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PROJECTING THE PASSION

THE INVENTION OF THE 'JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION' IN THE ROMAN/BIBLICAL GENRE OF POSTWAR AMERICAN FILM

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Figure 1: Charlton Heston, Cecil B. DeMille's favorite actor for Biblical epics.

Abstract:

*This paper traces the changes in the American view of the relationship between Jews and Christians from the First World War to the present as reflected in motion pictures from the earliest of the biblical epics to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. It demonstrates that the "Judeo-Christian tradition" as it has developed since the Second World War is a political theme that functioned first as anti-fascist propaganda and then as anti-communist propaganda that portrayed Jews and Christians as good and free in contrast to Nazis and communists; and it shows what an effective medium the movies were in selling this idea.*

Projecting the Passion

Building the Judea-Christian in postwar American film

In the Lenten months of 2004, a virtual holy war broke out in America over the Ash Wednesday release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a bloody 127-minute liturgical depiction of Jesus' scourging and execution. The clash did more than merely reopen the longstanding dispute over the crucifixion. The exposure of a genuine rift between Christians and Jews over just what happened in first-century Judea seemed to cause more

discomfort among religious conservatives than anyone else, for it questioned whether the Gospels should be interpreted as literal, historical fact amid the often contradictory history of Judea and early Christianity. The political instability this threatened among the American Right appears not to have gone unnoticed, as such awkwardness even led conservative Jewish film critic Michael Medved to decry the notion that Christians should be "forced a choice between faithfulness to scripture and amiable relations with Jews."¹ Clearly this does not apply to the majority of (non-literalist) moderate Christians for whom a rigidly literal interpretation of the Gospels is not an issue.

What Gibson's film indeed exposed was how different an American culture greeted *The Passion* than had confronted previous Biblical movies. *New York Times* reviewer A.O. Scott dismissed these earlier films as "palatable (if often extremely long) Sunday school homilies deigned to soothe the audience . . ." ² Ironically, at the same time in which the ancient Jewish-Christian fissure was being played out awkwardly in conservative newspaper columns, many of the same commentators were invoking the so-called "Judeo-Christian" heritage of the United States to fuel the ongoing culture wars. Cal Thomas, in a column

only a few months before his glowing praise of *The Passion*, sneered at the Council on Arab-Islamic Relations for seeking “the elimination of references to ‘Judeo-Christian’ when describing the heritage of the United States.”³ As historians from Mark Silk to Deborah Dash Moore have pointed out, the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is really an invention of 20th century America. This tradition owes more to World War II solidarity among Jews, Protestants and Catholics and the subsequent Cold War rhetoric that pitted America’s religiosity against godless communism, than to a chain of harmony and cooperation between the two faiths stretching from first-century Judea, through medieval Europe, to revolutionary Philadelphia.⁴ Indeed, conservative commentator Dennis Prager, prompted by skepticism over the authenticity of the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” felt compelled in spring 2005 to write a multi-part essay defending the use of the phrase and contrasting this wholly American “tradition” against two models he claims rival it on the world stage: European secularism and Islamic fundamentalism.⁵

But what does Mel Gibson’s *The Passion*, and the furor over it among both Christians and Jews, scholars and clerics, have to do with the so-called “Judeo-Christian tradition”?

There is an accepted mode of film criticism that allows us to see the protagonists and their enemies on movie screens as ideological constructs of the time in which they are made. This could not be truer than with the Roman-biblical epic, whose golden age dawned in the 1950s and ’60s alongside American anti-communist anxieties that in many ways took shape through religious discourse. Both Moore and Silk have noted how the solidarity of Jews, Protestants and Catholics in World War II and the anti-communist movement became devoted to distinguishing America against its godless Russian rival; this in turn led to an appeal to the so-called “Judeo-Christian tradition” of the United States, a tradition that supposedly served as the foundation for Western democracy. As each historian likewise points out, and as Jewish author Arthur Cohen proclaimed in an entire book devoted to “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition” in 1965, no such “tradition” really exists, but is wholly tied to the initial anti-fascist zeal among Jews and Christians and the subsequent anti-communist movement in the postwar period. The “Judeo-Christian tradition,” often referenced casually and genuinely by those who unaware of its origins, is wholly a product of postwar America. Even as Congress invoked such a tradition in 1954 to add “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance, explicitly as an anti-Communist device, American moviegoers were seeing the “Judeo-Christian tradition” fabricated in the ancient world, where Jews and Christians weren’t engaged in the fierce polemics that the New Testament, apocryphal writings, and the early church fathers clearly illustrate, but were rather united against another evil empire – Rome: sacrilegiously pagan rather than ardently atheist, cruelly slave-holding instead of collectively communistic, but always depicted in such a way that it could become equated on screen with the irreligious, anti-democratic, anti-individualistic enemy state in American consciousness.

While the emergence of Israel as a modern state in 1948 no doubt added a second political dimension to the Biblical epic, it is the depiction of Rome that best lays bare the anti-communist ideologies at work.

The consequence of this film tradition should be of interest to classical scholars, since the invention of the *Judeo-Christian* in American film claimed as a significant casualty the ancient Romans, who were now associated more with the fascist and communist enemy than with the political model upon which America’s founders based the early republic. This came about in three all-important themes in the Roman-Biblical genre in the postwar period: the crucifixion of Jesus, the persecution of Christians, and the oppression of Jews in the Holy Land, all at the hands of mighty Rome. A thorough examination of these films makes it clear that the Biblical epics of the 1950s and ’60s were hardly the “Sunday school homilies” that Scott proclaimed. Rather, they were decidedly political epics, designed to integrate America’s newfound identity as a “Judeo-Christian” nation against that of an enemy state.

