

Orientalism and the Epic

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Beginning in 1947, the film industry in the United States suffered a commercial decline that would last for ten years. Post-war prosperity triggered a mass exodus from the cities to the suburbs, whilst the emergence of television provided a novel and ultimately cheaper and more convenient form of entertainment. In response the major Hollywood studios developed new technologies such as widescreen to better differentiate their products. In addition, the studios adopted the policy of the “big picture”, which resulted in a wave of grandiose ‘epic’ films, often based on ancient history or Biblical mythology, that featured gargantuan set pieces, casts of thousands, luscious Technicolor, and large-scale action sequences.¹ A number of film scholars have argued that the appeal of these films lay not just in their gratuitous pomp and splendour, but also in their espousal of the United States’ contemporaneous Cold War identity. According to this paradigm the virtuous Christians, Jews, or slaves at the centre of these films signify contemporaneous Americans who, in accordance with the ideological rhetoric of the time, were increasingly defined by the mutually inclusive ideals of personal freedom and staunch religiosity.

Conversely, the ancient empires depicted in these films ruled by infamous megalomaniacal tyrants systemically recalled the authoritarian states of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, each of which represented the ideological antithesis of the United States.²

Because film scholars have traditionally viewed the epic cycle through a Cold War lens, the inherent Orientalism of this cycle of films has hitherto been largely overlooked. In this essay I look beyond the surface of two of the cycle's most iconic productions – Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* and William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) – and demonstrate how each film, whilst explicitly Americanising the ancient Hebrew protagonists, subtly constructs the figure of the Oriental as a cultural and racial Other fundamentally alien to Western society. By examining deeper the ways in which the narrative space of the ancient Middle East was utilised by the cycle of Biblical and historical epic films I hope to enable a greater understanding of the ways in which certain modes of Hollywood cinema that have traditionally been associated with the politics of the Cold War have simultaneously served disparate ideological ends; in this case, the framing of the then-nascent Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, I hope to uncover some of the roots of the common demonization of the figure of the Arab that has increasingly pervaded much of the West's cultural products throughout the last half-century.

For the purposes of establishing the ways in which Orientals are systematically Othered in *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, it is paramount to first discuss the manner in which each film overtly Americanises both Moses and Judah Ben-Hur – the respective protagonists of each film, each of whom is played by the blonde, blue-eyed, ruggedly handsome Charlton Heston. In line with the film’s overt allegorisation of the Cold War conflict, the Moses of *The Ten Commandments* suggested, according to one critic, “both the rugged American frontiersman of myth as well as God who creates Adam in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel fresco.”³ In contrast to the familiar image of Moses as a long-bearded elder cultivated by classic artworks such as Michelangelo’s sculpture of the horned Moses and Rembrandt’s painting of Moses smashing the tablets of the God’s Law, Heston’s Moses, at least throughout the film’s first two hours, is young, athletic, and flaunts not only the physique but also the wardrobe of a modern-day professional wrestler, prompting *Time* magazine to sneeringly describe the movie as a “Sexodus.”⁴ It is only in the last three minutes of the film that the audience sees Moses as the Decagenarian of Jewish legend, and even then his advanced age is only indicated by the length and pallidity of his beard; a token effort is made to make his face and hands look like those belonging to a man of 120 years of age, a failure acknowledged with regret years later by producer Henry Wilcoxon.⁵

Indeed, Heston's Moses is best understood as being amongst the earliest (and certainly amongst the most widely seen) antecedents of the hyper-masculine "tough Jew" archetype that would gain a foothold in American film and literature in the late 1960s, in the process shaking off the traditional conception of the Jew as "the frail and meek object of anti-Semitic initiatives."⁶ According to Michelle Mart, who in *Eye on Israel: How America Came to View Israel as an Ally* provides a thoroughly detailed historical overview of the forces underpinning the so-called "special relationship" between the United States and the State of Israel, the emergence of the tough Jew archetype was central to the profound de-emphasis of the Jews' long-held outsider status in American society, by virtue of their ability to exemplify "characteristics of ideal masculinity."⁷

