motion?’ General Lew Wallace and *Ben Hur*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 18 (Fall 1984): 33-41, quote 38.

³ Reported in the religion column, “Mt. Sinai to Main Street,” *Time*, November 19, 1956, 82, 85.

⁴ On individualism as a national signifier, see Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

⁵ Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times*, November 16, 1956, 35.

⁶ Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 391. On Suez, see J.C. Hurewitz, "The Historical Context [of Suez]", Robert Bowie, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Suez Crisis," and Diane Kunz, "Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis," all in *Suez 1956*. eds. William Roger Louis, and Roger Owens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). See also Peter Hahn, *The United States, Great Britain, and Egypt, 1945-1956: Strategy and Diplomacy in the Early Cold War* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991). On Egypt in this period, see Robert Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995); and Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 395-447.

⁷ Charles Hilliard, *The Cross, The Sword and the Dollar* (New York: North River Press, 1951). A left-liberal rhetoric of American power and responsibility organizes Reinhold Neibuhr's work in the 1940s and 1950s; see *The Irony of American History* (New York: Schribner, 1952) and *The World Crisis and American Responsibility: Nine Essays* (New York: Association Press, 1958).

⁸ I describe the theoretical and methodological justifications for this approach in details in *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

⁹ In 1952, *Newsweek* ran two stories on Queen Elizabeth II and one on Princess Margaret. In 1953, articles appeared on April 6, June 1, June 8, October 12, and December 21.

¹⁰ "Elizabeth and Philip: At the Edge of Empire," *Newsweek*, December 21, 1953, 44-46. See also William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, the United States, and Postwar Imperialism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).

¹¹ This same basic plot element is characteristic of most of the religious epics of the period, including *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *David and*

Bathsheba (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *The Egyptian* (1954), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), and *Land of the Pharaohs* (1956).

¹² This argument is made by Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 54.

¹³ Kunz, "Economic Diplomacy of the Suez Crisis."

¹⁴ Neff, *Warriors at Suez*, 390-391.

¹⁵ Quoted in George Lenczowski, *American Presidents and the Middle East* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1990), 52.

¹⁶ William Quandt, *Decade of Decisions: American Policy Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1967-1976* (Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1977), especially 121-123; 183-185; and 284-290.

¹⁷ Quoted in Neff, *Warriors at Suez*, 391.