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"In a world where slaves make bricks without straw..."

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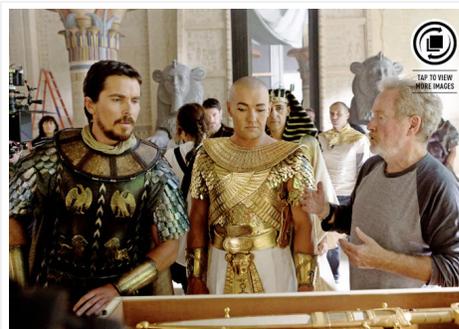
By: Alex Joffe

Director Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is the latest retelling of the Old Testament's most popular film franchise. Does he succeed or fail? Should Biblical films be Biblical or "historical"? And is Batman a good Moses?

Exodus: Gods and Kings stars Christian Bale, famous as Batman in the Dark Knight trilogy, and lesser known Australian actor Joel Edgerton as Ramses. Supporting them are a handful of well-known actors, including John Turturro as King Seti, Sigourney Weaver as queen Tuya, and Ben Kingsley as Nun, father of Joshua, played by *Breaking Bad*'s Aaron Paul. The rest of the cast is mostly unknown but includes a variety of British, Syrian, Iranian and other actors. And therein lies a tale.



From left, Joel Edgerton, Sigourney Weaver, John Turturro, Christian Bale.



Bale and Edgerton with director Ridley Scott.

Few recent films have attracted the same pre-release controversy as *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. Most prominent have been complaints that the film's stars constitute "whitewashing," apparently because ancient Egyptians were "black" in a modern American sense. [Scott's pre-release comments](#) that the film could not have been financed with unknown actors were dismissed and the entire project condemned as racially insensitive. Presumably 'alternative casting' would have gotten the movie funded and made it a hit. Thus, a [boycott](#) was called for.

It is difficult to imagine Scott or anyone else raising the film's \$140 million budget without an A-list star like Christian

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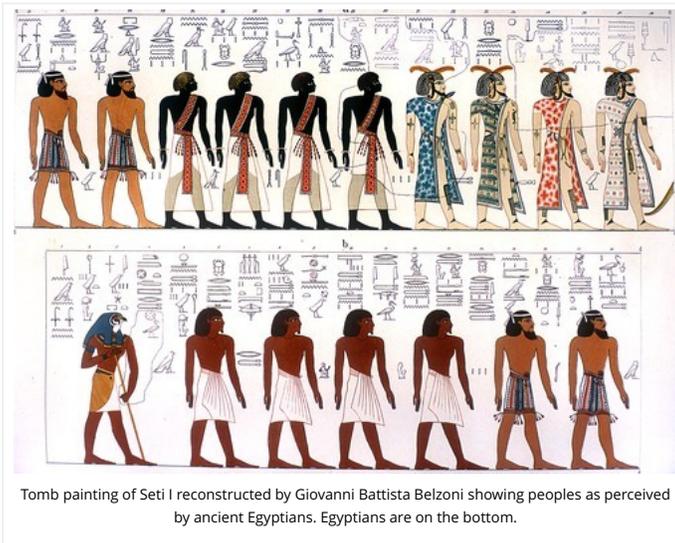
Bale. British actor Idris Elba would have been a good choice, but how would this have played with the all-important Chinese audience? Perhaps we will find out [when or if Elba plays James Bond](#). But the fact that the Egyptian general Khyan was played by Iraqi-Danish actor Dar Salim and one of Moses' generals by Nigerian actor Emmanuel Akintunde complicates the situation.



Dar Salim as general Khyan

Inadvertently, racist complaints recall old debates about whether ancient Egyptians were “black.” Twentieth century [Afrocentrists](#) built elaborate arguments about the “blackness” of Egypt, later revived by the heterodox scholar [Martin Bernal](#), which accused mainstream scholars of racism, in effect of removing Egypt from Africa. But Afrocentrists used modern “racial” categories at the same time most scholars have moved towards the idea that “race” is not a biological concept but a social construct.

Antiquity is also not cooperative. New Kingdom Egypt (that is, Egyptian high culture, created by royals and priests, transmitted by scribes and craftsmen) had strict color conventions in their art (gods were red, blue, green, black or gold, Egyptians were reddish-brown, Libyans and Asiatics were yellowish-white, and Nubians were black).



Tomb painting of Seti I reconstructed by Giovanni Battista Belzoni showing peoples as perceived by ancient Egyptians. Egyptians are on the bottom.

They were also were seriously xenophobic, and in some periods, really, really didn't like Nubians. As the 12th Dynasty [boundary stele of Sesostris III](#) put it,

Since the Nubians listen to the word of mouth
 To answer him is to make him retreat.
 Attack him, he will turn his back,
 Retreat, he will start attacking.
 These are not people one respects.

