

Solange De Santis

Hollywood and the Bible

By Solange De Santis

Ah, Easter – bunnies, lilies, chocolate eggs and Bible movies on TV. Every spring, television marks the Resurrection (and Passover, we might note) by scheduling films that inspire appropriate reverence for the season, unless you happen to be giggling. Filmmakers in every land have tackled religious themes, but Hollywood's intersection with the Book yields a particularly rich trove of risible over-acting, melodrama, special effects and every so often, genuine beauty.

One of the many reasons the Bible has survived for so long and provided material for dozens of movies is that it is a collection of stories that contain drama and personalities. By contrast, the Koran -- essentially a series of teachings -- is not nearly so easy to dramatize. Ironically, most filmmakers approach the Bible with a sincere sense of awe that often leads to unintentionally hilarious results.

Television often drags out Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956) at this time of year, and with good reason. The special effects in those pre-computer days stand up remarkably well and surely Charlton Heston was born to play Moses. Only an actor so earnest and devoid of a sense of humour could bellow, "BeHOLD the word of the Lord!" and maintain a straight face. My favorite bits of camp include Edward G. Robinson inciting the Israelites to worship the golden calf, rounding on Moses and snarling (you can practically see him with a cigar), "Where's your God *now*, Moses?" The other is Anne Baxter as a remarkably WASPy Egyptian princess, Nefretiri, flaring her nostrils, tossing her chin and crying, "Oh Moses, Moses, you stubborn, splendid, adorable fool!"

For my money, Moses should always be played by Mel Brooks, who descends from Mt. Sinai in *The History of the World Part I* (1981) with three tablets, rather than the traditional two. "All pay heed!" he cries. "The Lord Jehovah has given unto you these 15 (he drops one tablet) – *ten* commandments," he informs the Israelites. Later, as a waiter at the Last Supper with order pad at the ready, he solicitously inquires, "Does everyone want soup?"

At least De Mille, who credited four script writers, five costume designers and sources Philo, Josephus, Eusebius, the Midrash and "The Holy Scriptures," created good, compelling camp. Director John Huston, starting with Genesis, crafted a four-hour plod in *The Bible* (1966) that caused one reviewer to write succinctly, "The Book was better." The tedious *Solomon and Sheba* (1959) features Yul Brynner (in a toupee) and Gina Lollobrigida and the classic line, "You and your Sheban slut have defiled the fair name of Israel!"

The New Testament has produced an equal share of amusement as actor after actor has attempted to rise to the impossibility of playing Jesus Christ. Hollywood legend has it that playing the Saviour is a career killer and, indeed, teen heartthrob Jeffrey Hunter was dubbed "I was a teenage Jesus" after his appearance in *King of Kings* (1961), also called "monstrously vulgar" by Time magazine. British actor Robert Powell, who starred in *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) was busy but never a star thereafter. "I hope Jesus Christ will be the last in my line of sensitive young men for quite a while," he said.

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It isn't often (if ever) that a Jew gets to play Christ, but director George Stevens roamed far afield from the Middle East when he cast Swedish actor Max von Sydow in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) in another long slog that was dubbed Jesus Christ Superbore by one critic. The film was sunk – or enlivened, depending upon your point of view – by numerous cameos, the best (or worst) of which is John Wayne as a Roman centurion at the crucifixion. “Truly,” draws the Duke in his single line, “this man wuz the son of Gahd.”

The Sixties brought us Christ as hippie in *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* and the Old Testament sang and danced in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Many of these films actually have their inspirational moments, but to my mind, Hollywood gets it right when religious faith is brought down to the level of the personal and a film shows the engagement of a mind and heart.

In *Glory* (1989), the story of a pioneering black Civil War regiment, the men gather around a campfire the night before a battle they know will be difficult and bloody. One by one, led by an older soldier played by Morgan Freeman, they bear witness to their faith on the very eve of death, “in Jesus' name,” as one says. *Dead Man Walking* (1995) contains a moment of magic as Susan Sarandon, playing Catholic nun Helen Prejean, tries to get through to the convicted killer played by Sean Penn and gently asks him, “Have you heard of Jesus Christ?” She doesn't speak much above a whisper, but it's all she needs.

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