



‘LET MY PEOPLE GO!’

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Cecil B. DeMille’s final motion picture was Bible epic “The Ten Commandments” starring Charlton Heston, Yul Brynner, Anne Baxter and Edward G. Robinson.

At the time, it was the most expensive film ever made. But it also grossed \$122.7 million during its initial release and would become the second biggest-selling movie, in the history of Hollywood — at the time.

“The Ten Commandments” opened in the U.S. on Oct. 5, 1956 — 70 years ago Monday.

AN EPIC REMAKE OF AN EARLIER EPIC

Cecil B. DeMille was famous for his epic productions — especially his favorites, Bible stories — and for the epic revenues they brought in. His first big religious-themed project, the 1923 silent film “The Ten Commandments,” spent a quarter-century as Paramount Pictures’ all-time biggest-selling movie.

But after “Cleopatra” in 1934, “Sampson and Delilah” in 1949 and the circus film “The Greatest Show on Earth” in 1952, DeMille set this sights on making the definitive version of Homer’s “Odyssey.” Not long afterward, he announced he had changed his mind and would make a film about the “Book of Esther,” one



Cecil B. DeMille

of the five scrolls of the Hebrew Bible. And then he shifted again, expressing interest in the story of Helen of Troy.

Finally, DeMille decided to remake “The Ten Commandments” — but this time, he’d spare no expense in his choice of top-notch actors, filming in

Egypt and in creating stunning visual effects of things like parting seas and burning bushes.

DeMille announced his plan in June 1952. He began filming on Mount Sinai near Cairo, Egypt, in October 1954 and would spend \$13.27 million on his production, making it the most expensive movie ever, at the time.

‘SO IT SHALL BE WRITTEN ... SO IT SHALL BE DONE’

There’s a lapse of 20 years in the story of Moses in the Bible and in the Hebrew Torah. To fill that gap, DeMille’s script team relied on ancient historical texts. DeMille also bought the rights to Dorothy Clarke Wilson’s 1949 novel “Prince of Egypt” and Arthur Eustace Southon’s 1939 “On Eagles’ Wings” to add details about Moses’ younger years.



The Book of Exodus says Moses was “slow of speech and slow of tongue.” This is thought to mean he stuttered when he spoke. Heston tried to stutter but was unconvincing. Instead, he simply spoke slowly and more deliberately. On the 2004 DVD release, Heston admitted he had supplied the voice of God in the scene with the burning bush.

Actor William Boyd was considered for the lead role but it was feared his fame as Hopalong Cassidy might overshadow any work he did in this movie. Also considered: Kirk Douglas, Tony Curtis, Jack Palance and Rock Hudson. Charlton Heston won the role because he resembled the statue of Moses in Rome sculpted by Michelangelo.



Six sets of Ten Commandments tablets were made for filming. They consisted of wooden cores, covered in fiberglass, then chipped and hand-painted to look like they had been carved in granite. The “party” that his followers throw during Moses’ time on Mount Sinai was carefully planned to hint at debauchery but to not offend little children.

DeMille considered a number of actors to play Rameses II, including Mel Ferrer, William Holden, James Mason and Michael Renne. DeMille’s daughter urged him to see Yul Brynner in the musical “The King and I” on Broadway. DeMille was so impressed he went backstage during intermission to offer Brynner the role.



The city of Per-Rameses was said to be the largest film set ever built. It was 107 feet tall, 325 feet long and cost more than \$250,000. In all, 67 sets were constructed on 60 acres of land. DeMille spent 10 weeks filming in Sinai and at the Red Sea, but most of the film was shot over the summer of 1955 on the Paramount studio lot.

DeMille wanted Audrey Hepburn to play Rameses’ wife, Nefretiri, but he later decided she was too thin to play the role convincingly. He considered Rhonda Fleming, Vivien Leigh, Joan Taylor and Jane Russell before he watched the film “Carnival Story” and decided to go with Anne Baxter. Baxter later wrote she wore skin-colored underwear beneath her skimpy costumes.



The film’s most stunning moment is when Moses parts the Red Sea for the Hebrew slaves to escape the Pharaoh’s army. The effect used 360,000 gallons of water — with a little gelatin mixed in — released and filmed in slow motion so it could be sped up later and shown in reverse. It took effects experts eight months to complete the sequence.

Gone With the Wind	1939	\$4.561 b
Avatar	2009	\$4.157 b
Titanic	1997	\$3.864 b
Star Wars	1977	\$3.743 b
Avengers: Endgame	2019	\$3.441 b
The Sound of Music	1965	\$3.138 b
E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial	1982	\$3.065 b
The Ten Commandments	1956	\$2.898 b
Doctor Zhivago	1965	\$2.747 b
Jaws	1975	\$2.7098 b

ADJUSTED FOR INFLATION

ALL-TIME HIGHEST-GROSSING MOVIES

DeMille’s remake of “The Ten Commandments” became the highest-grossing film of 1956 and the second highest-grossing film of the decade. It grossed \$2.7 million at a single venue: 70 weeks at New York’s Criterion Theater.

Adjusted for inflation, “The Ten Commandments” is still one of the top-earning movies of all time.