

When Moses is banished, she marries Ramses and ascends the throne but still longs for Moses. The torch of romance burns even after Moses returns with his Midianite wife, Sephora, though it slowly turns to hate as Moses ignores her. (The movie makes clear that Moses ignores both women in favor of his vocation, as would any good American tending to his business during the 1950s.) In a very real sense, the most terrible of the plagues—the slaying of the firstborn—symbolizes God's reprisal for the manipulating and underhanded cruelty of a scheming woman scorned, because it is Nefretiri who hardens Ramses' heart.

The cliché of the woman scorned as the source of all evil may offend modern gender sensibilities, but it also makes Nefretiri the only really interesting character in the film. Everyone else, Moses especially, is imprisoned by the language of the Bible—or worse, by biblical-sounding dialogue. But Nefretiri, historically a wife of Ramses but otherwise fabricated from the gender conventions of the 1950s, is free to be evil—and tragic.

What is so hard for modern readers of the Book of Exodus to appreciate is the extent to which the biblical story is written as a contest between the true God of Israel and the pharaoh, or false god, of Egypt. That is why the usually terse biblical text goes on at length about the plagues and how the pharaoh is only very slowly convinced to allow the Israelites to leave. Each time he does so, God hardens his heart, and the pharaoh's recantations bring terrible, punishing reprisals. That is also why the biblical text takes such glee in exaggerating the details of God's strength: turning the most powerful man on earth into a puppet, robbed by a ragtag group of pastoralists who purloin vast quantities of gold and silver as spoils from the wealthiest nation in the Ancient World and then escape punishment because God drowns the world's most feared military machine in the Reed (not Red) Sea.

The legend of the Exodus is a tale of wish fulfillment of the sort that inevitably arises when a small people with limited power suffer for a long period and then escape political domination. Theirs being an ancient wish, it is a difficult one to depict understandably on the modern screen. Yet the subplot of the vengeful Egyptian princess Nefretiri at least allows DeMille to make the biblical contest meaningful to modern audiences.

Background Reading

Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea: Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts* (Yale University Press, 1971)

Werner Keller, *The Bible As History* (Morrow, 1981)

Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (Schocken, 1966)

1956/USA/Color

DIRECTOR: Cecil B. DeMille; **PRODUCER:** Cecil B. DeMille; **SCREENPLAY:** Aeneas MacKenzie; Jesse L. Lasky, Jr.; Jack Gariss; Frederic M. Frank; **STUDIO:** Paramount; **VIDEO:** Paramount; **RUNNING TIME:** 219 min.



Engraving from a fifteenth-century Bible

Later...

In DeMille's epic, created by and for a modern age, the contest between Moses and the pharaoh evokes the many conflicts between faith and science. Into Ramses' mouth DeMille places the same sort of pseudo-rational scientific explanations of the plagues that became so popular in technologically sophisticated America after World War II: red soil washed into the Nile caused fish to die, leading to a proliferation of insects, which caused skin infections, and so on. These and other explanations (an earthquake caused the sea to part) were offered in vain attempts to shore up the credibility of the biblical text, mostly by well-meaning apologists who wanted to bring science and the Bible into harmony.

On the other hand, the screen Moses champions the more sympathetic position (in the context of the film): that the miracles are produced directly by the power of God. As it does in the Bible, this emphasis on faith helps explain God's dogged pursuit of the pharaoh, followed by His otherwise incomprehensible hardening of the pharaoh's heart. God wanted to make an example of the pharaoh to demonstrate the power of faith—not only over reason but over might as well.

This victory of faith, however, troubled the rabbis, who perceived and tried to explain a different moral problem, one omitted entirely by DeMille in his film's blockbuster ending. The midrash invents a dialogue at the sea between God and the angels, who have joined Moses and Miriam's song of triumph after the drowning of the Egyptians. God silences the angels and says: "How can you sing when my creatures are drowning?"