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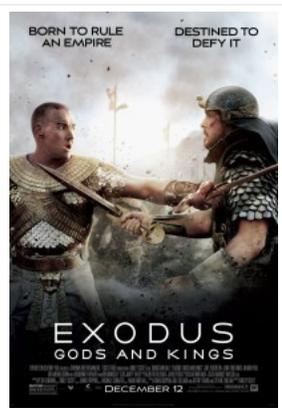
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They are wretches, craven-hearted.

Ancient Egyptians pretty much didn't like anyone beside themselves, which says nothing about "race" or their willingness to integrate foreigners into Egyptian society on specific terms. It certainly doesn't say anything about the "race" as construed by the authors of the Biblical text of Exodus.

For their part, Egyptian authorities complained that the film "*gives a Zionist view of history and contains historical inaccuracies and that's why we have decided to ban it.*" The Egyptian culture minister went on to complain that the film suggests "Moses and the Jews built the pyramids" which "totally contradicts proven historical facts."

It is true that the film anachronistically shows pyramids being constructed during the New Kingdom, but it also shows Egyptians wearing heavy eye makeup in bed and in combat. These satisfy audience expectations that have more to do with earlier movies than with "history." But the larger point is that the politically correct left and the reactionary right have converged. Popular representation must now conform to a politically correct view which has little to do with history and demography, much less the Bible.



Advertising poster for Exodus: Gods and Kings.

But these absurd complaints are hardly what are wrong with the film. The problems with *Exodus: Gods and Kings* are much more basic. For one thing, it is not especially dramatic. For another, it is not particularly epic or spectacular.

Exodus: Gods and Kings has only one possible ending – the slaves were always going to be free. So where is the drama? Most film versions opt for playing up tension between Ramses and his adoptive brother Moses. But this is entirely fictive; nothing in the text of Exodus 2 speaks of the relationship between Ramses and Moses.

This invention was a midrash, an exegetical or interpretive act that fills in gaps in the Biblical story and was key to Cecille B. De Mille's 1956 epic *The Ten Commandments*. The now standard brotherly tension between Moses and Ramses is almost kitsch, but it is hardly over the top, say, in the manner of Darren Aronofsky's *Noah*, which featured rock monsters helping to build the ark in a *Mad Max*-like wasteland. Then again, Aronofsky had a bare handful of

Biblical verses to work with. Forced to choose between a literal retelling, he opted for what one Biblical scholar called the "*midrashiest midrash that ever was midrashed.*" It made the film memorable, albeit not in a good way.

Bible films always walk a fine line, between the Bible, "history" as known from extra-Biblical sources, and the need to tell a good story. But ironically Scott's greatest divergences from the text undermine the drama. In the film's single worst move, rather than take the shepherd's staff and appear before Pharaoh to demand freedom and warn of God's anger, Moses teaches the slaves to fight and launches a guerrilla war against the supply lines of the Egyptian state. Ramses responds by hanging slaves and burning their villages.

This "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter" trope is not only tired and unconvincing but yanks out the dramatic heart of *Exodus*, turning it into a contest of wills between Moses and Ramses and their respective peoples. As God's anger increases and the plagues intensify audience sympathy shifts, unsubtly, towards the Egyptians.



Bale and Ben Kingsley.

Part of the problem is the naturalistic nature of Scott's God, a literal figment of Moses' imagination; he first appears as a result of blunt force trauma and a concussion in the form of an irritating and petulant English boy who works through nature rather than overt miracles. These devices would be all well and good if Moses had much faith in God. The problem is, he doesn't, and his mission becomes a fairly quotidian one, help the slaves escape from Egypt.

One complaint from scholars and other literalists is the matter of landscapes. Scott's landscapes are more than mere settings that create atmosphere, they are characters that shape the characters and our emotions, from the overpoweringly scale and 'truthfulness' of ancient Rome in *Gladiator* to *Blade Runner's* rain-drenched Japanese dominated dystopia of Los Angeles in 2019. Memphis, the Egyptian capital, is remarkably detailed but – like the king himself – is mysteriously hemmed in, mostly by manifestations of his own ego. The Israelite city of Pithom climbs a mountainside found nowhere in the normally muddy Nile Delta, while the slaves labor in an immense fiery pit somewhere between Mordor and Hieronymous Bosch. Only the Sinai Peninsula looks sort of 'real.'



The Egyptian capital.



