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The Ten Commandments: A Christian Tale
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From the end of World War II to the mid-1960s, religious films reflecting a Christian outlook and emphasizing biblical or early Christian themes constituted a popular American film genre. There were biblical romances, such as "David and Bathsheba" and "The Story of Ruth," as well as Christians in Rome films, such as "The Robe" and "Demetrius and the Gladiators." By 1961, a string of Jesus films had begun. But the most popular of all was "The Ten Commandments," which appeared in 1956.

It is surprising that this story of God bringing the Israelites out of Egypt to give them the "law" was such a hit with American Christians, for the law is an anathema to Christian theology. Although Jesus was careful to indicate he did not aim to "tear down" the law, but to "fulfill it," the early missionary Paul thought the opposite. In his Letter to the Romans, he spent the first eight chapters arguing that the "law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2) prevented salvation and that Jesus freed Christians from bondage to the law.

To overcome this problem, film director Cecil B. DeMille had to Christianize the tale. Borrowing from the Puritans and from earlier Christian ideas about Moses, he made the entire story into a foreshadowing of Christianity. Robert Torry and I discuss this in our new book, "Film and Religion: An Introduction," and show that DeMille used two main approaches to accomplish this.

First, "The Ten Commandments" turned Moses into a forerunner of Christ by assigning him events from Jesus' life. Moses' birth shows this clearly. While the biblical story of the baby Moses being found by Pharaoh's daughter in a basket floating in the Nile gives him a special upbringing in the palace, the film provides Moses with the signs of a special birth like Jesus.

A star appears to signal his birth and when the pharaoh consults his wise men, they tell him that it indicates the fulfillment of a prophecy of a deliverer for the Hebrews. Like King Herod, Pharaoh then orders the killing by sword of all the newborn male babies. Years of rumors followed concerning a deliverer for the Hebrews, just as Jesus' lifetime was filled with rumors of a messiah who would deliver his people from the Romans.

When he grows up, Moses discovers his Hebrew origins and goes out among them. After Moses killed an overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave, the Bible story

has Moses running away for fear of discovery. The film, by contrast, adds a Jesus-like trial in which he is accused of being the deliverer who will destroy Egyptian society by freeing the slaves. When Pharaoh seeks to pardon him, Moses answers the king in a way that forces his punishment, as Jesus did in his trial before Pilate.

Second, the law itself undergoes the most important transformation in "The Ten Commandments." The film does not present Paul's idea of the law that enslaves humankind, but a law that sets people free from tyranny.

Most important, it is a law written on people's minds and hearts, as the film repeatedly indicates. At the film's start, Moses is described as "a man upon whose mind and heart would be written God's law." Later, Moses tells Joshua that the Israelites will go to Mt. Sinai where God will "write his commandments in our minds and upon our hearts forever."

God's interview with Moses at the burning bush makes clear this characterization of the law refers to Christianity. This scene is quite faithful to the biblical text, with nearly all dialogue coming from the Old Testament Exodus story. But God tells Moses his ultimate intentions with a sentence taken from the New Testament, "I will put my laws into (the Israelites') mind and write them in their hearts."

This line from Hebrews 8:10 cites the prophet Jeremiah (31:33) predicting a "new covenant" which will come, and Hebrews interprets this covenant as the one established by Christ. So, "The Ten Commandments" uses this key phrase to present the giving of the law to Moses and the Israelites as a spiritual encounter akin to the inner, spiritual change of each individual in Christianity, and not a mere legal contract.

"The Ten Commandments" film thus presents the story about the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and their receiving of the law as a story that more than foreshadows Christianity; they become a type of Christian, guided to a relationship with God by a Christ-like savior, Moses, and linked to God through spirit of the law written on their hearts and minds.

Flesher's and Torry's book, "Film and Religion: An Introduction," is published by Abingdon Press (2007) and is available from the UW Bookstore, and local and online bookstores.