In addition to aesthetically suggesting the rugged frontiersman of American legend, Moses is fundamentally Americanised through what is largely an invented narrative.⁸ Even as a member of the royal dynasty that the film explicitly aligns with modern-day totalitarianisms, Moses is the quintessential self-made success story of American folklore. Unlike Rameses, who owes his immense wealth and power to his winning the lottery of life, Moses, through his own skill and initiative, has achieved great success as a builder of colossal monuments and is thus worthy of both his royal status and the love of

his surrogate father. This is most clearly evinced in the spectacular depiction of the raising of the obelisk in the building of a new city in tribute of the Pharaoh Sethi, a scene that Tony Shaw undoubtedly had in mind when referring to the film's sanctification of liberal capitalism and "America's capitalist-based creativity."⁹ Paradoxically, the film presents the highly proficient and successful capitalist as innately humanitarian. Displaying compassion completely absent in the authoritarian Rameses, Moses ensures that his workers are well fed and also helps to rescue a Hebrew slave woman (his mother, unbeknownst to him) from being crushed by a massive stone during the building of Sethi's colossal new city. Much to the chagrin of Rameses' merciless administrators Moses declares that "blood makes poor mortar," a virulent denunciation of the slave state's inhuman bureaucracy.

Moses is further Americanised when the Hebrews begin their journey through the desert and the film's narrator (DeMille) equates him to an eagle, a historical symbol of the United States, intoning that "He bore them out of Egypt as an eagle bears its young up on its wings." The film's final shot provides the exclamation point on Moses' inherent Americanness. With the Jews having successfully reached the promised land of Eretz Israel Moses cries out, "Go! Proclaim liberty throughout all the lands!" a phrase from Leviticus 25:10 that is also inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, an iconic symbol of

American independence. Pertinently, as pointed out by critic Michael Wood, Moses makes his proclamation whilst striking a pose reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty.¹⁰ In doing so the film implicitly associates Zionism with liberty and, by extension, aligns the Jews' return to Eretz Israel with the relocation of European immigrants from the "Old World" to the "promised land" of America. Moreover, the pose adopted by Heston positions Moses as metonymically representative of the United States, ultimately resulting in, according to Nadel, America reclaiming the Middle East "not as a Jewish homeland but as a part of Judeo-Christian tradition, that is, the American sphere of influence."¹¹

Released just three years after the *The Ten Commandments*, Williams Wyler's *Ben-Hur* is effectively the unofficial sequel to DeMille's retelling of the Exodus. Wyler repeats DeMille's utilisation of the ancient world to construct an equally grandiose Biblically-infused narrativisation of the struggle between freedom and oppression that echoed the contemporaneous political rhetoric pertaining to the Cold War, whilst similarly proffering a cinematic manifestation of the coming together of Judaic tradition and Christianity in the United States during the religiously resurgent 1950s. Heston's Judah Ben-Hur is essentially a replica of Heston's Moses – a physiognomically American proto-nationalist Messianic Hebrew hero fighting for Jewish freedom

in an ancient Middle East imbued with Biblical mysticism. Moses and Judah even share the same ‘mother’ – actress Martha Scott who, having played Sephora in *The Ten Commandments* and Miriam in *Ben-Hur*, admitted that even she had trouble distinguishing between the two films.¹²

Like Moses, Judah is a hyper-masculine precursor to the tough Jew archetype, in stark contrast to the character’s earlier incarnations. The protagonist of the Lew Wallace’s novel upon which Wyler’s film is based is a sensitive boy of seventeen, frequently described as ‘beautiful’ rather than ‘handsome’. Subsequently the 1925 silent film version of *Ben-Hur* directed by Fred Niblo cast as Judah the twenty-six year-old Mexican actor Ramon Novarro; tellingly, Novarro has been best understood by film historians such as Miriam Hansen as an ersatz Rudolph Valentino – the ultimate symbol of exoticised transgenderism in 1920s Hollywood.¹³