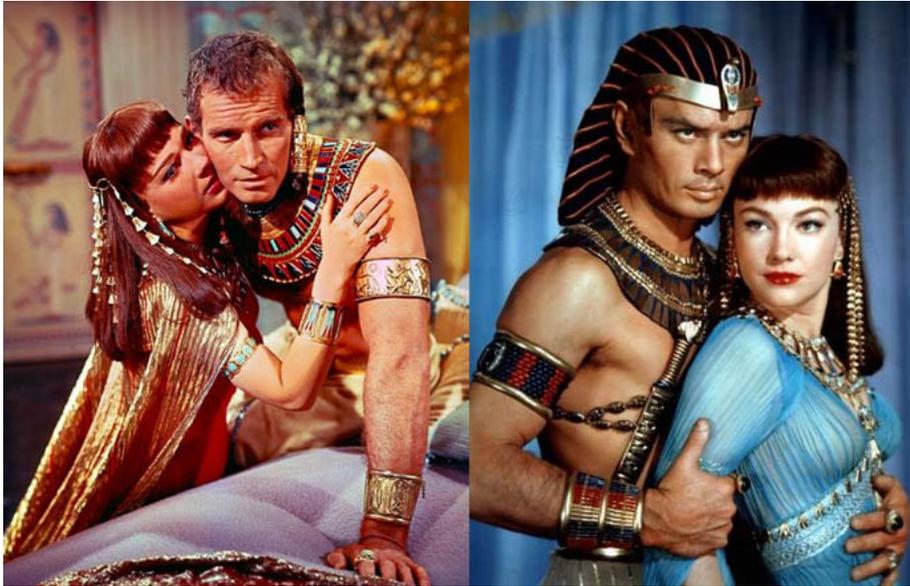
The slaves at work.

Such liberties are tolerable accessories to storytelling. But inevitably they clash with expectations formed by films of Exoduses past. For anyone over the age of 50 Moses is Charlton Heston and Ramses is Yul Brynner. Cecille B. DeMille's 1956 *The Ten Commandments* was epic in every way, from its historically researched costumes and sets to its widescreen VistaVision and Technicolor format.

In the pre-digital era, the film strove for visual accuracy and sweep, even as it featured scenery chewing tension between Moses and Ramses, a love triangle with Anne Baxter's vampish Nefretiri, and a memorable script prone to aphorisms like "Moses! Moses! Moses!" and "So let it be written, so let it be done." Shown on TV for decades at Passover/Easter time, DeMille's film is an inescapable point of reference for audiences and filmmakers alike.



Advertising poster for The Ten Commandments (1956).



Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner with Anne Baxter.

Every generation gets the Moses it wants. Heston's Moses was the very model of a 1950s man, by turns passionate, devout and stolid. Bale's Moses is a rationalist who reluctantly accepts his real identity (hilariously as "Moshe") and God's mission only after being clobbered. He argues with God but with little of the passion or conviction that made his Batman so memorable and definitive.

Joel Edgerton's Ramses is actually more interesting, a man whose insecurity tips into megalomania. This is in contrast to Brynner's blustery Ramses as a humorless, non-dancing version of his signature role in *The King and I* (which he was still performing on stage while making the film).



Moses confronts Ramses.



Joel Edgerton as Ramses.

Other actors are mostly wasted. John Turturro makes a surprisingly serene Seti without camping it up like Cedric Hardwicke. Ben Kingsley outshines everyone else but he is on screen for mere minutes. Aaron Paul mostly grimaces, which is a relief compared to John Derek's swashbuckling Joshua who mostly swings from ropes. Compared to the adoring Yvonne de Carlo (aka *Lily Munster*), Spanish actress Maria Valverde makes a sensitive and forceful Zippora, despite her Bedouin style facial tattoos.

Alas, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* just isn't that epic. De Mille filmed on location and enlisted the Egyptian Army as extras. But 21st century audiences have been so clubbed over the head by digital effects – in part by directors like Scott – such that even a signature scene like the parting of the Red Sea is underwhelming. Scott's \$140 million buys better effects than *Sharknado* but what is "spectacular" when digital effects can do anything? With God as a supporting cast member Scott's Biblical Egypt falls uncomfortably between the chairs of his hyper-real Rome of *Gladiator* and the unreal world of planet LV-223 in *Prometheus*.



The Egyptian army flees the waters of the Red Sea.

Much more could be said about the film. The music is competent and does not resort to fake Middle Eastern melodies played on squeaky instruments. The battle scenes are possibly the best thing in the movie and give some sense of how terrifying chariot warfare was in antiquity. But ultimately the film disappoints. If the thesis is that Moses' faith is a form of madness, then Scott and Bale should have gone all the way, in the manner of Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*, and Willem Dafoe's tormented Jesus.

Provided one accepts that *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is a movie, it will not undermine religious faith any more than it will educate on the nature of the Bible or history. But it is precisely as a movie that it disappoints.

Alex Joffe is the editor of The Ancient Near East Today.

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Naturally, it would have been nice if your commentary had included the included the historical note that these so-called events never happened. Totally mythic movies should be labelled as such.

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