History, it will be shown, was manipulated and sometimes falsified by filmmakers during this time in order to pursue three goals related to the three themes above, and all related to the invention of the *Judeo-Christian*: First, the crucifixion of Jesus was historicized, to make clear who would have been at fault for his execution on a Roman cross; second, the persecution of Christians is fictionalized, utilizing apocryphal tales or history imported from the later Empire into the Julio-Claudian period; and third, the real Jewish-Christian polemic is marginalized, and in its place later films overlapped the Roman subjugation of Judea, as related by Josephus and other historical writers, onto the already-established Christian persecution narrative, and even the crucifixion of Christ. What emerges is a narrative model in which Rome becomes somewhat like the three-headed Cerberus: a persecutor of Christians, oppressor of Jews, and most importantly, crucifier of Christ. Jews and Christians thus become united against Rome in Technicolor just as American leaders were advocating their unity against communism during the Red Scare.

It is the purpose of this article to point out this recurring model that greeted American theatergoers in the postwar period, its contribution to the notion of the “Judeo-Christian,” and the transformation of ancient Rome in the popular consciousness from a Ciceronian pillar of American law and institutions to a Neronian surrogate for communistic enslavement and godlessness.

The Ten Commandments and the quest for Zion

In March 2005, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich saw a correlation between the Ten Commandments displays erected by DeMille in the 1950s and the political hand-wringing led by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay over the Terry Schiavo case,

a family dispute over whether a Florida woman in a persistent vegetative state should be allowed to die. In a column titled "The God Racket: From DeMille to DeLay," Rich recounted the "ingenious publicity scheme" that DeMille embarked upon as he readied his 1956 remake "The Ten Commandments" for release to audiences. ". . . He sponsored the construction of several thousand Ten Commandments monuments throughout the country to hype his product. . . . Bizarrely enough, all these years later, it is another of these DeMille-inspired granite monuments, on the grounds of the Texas Capitol in Austin, that is a focus of the Ten Commandments case that the United States Supreme Court heard this month."⁶

To be sure, the Ten Commandments, despite theological nuances among Protestants, Catholics and Jews over their scope and interpretation, are often held up as *the* symbol for the "Judeo-Christian tradition." This correlation did not happen by accident. As Rich points out, DeMille himself made a significant contribution to the Ten Commandments mystique that is now so central to the conservative socio-political agenda. But DeMille accomplished this in more ways than just on stone monuments throughout the country (which, incidentally, still bear the Phoenician-like invented script used on the film's tablets). His 1956 *The Ten Commandments*, as shall be seen, was aligned squarely with the "Judeo-Christian" anti-communist rhetoric of the 1950s, rhetoric that had already become a staple in the Roman-Biblical genre. And yet one only has to compare his Cold War movie with his original 1923 silent by the same name to see how even DeMille himself apparently modified his understanding of the Ten Commandments and their theological importance, and the role of the Jews when it comes to Christianity.

"Our modern world defined religion as a 'religious complex' and laughed at the Ten Commandments as 'OLD FASHIONED,'" the first title screen declares. Then came the horrors of the World War, and people began to look for a "way out." That way out can be found in the commandments, it continues. "They are not laws – they are the LAW."

The beginning of the epic will seem familiar to those who have seen DeMille's 1956 re-make. Many of the set designs showing the enslaved Israelites pulling stones under the whip are virtually identical, as is the montage of slaves. However, there is no backstory to the Moses narrative, and the title merely states that God sent his servant (Theodore Roberts) into Egypt to free his people. When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai and discovers his people in an orgy around the golden calf, he throws the tablets and a disaster ensues, swallowing up the revelers in the earth. "Thou provokest thy God to wrath," Moses says, quoting Deuteronomy. And one Israelite woman, seductively leaning up the Golden Calf, is suddenly stricken with leprosy, leading her fellow people to shout at her: "Unclean! Unclean!"

Amidst the chaos, the camera slowly wipes to a modern-day dinner table, and a melodrama begins about the importance of religion in everyday life. It features a legalistic mother, Martha

McTavish (Edythe Chapman), and her two sons, the good son John (Richard Dix) and his atheistic brother Dan (Rod LaRocque), thus setting up the stock biblical theme redolent of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau. The mother reads exclusively from the Old Testament, and her son Dan mocks her. His mother then warns him: "You'll get just what the children of Israel got when they worshipped the golden calf." Dan proceeds to prove her right, becoming a contracting magnate and marrying the female protagonist Mary (Leatrice Joy), and succeeding largely by cutting corners. A church he builds with phony concrete and supplies he smuggled illegally from Asia collapses, killing his mother. Meanwhile, a "Eurasian" stowaway on the smuggling boat, with whom he becomes romantically involved, is revealed to have leprosy, which infects him and later his wife. Amidst all this is Dan McTavish's mock that he will "break all Ten Commandments" and it won't matter, which is of course proven wrong by film's end. In itself, this would appear to be a reinforcement of the later "Judeo-Christian" morality, if it weren't accompanied by the clear "replacement" theology of Christian grace over Jewish law.

