

Live By the Sword, Die By the Sword: The Reinvention of the Reluctant Prophet as MovieMoses™

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Exodus: Gods and Kings is a beautiful, bungled movie.

It has its really fine moments, such as its portrayal of Zipporah, or the soaking of Moses and Pharaoh at the sea crossing. And its portrayal of the plague of the firstborn is unflinching and worthy of the Bible.

But the movie falls short because it takes its *main character*, Moses, and wipes away much of the strangeness and complexity that makes him one of the most fascinating figures in world literature. The filmmakers took Israel's reluctant, stammering, paradigmatic

prophet, who needed human help and understood his God's dark side, and turned him into MovieMoses™, a handsome, silver-tongued general who bravely and heroically leads his people, and even argues with God about the harshness of his justice, like Abraham.

The movie's central, recurring image is Moses' sword, and I have never seen such a singularly bad decision by the maker of a biblical film. In the structure of the story, the sword is a substitution for Moses' staff, which the Bible repeatedly describes.

A staff is a support, a shepherd's tool. With the staff, the biblical Moses works wonders before pharaoh, parts the sea (14:6), and (controversially) strikes a rock to make water flow for the people (17:6).

A sword is a warrior's tool; it has no surprises. With the sword, MovieMoses™ kills Hittites. The sword is a symbol of Moses' status as a general and his close bond with the young pharaoh—neither of which has any biblical basis.

In the movie, God tells Moses, "I need a general." Moses says, "What for?" God says, "To fight! What else?" So off goes MovieMoses™ to muster an army in a lengthy training montage worthy of a Rocky

movie.

In the Bible, Moses and the people make no effort to fight Egypt themselves; they *cannot* fight Egypt themselves, because Egypt is Egypt. So it is that in Exod 14:14, they are told, "The LORD will fight for you. As for you? You just keep still." Yes, the movie script works its way around to God telling Moses to watch what he can do, but it doesn't change the portrayal of Moses the action hero.



In the Bible, Moses is a man with a sensitivity to the divine. Just as God notices the suffering of his people, Moses notices the burning bush, and turns aside to see it. But rather than a quick call narrative (compare Isaiah 6: “Here I am! Send me!”) there follows an excruciatingly long scene in which Moses cross-examines God about his calling. Five times Moses objects:

- Who am I to carry out this mission? (3:11);
- I don’t know your name (3:13);
- What if they don’t believe me? (4:1);
- I’m not a good speaker (4:10);
- Send someone else! (4:13).

Moses is portrayed as fearful, and reluctant, a real shrinking violet. He has to be pressed, cajoled, and sermonized by God. By the end of this conversation that spans two chapters, the reader can well sympathize when “the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses” (4:14). Soon after, the Lord attacks Moses at night and tries to kill him (4:24); exegetes treat this scene as a mystery, but it’s hard not to assume it was because of the Lord’s lingering frustration with him.

In the Bible, the Lord finally assigns Aaron, who “can speak fluently,” and tells Moses, “You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. ... He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him” (4:14-16). Aaron exists in the plot because Moses *cannot* go it alone, and his near-eradication from the script is symptomatic that the film misunderstands Moses badly. He is not a complete leader; he is not a general.

The idea that the greatest figure in Israel’s history couldn’t make a speech would be a hard sell in present-day America, as Ridley Scott apparently recognized. Our most admired leaders don’t just have great ideas, they also know how to *promote* them! Steve Jobs didn’t just invent the iPhone, he also sold it. Bobby Flay doesn’t just make great food, he also appears on TV every day to hype it. So out went Aaron, and Moses became a speech-making general comparable to Patton or Henry V.

Interestingly, though, the process of melding Aaron into Moses also seems to pull Moses farther away from God. MovieMoses™ objects to the Lord’s plans for Egypt, which is not present in the Bible, but makes him more sympathetic to a present-day audience. The biblical Moses does not object to the plagues, even the plague of the firstborn. MovieMoses™ may speak God “face to face” (Exod 33:11, etc.), but he doesn’t seem to understand God as well as the biblical Moses does. Heck, MovieMoses™ requires a boulder to the head to even see the burning bush.

Presumably, audiences could not be trusted to want to watch the Moses whom the Bible gives us, an often fearful, rancorous man with “a slow mouth and a thick tongue” (4:10). But that’s our problem, the Bible intimates. If we don’t like it, then we are the people Moses feared he would encounter. We miss Egypt when we are forced to wander from it; though the empire may be killing us, to be dragged away from it feels like death (Num 14:1-4).

The filmmakers certainly seem to have felt that way. At bottom, the movie is most fascinated with Egypt—not Israel, or Moses, or their God. Scott’s camera lingers over the golden-boy pharaoh with the great biceps; he’s drawn to the Egyptians, and many viewers will be, too. Scott is so much in thrall to the empire’s values that he even makes over the

countercultural hero in the empire's image. That why, despite its visual spectacle, the film is curiously *unmoving*. It offers no vision for actual liberation. It gives us the Moses that we want, instead of the one the Lord chose.

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