The Construction of a Christ-figure within the 1956 and 1923 Versions of Cecil B. DeMille’s The Ten Commandments

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Abstract

Cecil B. DeMille was an avowed Episcopalian Christian of half-Jewish descent who co-founded Hollywood and became the undisputed master of the American biblical epic. He produced and directed two versions of The Ten Commandments, both of which set the standard for the genre in their respective days. One of the secrets of their still resonating power was the subtextual engineering of his protagonists as Christ-figures. This DeMillean auteur signature strategy is grossly unappreciated today, but which contributed significantly to his phenomenal box-office success and directorial longevity. Using textually-based, humanist film criticism as the analytical lens, the critical film and religion literature was reviewed, the two biblical epics closely inspected, and their christic subtexts explicated herein. It was concluded that DeMille was a far more artful and devout religious filmmaker than has hitherto been acknowledged, believed or honoured to date. Further research into the emerging and exciting interdisciplinary fields of Religion-and-Film and DeMille Studies was recommended.

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The Ten Commandments is a 1956 American epic religious drama film produced, directed, and narrated by Cecil B. DeMille, shot in VistaVision (color by Technicolor), and released by Paramount Pictures. The film is based on Prince of Egypt by Dorothy Clarke Wilson, Pillar of Fire by J.H. Ingraham, On Eagle's Wings by A.E. Southon, and the Book of Exodus. The Ten Commandments dramatizes the biblical story of the life of Moses, an adopted Egyptian prince who becomes the deliverer of his real brethren, the Cecil B. DeMille was an avowed Episcopalian Christian of half-Jewish descent who co-founded Hollywood and became the undisputed master of the American biblical epic. He produced and directed two versions of The Ten Commandments, both of which set the standard for the genre in their respective days. One of the secrets of their still resonating power was the subtextual engineering of his protagonists as Christ-figures. This DeMillean auteur signature strategy is grossly unappreciated today, but which contributed significantly to his phenomenal box-office success and directorial longevity.