While the son Dan is presented as a godless heathen, his mother is often an overly legalistic zealot, and it requires the constant intervention of John, the good son (who also just happens to be a carpenter) to balance the two. So while John admonishes his brother, "You can laugh at the Ten Commandments all you want, but they pack a terrible wallop," he also scolds his mother's strictness with a reference to the previously viewed slave-driving of the Israelites: "You're holding a cross in your hand, mom, but you're holding it like a whip." As she lay dying amidst the rubble of the collapsed church, Martha apologizes to her wayward son Dan, telling him, "I taught you to fear God, not to love him, and love is all that counts." The replacement theology is all but cemented by film's end, as Mary, wracked with leprosy, approaches John the carpenter about her illness. By the time the audience sees another biblical re-enactment, it is of Jesus healing a sick woman as John reads from the New Testament, the "new covenant's" first appearance in the movie. And as if in parallel to the end of the Old Testament account, in which the Israelite woman succumbs to leprosy presumably for her sins against the law, Mary is cured of her leprosy by the love of the New Testament.

This wholly Christianized reading of Jewish scripture was abandoned by DeMille when he remade his epic in 1956, famously starring Charlton Heston in the leading role, and was instead Judeo-Christianized. The modern melodrama was removed entirely (who needed an overtly modern story when Romans and Christians in the first century had been conveying modern ideas for years by then?) and DeMille instead expanded upon the Moses story using yet more religious fiction, namely Dorothy Clarke Wilson's "Prince of Egypt" and J.H. Ingraham's "Pillar of Fire." The Ten Commandments, in this film, are not presented as a Jewish legal document that is nice to follow but secondary to Christian grace – rather, in line with the latest

rhetoric of 1950s America, the Ten Commandments become the Judeo-Christian basis for democracy, and the notion of freedom vs. “the state” again arises in a wholly integrated, Judeo-Christian narrative that makes “The Law” the source of freedom no matter how much Jesus may have monopolized liberty in previous films. We thus have the first movie in the “Judeaizing” of postwar film, which would, ironically, grow strongest in later tales about the Christ.

DeMille makes it clear from the beginning that his is a political epic, stepping out from behind a curtain to unusually introduce the film himself to the audience: “We have an unusual subject: The story of the birth of freedom, the story of Moses. . . . The theme of this picture is whether men ought to be ruled by God’s law, or whether they are to be ruled by the whims of a dictator, like Rameses. Are men the property of the state, or are they free souls under God? This same battle continues throughout the world today.” While *Quo Vadis* had claimed that Jesus died on a cross to “make men free,” DeMille – shedding the post-crucifixion punishment of Jews in *The King of Kings* and the replacement theology of his first *The Ten Commandments* – turned the birth of freedom into something both Christians and (supposedly) Jews could appreciate, under the leadership of their joint prophet. When referring to Philo of Alexandria during his introductory remarks as a historical source for his film, DeMille even refers to Philo’s contemporary as “Jesus of Nazareth,” not the Christ. This was to be a Judeo-Christian film exalting individuals as “free souls under God,” and it was released just two years after Congress added precisely that language to the Pledge of Allegiance.

While *The Ten Commandments* cannot necessarily be classed as a Roman epic given its Egyptian antagonist and setting, it relies heavily on the rhetorical and state model that the Roman movie had by 1956 embedded into popular consciousness. It was no large step, then, for DeMille to put Egyptian headdresses on his characters whilst still showing them in the lap of decadent luxury, living off the fruits of their slaves, the individuals “at the mercy of the state,” as *Quo Vadis* had put it. Throughout, much as Nero had been addressed as “divinity” by his court, Rameses (Yul Brenner) is likewise called “divine one” by his subjects, and the ridicule of pagan gods seems overwhelmingly familiar, most especially when the Pharaoh prays to a statue to heal his son and his wife Nefretiri scoffs, “He’s nothing but a piece of stone with the head of a bird.” However, like the godless Roman state and its actors before, Pharaoh is more atheistic than polytheistic: “What gods?” he asks Moses and the magicians. “You prophets and priests made the gods so that you might pray on the fears of men.”

And most of all, of course, is the recurring theme of freedom vs. slavery and the notion that biblical law is the origin of all freedom, the origin of the Western democratic values of the audience. “It is not treason to want freedom,” Moses tells his “brother,” the future Pharaoh Rameses, before he is outed as a

Hebrew. When he is discovered to be Hebrew, Moses is put in bondage and brought before the Pharaoh with a *tibulum* holding up his arms, very similar to many depictions of Jesus marching to Calvary tied to his crossbeam. When Moses returns a prophet and demands the release of his people, the Pharaoh responds, “Their lives are mine; all that they own is mine.” And Moses makes his governmental model clear: “Man shall be ruled by the law, not by other men.” As the angel of Passover visits the Egyptian households, the anxious Israelites anticipate that “Tomorrow the light of freedom will shine upon us.” And when they err in licentiousness in the wilderness and spark Moses’ and God’s wrath with their appeal to “freedom,” the prophet scolds them, “There is no freedom without the law! . . . If you will not live by the law, you will die by the law.” DeMille’s seemingly favorite motif then ensues again, as hundreds of Israelites are swallowed up into the Earth by the Almighty’s anger. As if to punctuate the importance of Jewish law in Christian tradition, Sefhora (Yvonne De Carlo) tells Moses that he “taught them not to live by bread alone.”⁷ Finally, as Moses hands a satchel of scrolls to his brother Aaron and prepares for his walk with God, he parts by instructing them to “Proclaim liberty to all the lands.”

It was a far cry from the vision of Jews that DeMille had provided audiences in *The King of Kings* and his first *Ten Commandments*. Not only would *The Ten Commandments* launch a fully Judeo-Christian understanding of the biblical epic, it would also introduce the character of the fighting Jew, the rebel against tyranny that would, perhaps ironically, retain the gentile, blue-eyed Charlton Heston as its primary actor. Yet the film cannot be said to be Jewish: Rather it is simply an “Old” Testament epic, and the story is told through the typical Sunday-school Christian narrative, aside from its fictional aspects. Later epics that would feature prominent Jews would return to first-century Judea and the cruel Roman state, and would feature the return of Jesus as a central character – Hollywood’s second coming of Christ.

Josephus, Hollywood screenwriter

“It is written,” intones narrator Orsen Welles in biblical language at the beginning of *King of Kings* (1961), before proceeding to account for the Roman conquest of Judea. Only Welles wasn’t quoting from Scripture, but from history, specifically Flavius Josephus (c. 37-101 CE). More than ever before, the Roman-Biblical films of the 1960s would use generous amounts of Jewish history, and for that filmmakers turned to this first-century author, one of our best sources for Jewish events during the Greco-Roman period. Almost always, the portrayal of the Romans gleaned from Josephus is a notoriously brutal one, and the depiction of the Jews one of freedom fighters or patriots, trying to win their homeland away from the occupier. But it is important to remember that Josephus, while documenting Roman brutality, was not necessarily a Jewish partisan. In his introduction to *The Jewish Wars*, he states:

It is not my intention to counter the champions of the Romans by exaggerating the heroism of my own countrymen. . . . [Judea] was destroyed by internal dissensions, and the Romans who so unwillingly set fire to the Temple were brought in by the Jews' self-appointed rulers, as Titus Caesar, the Temple's destroyer, has testified. For throughout the war he pitied the common people, who were helpless against the partisans; and over and over again he delayed the capture of the city and prolonged the siege in the hope that the ringleaders would submit. If anyone criticizes me for the accusations I bring against the party chiefs and their gangs of bandits, pardon my weakness...⁸

Given Josephus' hostilities to Jewish "revolutionaries," we are faced yet again with a Hollywood that must change or at least manipulate the historical record in order to make its narrative function in line with current ideologies. Nevertheless, Josephus does provide us with a solid history of the Roman-Judean interaction, beginning with Pompey's taking of Jerusalem in 63 BCE. According to his *Jewish Wars*, Pompey and his army assaulted the walls of the city for three months before finally overturning the battlements and storming the temple. "Many of the priests, though they saw the enemy approaching sword in hand, quietly went on with the sacred rites and were cut down as they poured libations and offered incense, putting the service of God before their own preservation."⁹ Just as Eusebius' unflattering accounts of his fellow Christians' faith was excised from films about the persecutions, so too Josephus' words indicting some of his fellow Jews in the wars never made the editing cut. "Most who fell were killed by their own country men of the rival faction," he continues. "Others beyond number threw themselves over the precipices; some, maddened by their hopeless position, fired the buildings round the wall and perished in flames."

Despite the calamity, nothing "sent a shudder through he nation as the exposure by aliens of the Holy Place, hitherto screened from all eyes. Pompey and his staff went into the Sanctuary, which no one was permitted to enter except the high priest, and saw what it contained – the lampstand and the lamps, the table, the libations cups and censers, all of solid gold, and a great heap of spices." Though *King of Kings* (1961) will depict this interaction as an oppressive one, Josephus writes that Pompey didn't touch any of the treasures, ordered the Temple purified again the next day, and "proved his worth as a general . . . and by relying on considerateness rather than severity won the goodwill of the citizens."

Nevertheless, Josephus does paint a rather unruly picture of Jerusalem during the time of Jesus of Nazareth. Sometime before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BCE and the placement of Judea under the direction of a Roman governor in 6 CE.,¹⁰ two rabbis, Judas and Matthias, on hearing that Herod was dying, caused a popular uprising by urging people to tear down a golden eagle that the king had erected on the gate outside of the Temple. "At mid-day, when masses of people were walking about the Temple

courts, they lowered themselves by stout ropes from the roof and began to cut down the golden eagle with axes."¹¹ Herod seized the men and the rabbis and had them all burned alive. Of course, the most notorious uprising is the main subject of Josephus' *Jewish Wars*, the siege and razing of the city in 70 CE.¹² It is this oppression – the Roman occupation of Judea and the Jews' resistance – that occupied the attention of moviegoers and filmmakers in the postwar period.

A Tale of the Judeo-Christian

By the time William Wyler wished to produce the 1959 blockbuster *Ben Hur: The Tale of the Christ*, it didn't take much to transform Charlton Heston into the ultimate fighting Jew for the movie-going population. After all, he had been *the* Jewish prophet only a few years before, so his opening lines to the Tribune Messala are meant in all seriousness: "You're a Roman, I'm a Jew." With Heston, Hollywood continued a re-examination of the Jew that it had in earlier films like DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, which is replete with references to the Hebrew race and the prejudice that had accompanied such identification for centuries. "There is no shame in me," Heston told his adopted mother as Moses in 1956, "how can I feel shame for the woman that bore me or the race that bred me?" Later, before Pharaoh, he lamented "the evil that men should turn their brothers into beasts of burden, to slave and suffer in dumb anguish, to be stripped of spirit and hope and faith, only because they're of another race, another creed. If there is a God, he did not mean this to be so."

Heston would continue playing the part of the prophetic pest to Frank Thring's Herod Antipas in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. The film turned his portrayal of John the Baptist, perhaps fitting given the film's set location in the American West, into the heroic American outlaw cowboying up to the powers that be, most especially when pumping Herod full of one-liners: "I have orders to bring you to God, heathen!" he yells at an emissary of Herod when asked to come to the Galilean palace. "I won't come with you at all," he adds to the throng of soldiers, who when wading into the Jordan to take the Baptist by force, find themselves repeatedly dunked by Heston. "Repent! Repent!" he yells, as soldier after soldier is submerged. Though Jesus is presented as an otherworldly, anti-materialist sage – one of the most painfully lengthy discourses comes under a bridge as Jesus convinces his disciple that being deprived of his coat was no great loss – the world of the *Greatest Story* is one of upheaval against Rome. At the beginning, before the sea of crucifixions meets the holy family on its return from Egypt, as noted before, a riot breaks out as Israelites tear down a Roman eagle from the Temple gate, a tale ripped straight from the pages of Josephus.¹³

But it is Heston's performance as John the Baptist that no doubt conjured the image of the rebel Jew, especially given his previous performances as Moses and Judah Ben-Hur. "I have no king but God," he defiantly tells Herod at the palace. When

Herod asks where he can meet Heston's king, the Baptist growls, "By standing in the first line you come to this side of Hell!" Herod will find the Christ he is seeking all right, John the Baptist warns: "Your answer is in the fires of Hell, Herod! ... You'll stand in judgment. You'll burn in Hell!" Heston's fiery performance seems to complement the otherwise staid and peaceful portrayal of Max Von Sydow's Jesus. Indeed, as much emphasis is given in *The Greatest Story Ever Told* to John the Baptist's "treasonous" actions and eventual martyrdom as to Jesus himself, as John morphs into the Jewish counterpart to Christianity's Jesus. This is a wholly abiblical portrait of John the Baptist, needless to say, whose imprisonment and martyrdom is attributed only to his rebuking of Herod, not treason against Rome.¹⁴

It was not the first time. *King of Kings*, the not-so-remade DeMille classic in 1961, also features a rebellious John the Baptist amid a host of other Jewish rebels, led of course by Barabbas. The Jews' continuous fight for the homeland is made a constant backdrop in *King of Kings*, and John the Baptist is at first at the forefront. After Pilate places the standards of Caesar in Jerusalem,¹⁵ John the Baptist stands outside addressing the crowd: "Behold the sign of the pagan," he says. "A day will come when Rome will crumble into dust. . . . The high shall fall and the fallen shall rise." Though Caiphas tells Pilate that "we have found it wiser to ignore the ravings of these false prophets than to persecute them," Pilate thinks there is always a way to get rid of vagabonds, and throws a coin at the Baptist from the window. This John (Robert Ryan), equally as defiant as Heston, throws the coin back at Pilate.

In *King of Kings*, John and his cousin Jesus are put into a rebellious world in which the Jews are fighting for their homeland, including a sympathetic Barabbas, whose throngs of rebels conceal themselves underground in hideouts similar to the catacombs. As if aware of the translation issues surrounding the word *ἠσθητής* in Josephus, Herod asks the eventual convert and Roman centurion Lucius, "What are these men, bandits?" to which Lucius responds, "They call themselves patriots," using the same word Judah Ben-Hur did years earlier to describe his people to Messala. Lucius becomes the lone sympathetic Roman in *King of Kings*, eventually identified with the centurion beneath the cross who confessed Christ's divinity,¹⁶ in an evil empire oppressing the Jews in their homeland and ultimately crucifying Jesus. During the prologue, Orson Welles tells of Herod, the "Arab" and "false and maleficent king of the Jews," causing rebellions to rise up. "Herod, in reply, planted evil seeds, from which forests of Roman crosses grew high on Jerusalem's hills. And Herod made the forest multiply." As Welles drones, the bodies of Jews are seen taken down from crosses, carried to a pit, and thrown among heaps of corpses. It was the postwar film's most explicit Holocaust imagery, and served to render concrete the notion that Rome had been not only the persecutor of Christians and killer of John the Baptist and Jesus, but no better than the Nazis themselves in exterminating a race of people. Of

course, Herod's identification as an Arab is also significant given the strife of the 1960s between Israelis and Arabs, but *King of Kings* makes Herod's service to Rome and Rome's festering presence in Israel paramount to the oppression of the Jews. When Joseph comes to Bethlehem as required by the census, for example, he finds his city "much corrupted by Rome." The entire opening sequence, as referenced before, shows Pompey's legions marching into Rome and "most irreverent Pompey" stepping into the Holy of Holies. No flattering portrait of the general is given here. Pompey has Jewish priests standing firm on the steps of the Temple executed with spears, and as he steps into the inner sanctum, he provides a Roman reversal of the climax to the first *King of Kings*: rather than God rending the Temple veil in anger over the crucifixion, Pompey cuts a long slit in the curtain to enter the chamber.

Even the crucifixion is made to service this image of Roman occupation, as Jesus and the two *ἠσθηταί* next to him are made merely the foreground in a sea of crosses. And when Barabbas is in prison with the two men to be crucified with Jesus, he tells them that he and Jesus seek the same thing: "freedom."

This confusing theme of freedom contrasted over against the Christian spiritual notion of freedom and yet seemingly supported by it at the same time, plays out awkwardly in several films, not the least of which is *Ben-Hur*. The "freedom" of the earlier postwar epics, the freedom sought by Christians under the evil empire to worship as they please, is dovetailed into the freedom of the Jewish people in first century Judea and their quest for Israel, both of which are of course layered on top of the Cold War and Middle-Eastern politics at work in 20th century America. After all, only a decade before Israel had declared itself a state upon the lapsing of the British mandate over Palestine, Arab forces invaded and fighting continued until truce agreements are signed in 1949. So it is perhaps unsurprising that Jews were thus encouraged in the Roman movie to take on the godless empire alongside their Christian brethren, for surely Rome (and thus the communist state) was no less hostile to the religious Jewish state antithetical to its irreligiosity. Therefore, despite repeated references to Christ's emphasis on freedom for the soul over freedom won militarily ("I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand," Judah says of the crucified Christ in *Ben-Hur*), filmmakers insist on presenting the latter quest as equally admirable and necessary.

Nowhere does this play out more fully than in *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, in which Israel and Christianity converge in the ideal Judeo-Christian alliance. Indeed, Judah Ben-Hur, as his name suggests, becomes a stand-in for Judea, for Israel the state, throughout the film, and as a representative of the Jews his story is made to mirror his contemporary representative of Christianity, with whom he interacts at the beginning and end of the movie. We are told he is a Jewish prince, one of presumed influence given Messala's attempt to recruit him in an effort against the rebels. "They're my people, I'm one of them," Judah protests. If

Messala wants his advice, it is to withdraw the troops and "give us our freedom." Who are the rebels conspiring against Rome? Messala asks. "They're patriots,"¹⁷ responds Judah, before emphatically stating his Zionism: "I believe in the past of my people and in their future. ... You may conquer the land, you may slaughter the people, but that is not the end. We will rise again." This notion of a return to Zion is perhaps unsurprising in the film's rhetoric, and the equation of Judah with Israel is made explicit when he is captured by Messala after a mishap blamed on the House of Hur and sentenced to the galleys: "I pray that you live till I return."

In accordance with previous movies in the genre, Romans are of course again depicted as irreligious tyrants. "Rome is an affront to God," Judah proclaims. "They're drunk with religion," complains the outgoing Tribune. "How do you fight an idea, especially a new idea?" How? Messala answers. "With a new idea."¹⁸ Judah's galley master and eventually adoptive father Arrius, meanwhile, remarks on "what a strange, stubborn faith you keep, to believe that existence has a purpose." And the reticence to identify the protagonists, the Jews themselves, as slave holders is likewise played out awkwardly, as Judah's slave Esther (Haya Harareet) tells him she "never felt like a slave" in his house, and Judah grants her freedom as her wedding gift.

But most pronounced is Judah Ben-Hur's identification with Jesus throughout the film, as though the fate of the two, Christian and Jew, Christ and Israel, are necessarily entwined against the state. The wise man Bathazar (Finlay Currie) at one point mistakes Judah for Jesus, saying they would be about the same age. Meanwhile, after winning the race with the Star of David around his neck – "to shine out for your people and my people and blind the eyes of Rome," says the Arab horse trader who gives it to him – Judah is hailed as the "people's god" and recognized as a threat by Pilate, who orders him banished from his homeland after he renounces his Roman citizenship. While still trying to convince him to accept, the crucifier of Christ entreats him "not to crucify yourself on a shadow such as old resentment or impossible loyalties. Perfect freedom has no existence." Addressed as Arrius, his adopted Roman name, Heston famously retorts, "I am Judah Ben-Hur." And while about to face Messala in the arena, Judah makes a Gethsemane prayer to his God: "My path is set. Into your hands I commit my life. Do with me what you will." The reciprocal images of the enslaved Judah receiving water from the Christ toward the beginning, and the Jew giving water to the condemned Jesus are perhaps so embedded in popular consciousness they need not even be recounted. Suffice it to say, Judah as Jew and Christ as Christian, their parallel struggles against godless Rome and devotion to freedom, constitutes perhaps the most powerful construction of the Judeo-Christian in all of postwar film.

Yet *Ben-Hur* is not a Jewish story, but a wholly Christian one. The two women of the Hur house afflicted with leprosy are cured at the end amid Christ's crucifixion, and Balthazar succinctly

sums up the general crucifixion theology when asked why Jesus was crucified: for the sins of the world. And yet it should be pointed out that in the 1880 novel by Lew Wallace, Judah is converted explicitly at the end to Christianity, but not so in the movie. It is in fact left intentionally ambiguous to which faith group the Hurs now belong. Instead, the film ends the Friday evening immediately after the crucifixion but before the resurrection – at that small window in time, one might say, when Christians weren't yet Christians and Jews like the Hurs hadn't had the chance not to be Christians yet – that one Sabbath in history when all Jews were potential Christians and all Christians still Jews, and Judah himself the ultimate Judeo-Christian.

A new era in film for the Judeo-Christian?

"Christians and Jews created the United States of America in a revolution against tyranny," wrote James Atticus Bowden on April 4, 2005, in an "open letter" to the Judeo-Christian Council for Constitutional Restoration and its upcoming conference on *Confronting The Judicial War On Faith*.¹⁹ Continuing with a stark modification of that first moment in recorded Christianity when the Jews supposedly severed themselves from Christians – their John 19:15 scream that "We have no king but Caesar" – Bowden Judeo-Christianizes the story of the American Revolution. "Christian ministers lead [sic] their congregations to fight. Patriots proclaimed, 'We have no king, but Jesus.' The tiny Jewish congregations risked everything against the greatest military empire on earth. The fight was about who had the right to tax us. Yet, America became the place where it was safe to be a practicing Christian or Jew."

There were some Jews in America during the Revolutionary War, and some, like Haym Salomon, played an important part as Patriots. But Bowden's repeated invocations of the Christian and Jewish patriot are meant to gloss over the very real anti-Semitism that was not absent in America, in an effort to push the "Judeo-Christian" ideological agenda touted at the *Confronting The Judicial War on Faith* conference, including the preservation of the Ten Commandments on public property and the words "Under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. It is no coincidence that the continuing rhetoric regarding these socially conservative political issues is coated in the "Judeo-Christian" tradition, and that many of the symbols held up by the Right are in fact relics of the Cold War era: DeMille's Commandments monument; the acknowledgement of God in the Pledge.

The "Judeo-Christian tradition" had several obstacles in its way when anti-communism decided to adopt it as its political model. For one, there was the sheer existence of history to the contrary, history that has shown the enormous influence of Roman law on the founding of the Republic, and not so much an emphasis on Judaic law, let alone "Judeo-Christian" law, a hyphenation that, as Silk has noted, the founders would have scarcely recognized.²⁰ Secondly, there were 2,000 years of history in which the relations of Christians and Jews were

defined solely by polemic. Not least of which the ancient period, in which even in the gospels we can detect a note of distrust (the Jews still hold “to this day” that the body of Jesus was stolen²¹); the medieval period, when the dreaded Passion play arrived yearly for the Jew; or for that matter the 20th century, with its scale-tipping atrocities. But the number one sticking point between Jews and Christians has always been the crucifixion – who did it, and why. For Christian replacement theology, it has long been convenient to see the Jews as rejecting Jesus and thus to see his death as caused by that rejection. As Cohen pointed out, this theological dimension is simply irreconcilable. But historically, the authors of the Judeo-Christian tradition on film attempted to address the crucifixion simply by rewriting the gospel accounts to bring them more in line with what we know of Roman and Jewish history. Thus Rome, not the Jews, became the crucifier of Christ, and the largest obstacle in Christian-Jewish reconciliation was at least superficially removed. Had this happened alone, the reputation of Rome might not have been necessarily as sullied, but it did not happen alone. Christians and Jews needed more camaraderie and a joint enemy as they had been presented with in World War II. They had one: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the communist, Stalinist regime, against which the American Right in the postwar period would constantly strive to define its country. Appealing, perhaps naturally, to religion, the Judeo-Christian tradition was born as we know it today. But as we have seen, this newfound unity was viewed skeptically at best. For the popular American consciousness, however, a relatively new medium proven to spark trends and influence ideologies was put to work to convince the public of the authenticity of the Judeo-Christian. American film perhaps did not conspire with a unified voice and agreed-upon arrangement to create the Judeo-Christian, but the Cold War ideologies at work converged to present a powerful contribution to postwar philosophy, either as its reflection, its refraction, or perhaps most compelling, its stimulus in cementing the Judeo-Christian in the postwar mind. To present the Judeo-Christian in all its authenticity, filmmakers reached back to the origins of rabbinical Judaism and Christianity to the soon-to-vanish Temple Judaism of the first century. And perhaps conveniently, they found a state, sometimes directed by cruelty, sometimes a persecutor of said Christians, on some occasions the conquerors of Israel. They found in common a prevailing enemy state for Jews and Christians to resist together just as the faithful should resist communism. They found Rome.

And so there is Bowden, winding up his tale of how Jews and Christians had fought alongside each other against tyranny throughout American history – in the Civil War, on “both sides” of course, during the world wars, the cold war, and even today. And perhaps not surprisingly, near the rhetorical climax of his rallying cry against “secular humanism” at the hands of the courts, he envisages a leader to direct “America upwards in the way of Christians during Roman Emperor Diocletian’s tyranny. ... When Christians refused the Roman eagle, they were declared ‘enemies of humankind’ and killed horribly. . . . Judges under the

American eagle, demand a greater dishonor of the Judeo-Christian God today.”

For Bowden and others, the decline of Rome in the American mind must assist in yet another dimension: as one of the undisputed pillars of American tradition and law, its despoiled reputation allows for the new, invented model of U.S. governance to exert itself. With our Greco-Roman heritage out of the way, the Judeo-Christian tradition stands at the ready.

Perhaps demonstrating the ongoing mystique of Christian persecution, Mel Gibson went on a publicity campaign in 2004 and claimed the controversy over his film “The Passion of the Christ” owed to his showing a positive movie about Christ. The American Right jumped aboard. But what was really at work? Gibson had failed to follow the rules concerning the Judeo-Christian tradition, blatantly undermining the tenuous crucifixion narrative that had supposedly served so well to reconcile the Judeo with its Christian for the postwar Right. He had spoken the unspeakable, and so a culture-war controversy served as a natural defense mechanism. If such an enormous rift exists between the Christian’s assumption about the Christ and the Jew’s understanding of 2,000 years of religious and racial intolerance, what kind of “Judeo-Christian” tradition is there, anyway? If there is still a question as to how much law Christ “replaced” with his death and crucifixion, how much of Leviticus can be commandeered for the purposes of joint Judeo-Christian morality? Thus we have Medved, a conservative Jew in the social conservative movement, attempting to iron away the rift by urging his fellow Jews to accept Christians’ literalist reading of the gospels, even if those gospels reflect the very ancient polemic against Jews that served as the context for their oppression and suffering for the past two millennia. What the *Passion* controversy was really about was a fissure in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Gibson hadn’t played the script his forebears had provided him in the postwar period, and so on the surface the social conservative model of ideal governance appeared cracking.

Or was it? “Christians and Jews paid the blood tax fighting tyrannical Imperialism, Human Secularist Nazi Totalitarianism, and Human Secularist Communist Totalitarianism in World Wars I, II and III (the Cold War),” Bowden continued in his letter. “Now, we are fighting Islamists, who hate Israel and America in almost equal measure, in a long, long World War IV against Islamist Totalitarianism.”

Gibson’s film was an enormous success among the American Right, but not so the 2003 independent film *The Gospel of John*, a word-for-word retelling of the Gospel that was released just six months before. Why?

Perhaps it isn’t that *Passion* was merely about Christianity or even positive Christianity (no objections were raised to *The Gospel of John*). Perhaps the film conveyed something latent beyond merely its Christian message, something that can explain why it was often reviled by the Left but embraced by the Right,

who watched time and again as American actor James Caviezel as Jesus withstood the cruel thrashings of the Latin-speaking Romans and fundamentalist priests conspiring against him in Aramaic.

While the sadistic and godless soldiers mercilessly beat Christ and ridicule him with their Italic dialect, and the robed and head-dressed middle-easterners speak in a sister language to Arabic, one is tempted to wonder if another version of the Judeo-Christian is working its way onto the screen – Dennis Prager's Judeo-Christian America pitted against European secularism and Islamic fundamentalism²² – and if it will prove as lasting and indelible as its predecessors.



Figure 2: Caiaphas in *The King of Kings* (1927)



Figure 3: A more Semitic Saint Paul in *Quo Vadis* is made subordinate to the obviously Gentile St. Peter.

Endnotes:

¹ *The Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 2, 2004

² *The New York Times*, Feb. 25, 2004

³ Thomas, "The Threat Among Us," May 20, 2003, Tribune Media Services, whose biography on one radio station (WOCA 1370) touts that he "challenges conventional conservative wisdom by invoking a return to biblical morality, and to government based on the truth of the Judeo-Christian moral code."

⁴ See Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 1984); and Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*, Harvard, 2004.

⁵ "Judeo-Christian values are larger than Judaism or Christianity," March 15, 2005, Creators Syndicate Inc.

⁶ "The God Racket, from DeMille to DeLay," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2005

⁷ Deut 8:3; Luke 4:4

⁸ *Jewish Wars*, I.9-12 (Trans. Williamson, Penguin, 1970) – As noted by the Oxford Classical Dictionary, though Josephus was "a zealous defender of Jewish religion and culture, his writing is largely hostile to the various revolutionary groups, whom he regarded as responsible for the fall of the Temple: his theology centers on the idea that God was currently on the Romans' side." (page 798).

⁹ *Jewish Wars*, I.150

¹⁰ *Jewish Wars* I.125

¹¹ *Ibid.*, I.646

¹² *Jewish Wars*, V.279-445

¹³ Though Josephus relates this story, he doesn't specify that the eagle was a Roman one, and Williamson notes in his translation that it is difficult to know its origin. In *Greatest Story*, however, the eagle is decidedly Roman, and will appear again behind Jesus as he is sentenced by Pilate.

¹⁴ Mat. 14:1-12, Luke 3:19-20, Mark 6:19-29

¹⁵ Josephus records this tumultuous decision in *Jewish Wars*, II.165.

¹⁶ Mat. 27:54

¹⁷ Cf. page 15

¹⁸ Cold War – n. – a conflict over ideological differences (Merriam-Webster).

¹⁹ As of May 2005, Bowden's letter could be found at <http://www.webcommentary.com/asp/ShowArticle.asp?id=bowdenja&date=050404>, <http://www.renewamerica.us/columns/bowden/050404>, <http://virginianewssource.com/article262.html>, and <http://www.americandaily.com/article/7361>, among others.

²⁰ Several classicists have treated the issue of Roman influence on America's founding, among them Meyer Reinhold (*Classica Americana*, Wayne State University Press, 1984) and Carl Richard (*The Founders and the Classics*, Harvard, 1994).

²¹ Mat. 28:15

²² Cf. page 2

Faculty comment:

Mr. Burrows' faculty mentor, David Fredrick, is extremely complimentary about his student's work. In his letter to the *Inquiry* publication board supporting the publication of Mr. Burrows' article, he said,

I am very pleased to recommend the work of Don Burrows for publication in *Inquiry*. Don is one of my finest Latin students, and his final project for CLST 4003H (Rome on Film, 2003) received the highest score in a class of 20 very talented honors students. He produced a carefully researched and skillfully constructed website analyzing DeMille's *King of Kings* in comparison with the tradition of Passion Plays and Hollywood movies on the crucifixion. This website subsequently formed the kernel of his honors thesis proposal, to examine the transition in post-war films from blaming the Jewish community for Christ's death to blaming specifically the Romans, a movement away from anti-Semitism toward the condemnation of fascism and communism in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Don received a Scholars' Undergraduate Research Fellowship for 2004-05 from the State of Arkansas to support his research.

Over the past year, