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“Changing American History, One Movie at a Time”
Paul V.M. Flesher

It is time to pick new textbooks in Texas, and the big publishing companies are hawking their newest works. Every five years, the Texas State Board of Education selects textbooks to be used in all schools across the state. Given the size of Texas’ student population, the winning books reap enormous profits for their publishers.

Competition for the American government selection for grades six to 12 is particularly stiff, but several publishers decided to give themselves an edge by playing to the board’s well-known conservative religious leanings. Some even linked the founding of the United States’ government to Moses! Here are two claims:

McGraw-Hill’s entry states that Moses’s “idea of a covenant … influenced the formation of colonial governments and contributed to our constitutional structure.”

Pearson Education submitted a book containing a “Biography of Moses” that likens the Ten Commandments to the U.S. Constitution.

“Moses helped establish a legal system, including the Ten Commandments, to govern his people” the book says. “Similarly, the founders of the United States wrote the Constitution and established a system of laws to govern Americans.”

A group of 10 academics working for the Texas Freedom Network indicates the problems with giving Moses credit for these ideas. Their main point, and one that has been known since America’s founding, is that the writers of America’s Constitution were influenced by Enlightenment principles rather than Scripture.

The misrepresentation in the McGraw-Hill work is that our country’s “constitutional structure” is actually based upon John Locke’s idea of social contract, which was an idea set in explicit opposition to the biblical covenant.

Pearson’s bowler is that the U.S. founders created a republic, rather than the monarchy put forth in Moses’s laws. In fact, the founders were explicitly “reacting against several of the crucial elements of the moral, legal and political tradition associated with Moses and the Ten Commandments.” One element was, of course, the divine right of kings to rule their subjects.

The notion that Moses provides anything more specific to American government than a desire for good governance is unfounded. So, why is he showing up in these textbooks?

Well, we can thank Hollywood. The link between Moses and America was most profoundly portrayed in that 1956 film, “The Ten Commandments,” directed by Cecil B. DeMille, with Charlton Heston as Moses and Yul Brynner as Rameses.

As Bob Torry and I demonstrated in our 2007 book, “Film and Religion,” DeMille’s blockbuster infuses the Ten Commandments and the Jewish Law with a decidedly Christian character. Despite the tablets, God says that the Law is most importantly written on the Israelites’ “hearts and minds.” This spiritualization of the Law likens it to the work of the Holy Spirit in Christianity, which enables inner transformation. In turn, the Jews of the Exodus become the model for the future Christians.

But DeMille takes a further step. His Israelites are not just future Christians, but Americans as well. In the pressure cooker of the Cold War, this mid-’50s film explicitly links Moses’ followers with the United States and the Egyptian enemy with the Soviet Union.

And, in case the film’s symbolism was not clear enough, DeMille himself comes on stage before the start and states that this is a story of how God’s “Law of Freedom” opposes tyranny and that “this same battle continues throughout the world today.”

Audiences lapped it up. “The Ten Commandments” became not only a wildly successful movie, but it placed the Cold War into a cosmic scenario in which God sided with America against the godless Communists.

Moses’ founding of the Hebrew nation through the giving of the Law, as portrayed by DeMille, formed the model for the foundation of the United States of America. The tensions of the Cold War were allayed by the firm conviction among many Americans that we were in the right and God was on our side. God guided this nation, just as He guided Moses and the ancient Israelites. DeMille’s filmic reinterpretation of the Exodus set the rhetorical basis for linking America’s founding to Moses found in these textbooks.