However, in the Wyler film the role of Judah is played by the thirty-five-year-old barrel-chested Charlton Heston in a significant departure from both the traditionally epicene characterisations of Judah and Hollywood’s traditional representation of Jews. Indeed, as represented by Heston, Judah constitutes an even tougher, more physically imposing Jew than Moses does in *The Ten Commandments*. Whereas Wallace’s novel features Judah’s mother emphasising the

importance of being a great orator and philosopher, the film unequivocally privileges the warrior aspect of Judah's character.¹⁴ The first appearance of Judah clearly establishes his athletic prowess when, after being challenged by his friend (and soon-to-be rival) Messala to a friendly spear-throwing contest, Judah hits dead centre of a wooden beam in the shape of a cross, dislodging Messala's spear in the process and establishing Judah's inherent physical superiority over his Roman overlords. Later in the film Judah, after being unfairly arrested and imprisoned, easily overpowers three centurions who visit him in his cell, eventually being neutralized only after being blind-sided and sustaining a blow to the head from a large set of metal keys. A bar is placed through Judah's arms behind his back, forcing him into a position that evokes the classic Christ pose and in turn exemplifies the film's dovetailing of Christianity and Judaism. Even whilst restrained Judah again overpowers three Roman guards, managing to escape and apparently killing another guard before arming himself with a spear and breaking into Messala's private room, confronting him over his prevarications that have led to the imprisonment of Judah as well as his mother and sister.

Later, having been sentenced to hard labour in the galleys of a slave ship, Judah remarks that he has worked for over three years on a number of ships, yet in contrast with the majority of his fellow

condemned he appears unbroken both physically and mentally. Clearly impressed with Judah's muscular physique and fighting spirit, the ship's consul Arrius offers Judah the opportunity to train as a gladiator and charioteer, which Judah refuses. However, Arrius – without offering any hint of justification – orders that Judah remain unchained in the galleys, thus enabling Judah to easily escape the ship after it is rammed by Macedonian pirates whilst his fellow slaves are left to drown. Once freed Judah easily overpowers a Roman guard in much the same way he did when first arrested, choking him to death. Judah then overcomes an armed pirate and jumps into the ocean to save Arrius, setting up the next stage of the narrative in which Judah makes his way back to Jerusalem and confronts Messala as the favoured surrogate-son of a wealthy and powerful Roman.

Judah's return to Jerusalem ultimately leads to what is both, undoubtedly, the film's most iconic sequence and most vociferous articulation of Judah's immense toughness – the nine-minute chariot race. To this day the sequence remains a landmark in cinematic spectacle; critic Michael Wood writes that “The hero of *Ben-Hur* is not Ben-Hur, who only won the chariot race, but William Wyler, the director, the man responsible for providing the chariot race for us.”¹⁵ In a reiteration of both the omnipotence of the Judeo-Christian God as well as the sense of Judah being guided by providence, Judah is shown

praying to God before the race, which is contrasted by his rival Messala flippantly hailing Jupiter and asking that he guide him to victory. Judah proceeds to win the race against seemingly insurmountable odds. The wheels of Messala's chariot are mounted with spikes that Messala uses to destroy Judah's chariot, and when this fails to effectively repel Judah Messala begins to whip him. However, Messala's nefarious tactics prove to be his downfall; Judah, using his incredible strength and dexterity, manages to wrestle the whip out of Messala's hands, dislodging Messala from his chariot which results in him being trampled by rampaging horses, mortally wounding him. Judah's killing of the Roman villain symbolises the overthrowing of the Roman institution of power by Christ – a historic toppling of a slave state that, in accordance with contemporaneous Cold War rhetoric, foretold the inevitable defeat of the Soviet Union by the United States. In a reaffirmation of the film's positioning of Judah as a messianic Christ-figure, as the winner of the chariot race Judah is greeted by Pontius Pilate – the Roman prefect of Judea who presided over the trial of Jesus – who says to Judah, "you are the people's one true god." Pilate proceeds to place on Judah's head a laurel wreath that, because of the trickles of blood streaming down Judah's face from wounds sustained during the race, evokes the image of Christ after he is adorned with the crown of thorns.

Judah's status as an embodiment of an idealised, peculiarly American hyper-masculinity is lucidly reinforced by the manner in which he is invoked throughout the intertextual references to *Ben-Hur* contained within *Any Given Sunday* (1999), Oliver Stone's paean to professional football. Though trenchantly critical of the corporatisation of professional sports, *Any Given Sunday* unambiguously valorises the courage and athletic prowess of those that play the game. As pointed out by Miller, in a scene in which the Miami Shark's coach has his star player over at his house to discuss team strategy a television in the background plays the chariot race from *Ben-Hur*. Stone proceeds to intercut the conversational scene that follows with clips of football games and scenes from *Ben-Hur*, specifically the chariot race and the scenes set in the galley ship, clearly intoning that professional athletes are the gladiators of the contemporary age. Nearly half-a-century after the fact, Heston's "tough Jew" has become the paradigm for modern-day American hyper-masculinity, demonstrating both the film's timelessly iconic status and its protagonist's intrinsic Americanness.¹⁶

In stark contrast with the construction of Moses as a ruggedly hyper-masculine figure, *The Ten Commandments* presents its Egyptian villain, Rameses – played by the Russian-born Yul Brynner, who was known by American audiences almost exclusively as the King of Siam from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*, a role that

he had played to great acclaim on Broadway since 1951 as well as in a highly successful film version released only months prior to *The Ten Commandments* – as profoundly emasculated. Whereas Moses spends much of the film showing off a noticeably hirsute chest, the smaller Rameses is shown to be completely devoid of body hair, with the notable exception of a long ponytail that he frequently sports. Moreover, throughout the film Rameses is adorned in epicene accoutrements such as a skirt and garish jewellery. As such, Rameses constitutes an elision of ethnic otherness and sexual ambiguity in much the same way as the characters played by the iconic sex symbol Rudolph Valentino in films of the 1920s; as argued by Miriam Hansen, the Valentino persona was one that, whilst adored by many American women, was fundamentally rejected by many “masculinist” American men.¹⁷

Having been thoroughly feminised aesthetically, Rameses is also emasculated in the figurative sense. Powerless to protect his young son from the Angel of Death’s curse, Rameses is unable to perform the most basic duty of a father and is forced to watch his child recede hopelessly into death. Lacking the Anglo-Saxon virility of the Americanised Moses, Rameses is also unable to please his woman, Nefertiri, the Egyptian queen. She both loves and lusts after Moses and when belatedly convinced that she can never possess him Nefertiri

employs her acerbic tongue to verbally emasculate Rameses at every opportunity. As conveyed by the cloak of darkness that pervades the scene in which Rameses' son succumbs to the plague foretold by Moses, Rameses is a broken man resigned to the veracity of Moses' omnipotent God, on bended knee helplessly praying to, in the words of Nefertiri, "nothing but a piece of stone with the head of a bird," the projection of power of the two adversary's respective deities accurately reflecting the film's hierarchy of masculinity.

It is through this feminisation of Rameses that *The Ten Commandments* can be seen as engaging in the practise of what Edward Said terms "Orientalism". According to Said a fundamental tenet of Orientalism is the feminisation of the East by Western cultural products, which has helped to establish a lucid racial hierarchy that has ultimately primed the Oriental for subjugation and tacitly justified Western colonisation of the region.¹⁸ Crucially, this Orientalist depiction of Rameses ran analogous with American popular culture's representations of the belligerents of the nascent Arab-Israeli conflict at a time in which Egypt was the undisputed leader of the Arab contingent. Framed by both the Israeli state's political alignment with the United States and the emerging tough Jew archetype in American culture, Israel, according to Michelle Mart, "came to be perceived as masculine, ready to fight the Cold War alongside America." Conversely

Arabs were “increasingly stigmatized as non-Western, undemocratic, racially darker, unmasculine outsiders.” Consequently “the difference in status between Arabs and Israelis was defined most clearly by measures of masculinity,” a notion vehemently reinforced by the diametrically opposed constructions of Moses and Rameses in *The Ten Commandments*.¹⁹

The construction of Rameses as a racial and cultural Other is further reinforced by the silver necklace he wears and the pigtail on the side of his head that, as noted by Sumiko Higashi, recalls the look of Native Americans.²⁰ Thus, Rameses is not only the Oriental Other whose customs and ethnicity render him inherently repellent to contemporaneous American society, but is also redolent of the stock villain of that most popular and enduring of American film genres, the Western. This is particularly noteworthy, as, according to historian Lawrence Davidson, Americans have historically understood the Arab-Israeli conflict as a re-enactment of the expansion of the American frontier featuring a fresh new cast of barbarous “savages” and civilised Covenantal Europeans.²¹ In recalling the Native American in the aesthetic construction of Rameses, the film serves to further demonise the Egyptians by lending cultural capital to the then popular conception of the Arabs as modern day Indians impeding a divinely ordained Western civilizing mission in a surrogate frontier nation attempting to

realise its own manifest destiny, a theme that is central to the representation of the nascent stages of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the films *Exodus* (1960) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966).

As with the diametrically opposed characterisations of the Hebrew Moses and the Egyptian Rameses in *The Ten Commandments*, in Judah's friend Sheik Ilderim *Ben-Hur* proffers an Arab character that is fundamentally antithetical to the film's heroic, hyper-masculine Hebrew protagonist. On the surface the character of the Sheik – played in brownface by Welsh actor Hugh Griffith, in an Oscar winning performance – constitutes one of the more positive representations of an Arab in the history of Hollywood cinema. As arguably Judah's closest ally throughout the entire film, he confers both material and moral support on to Judah in the lead-up to the famous chariot race. Consequently, Arab scholar Jack Shaheen, who has written extensively on the demonization of Arabs in Hollywood cinema, endorses *Ben-Hur* on the basis of its presenting Jews and Arabs as friends, and also its excision of the sultry Egyptian femme fatale character Iras who appears in both Wallace's novel and the 1925 film version. Of the 908 films reviewed by Shaheen for his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, a mere 51 are rated as "Recommended" based on their positive portrayals of Arabs; *Ben-Hur* can claim such an endorsement among its many accolades.²²

Similarly, Melani McAlister describes the sheik as “one of the heroes of the film... aligned with the warm colors and human scale of the film’s ‘nationalist space’,” whilst dismissing analyses that focus on the superficial aspects of the representation, claiming it tells us “nothing about the important ideological work the character does within the film as a whole.” For McAlister the Sheik represents the “‘formerly subject peoples’ who have freed themselves from the ‘slavery’ of Empire,” with the Sheik’s and Judah’s friendship serving as an expression of the Cold War rhetoric of America’s “benevolent supremacy” that ostensibly distinguished it from the erstwhile colonial powers of Europe and the authoritarian superpower of the Soviet Union.²³

In my opinion both scholars have provided extremely superficial readings of the characterisation of the Sheik in *Ben-Hur*. Shaheen’s scholarship is tempered by an essentialism that results in a disproportionate focus on representational superficialities, such as whether the character in question is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, as well as an unwillingness to acknowledge the broader cultural context of the film and the social positioning of its audience. Meanwhile McAlister makes a rather tenuous attempt to link the representation of the Sheik to the cultural espousal of America’s benevolent supremacy and, like Shaheen, appears so distracted by the character’s innate benevolence

that she is altogether dismissive of the film's inherently racist Othering of the character.

The social implications of the Othering of the Sheik are exacerbated by the fact that he represents the only obviously Arab character of any significance throughout the entire film in spite of its Middle East setting. This is in stark contrast to Wallace's novel in which the entire first two chapters focus directly on the Arabian magi Balthazar, his meeting with the other two wise men, and their pilgrimage to witness the birth of Jesus (though he appears in the film Balthazar, as played by the Scottish actor Finlay Currie, is thoroughly de-ethnicised, sporting white hair and a white beard on his white skin, appearing as just another European at home in the Holy Land). The novel speaks of Arabs in reverential tones, declaring in the first chapter, "The Arab has impressed his language upon everything south and east of Judea," thus identifying them as a pre-eminent entity in the region. Conversely the film presents the Sheik as a member of a racial minority, carrying with it the implication that Arabs are the minority in the region in a total inversion of the demographic realities of the Holy Land in the 1950s (not to mention the preceding two millennia).²⁴ This marginalization of Arabs, occurring simultaneously with the systemic conflation of Christians and Jews, reinforces the romanticised impression of Palestine within the United States as "the biblical land of

milk and honey, the Old Testament land of the Jews and the New Testament land of Jesus,” that Davidson argues has prevailed throughout the country since the time that Protestant missionaries embarked on the region in the 18th century.²⁵

Certainly *Ben-Hur* doesn't follow the explicitly reductive route of David Lean's contemporaneous epic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), which presents Arabs as an often violent, irrational, and fractious people. However, as pointed out by Geraldine Murphy, “ethnicity and national identity...are reduced to a few colourful idiosyncrasies, in keeping with the American ethnic pluralism of the 1950s.”²⁶ In a scene that is absent from the novel, when the Sheik is introduced he appears as a raving madman, referring to his horses as “his children” and vociferously excoriating a rider for whipping his horses, screaming, “you think you can treat my horses like animals?!” In the following scene, upon Judah's mentioning that he has no wife, the Sheik informs that he has six (at which Balthasar interjects, remarking that he counts eight) before jovially stating, “One god I can understand, but one wife? That is not civilized...it is not generous.” The Sheik is further reduced to an embodiment of “colourful idiosyncrasies” when it is soon revealed that in referring to his “wives” that Sheik actually meant his horses. In accordance with the logic of an inherently Eurocentric narrative the Sheik is rendered into laughable chauvinist, becoming the genre's

apotheosis of, what Edward Said terms, the Orientalist impression of the East as “a living tableau of queerness.”²⁷ The Sheik’s inference that he can understand having “one god” is also pertinent, as it constitutes the only reference to his faith. Throughout the novel it is frequently reinforced that all of the non-Roman characters worship the same God and that an innate kinship exists between Jews and Arabs; like the oppressed Hebrews the Sheik eagerly awaits the arrival of the King of the Jews; the Sheik is compared physically to Aaron, the Hebrew prophet and brother of Moses; the Sheik himself frequently invokes Solomon, the Hebrew prophet and legendary King of Israel.²⁸ Each of these elements is completely absent from the film, as is the Sheik’s providing of refuge to the three wise men. The natural result of this excision of the Sheik from the Christ narrative is a Eurocentric counter-narrative in which the Sheik is fundamentally excluded from the faith-based special relationship enjoyed by the providentially guided Americans and Hebrews, and a profound distancing of Arabs from the Christian mythology that lay at the heart of American Cold War identity.

According to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Eurocentrism “embeds, takes for granted, and ‘normalizes’ the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism and imperialism,” and in Wyler’s *Ben-Hur*, unlike in the novel, we see the maintenance of an implicitly

normalised racial hierarchisation, with the white European male firmly entrenched at the totem's apex.²⁹ First and foremost, the casting of Hugh Griffith and his wearing of brownface makeup superficially embodies Said's contention that Orientalist discourse insists on the inability of the Other to speak for themselves, serving as a reiteration of contemporaneous American society's fundamental excluding of Arabs.³⁰ Indeed, in 1950s Hollywood the Other not only cannot speak for themselves, they cannot speak *as* themselves. Furthermore, the narrative completely denies the Sheik of any sense of personal agency. Though Judah's journey (and, by natural extension, the journey of Judaism into Christianity) is providentially destined, he is onscreen for what is essentially the entirety of the film and is thus positioned as the figure around which all events occur, facilitating at least the illusion of personal agency and spectatorial identification with the character. Conversely the Sheik, despite his own apparent wealth and stature, is a non-threatening, subservient, completely disempowered personification of passivity, representing an idealized portrait of racial Otherness akin to the African-American mammies and Uncle Toms of *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and innumerable other politically incorrect entries in the canon of Hollywood "classics". This contrasts with the novel in which the Sheik is an avuncular figure to the young Judah, providing counsel and refuge and ultimately bequeathing to him his

property and fortune with the expressed wish that he use it to build a new church in Rome – yet another instance of the novel’s projection of Arabs and Jews as worshippers of the same god. As neither a Jew nor a Christian, the Sheik of Wyler’s film lacks the privilege of being one of God’s Chosen People and instead exists merely to help propel the Americanised Hebrew towards the realisation of his divinely ordained destiny.

The implications of the film’s reduction of the Sheik into an agent of Judah are most profoundly expressed by Babington and Evans who, in discussing the scene in which the Sheik uses his cunning and genial nature to extract a higher price from the Romans eager to gamble on Messala winning the chariot race, describe him as “a grotesque visual stereotype of the hook-nosed, shady dealer, the Arab taking on a version of the Shylock look.”³¹ With the Jew having become Americanized and achieving “insider” status, the Arab has now assumed the role that throughout the annals of Western popular culture was traditionally assigned to the Jew. Indeed, even Wallace’s novel has not the Sheik but the Jewish character Malluch soliciting money from the Romans, who derogatorily describe him as “the dog of Israel”, whilst at the same time presenting the Sheik as unequivocally *not* being a man of business (Judah comments to Malluch that “Arabs seldom are”).³² The Sheik can thus be seen as one of the seminal cinematic

figures contributing to the smooth transference of popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to an Arab target in American cultural products.

The subservience of the Sheik to the fundamentally Westernised Judah is further compounded by his utter impotence when it comes to challenging the authority of Rome himself. In the novel the Sheik insists that he won't be a slave "crawling to a master's feet", and is considered by the Romans to be a traitor and posing such a threat to their hegemony that an intercepted letter speaks of having him arrested and sent to Rome.³³ However, in the film the Sheik is reduced to the typical "native in need of rescue", embracing the hyper-masculine Western hero as a liberator, pinning the Star of David on his chest in the lead-up to the chariot race and entreating him, in a line that is notably absent from the novel, to "shine out for your people and my people together and blind the eyes of Rome." At best, this scene is a classic example of what Said terms, "the old Orientalist habit of speaking for the natives," crystallising the institutionalised passivity of Oriental subjects in Western cultural products and recalling the classic Orientalist approach that positions a Western presence in the Middle East as a philanthropic civilizing mission embraced by the backward Arabs congenitally unfit to govern themselves.³⁴ At worst this scene constitutes, in the words of Babington and Evans, "an equivocal moment, involving desire for Jewish-Arab reconciliation but also wish-fulfilment on the part of

Jewish American that the Arabs should accept the *de facto* situation of Jewish colonisation of Palestine.”³⁵ The Sheik’s final appearance in the film (coming much earlier than his final appearance in the novel) immediately follows Judah’s victory in the chariot race ends as he rejoices alongside a cadre of nameless Arabs as Judah is crowned by Pontius Pilate and referred to as “the people’s one true god” – a fitting exclamation point on the film’s normalization of traditionally Eurocentric hierarchical race relations in a thoroughly idealized Middle East.

Undoubtedly *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, and, indeed, essentially the entirety of the cinematic Biblical and historical epic cycle, shall continue to be principally discussed by film scholars in relation to the corpus of Hollywood films known as “Cold War cinema”. However, as I have detailed in this essay, the ideological implications of each film transcend the Cold War; indeed, one might argue that the implications of the films’ inadvertent framing of the then-nascent Arab-Israeli conflict far outweigh those pertaining to the films’ allegorisation of the Cold War. The overt conflation of Americans and ancient Hebrews in these films, whilst serving to project the ideal of American benevolence according to the rhetoric of the Cold War, simultaneously consecrates the ideal of an inherent kinship between Americans and Israelis and can be considered the cinematic seed from

which the notion of a “special relationship” between the United States and the state of Israel would ultimately germinate. Moreover, through the systematic Othering of Oriental characters, be it either via explicit demonization or implicit marginalisation, each film fuels the cultural disconnect between Western audiences and modern-day Arabs. As a consequence the Arab-Israeli conflict emerges for Western audiences as a dichotomous struggle between a people who are fundamentally like us, and a people who aren’t – a narrative that resiliently persists to this day.

Rodney Wallis is currently in his third year of his PhD at UNSW. His thesis examines the manner in which the Arab-Israeli conflict has been represented in and by Hollywood cinema, and the ways in which the conflict has been utilised for the construction of the United States’ cultural and political identity.

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- ¹ For a more detailed discussion of Hollywood's evolution during the late 1940s and 1950s see Tino Balio, *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (London: Unwin Hyman), 3-40.
- ² Martin M. Winkler, "The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945," in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture* ed. by Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 50-76; Margret Malamud, 'Cold War Romans', *Arion*, 14 (2007): 121-154.
- ³ Review in *New York Times*, 25 March, 1984. Quoted in Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 118.
- ⁴ Emilie Raymond, *From My Cold, Dead Hands: Charlton Heston and American Politics* (Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 25-26.
- ⁵ This is mentioned by film historian Katherine Orrison in her audio commentary on the DVD of *The Ten Commandments*.
- ⁶ Paul Brienes, *Tough Jews: Political Fantasies and the Moral Dilemma of American Jewry* (Basic Books, 1990), ix.
- ⁷ Michelle Mart, *Eye on Israel: How America Came to View Israel as an Ally* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 65.
- ⁸ Though DeMille makes strident appeals to the film's historical veracity in his on-screen introduction that serves as film's prologue, the story of Moses as favoured son of Pharaoh, his consequent rivalry with Rameses, and the unconsummated desire of Nefertiti for Moses (and vice-versa) which serves as the locus for the film's narrative are all inventions of DeMille.
- ⁹ Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War*, 105, 121.
- ¹⁰ Michael Wood, *America In the Movies: Or "Santa Maria, It Had Slipped My Mind"* (New York: Delta Publishing, 1975), 187.
- ¹¹ Nadel, "God's Law and the Widescreen," 427.
- ¹² This is mentioned by film historian Katherine Orrison in her audio commentary on the DVD of *The Ten Commandments*.
- ¹³ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 254.
- ¹⁴ Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (North Carolina: Alex Catalogue, 2000), 73.
- ¹⁵ Wood, *America In the Movies*, 173.
- ¹⁶ Howard Miller, 'The Charioteer and the Christ: Ben-Hur in America from the Gilded Age to the Culture Wars', *Indiana Magazine of History*, 104, No. 2 (2008): 172.
- ¹⁷ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 254-268.
- ¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, rev. edn. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 206.
- ¹⁹ Mart, *Eye on Israel*, 57-58.
- ²⁰ Sumiko Higashi, "Antimodernism as historical representation in a consumer culture: Cecil B. Demille's *The Ten Commandments*, 1923, 1956, 1993," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event* ed. by Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 104.
- ²¹ Lawrence Davidson, "Christian Zionism as a Representation of American Manifest Destiny," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 14, No. 2 (2005): 161.
- ²² Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 550.
- ²³ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*, rev. edn. (Berkely: University of California Press, 2005), 66-67.
- ²⁴ Wallace, *Ben-Hur*, 4.
- ²⁵ Lawrence Davidson, "The Past as Prelude: Zionism and the Betrayal of American Democratic Principles, 1917-1948," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXXI, no. 3 (2002): 21.
- ²⁶ Geraldine Murphy, "Ugly Americans in Togas: Imperial Anxiety in the Cold War Epic," *Journal of Film and Video*, 56 (2004): 9.

²⁷ It is important to note here that Said uses the term “queerness” in its traditional sense, meaning ‘strange’ rather than ‘homosexual.’ Said, *Orientalism*, 103.

²⁸ Wallace, *Ben-Hur*, 191.

²⁹ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

³⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 6.

³¹ Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 202.

³² Wallace, *Ben-Hur*, 222.

³³ Wallace, *Ben-Hur*, 241.

³⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 263.

³⁵ Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, 202.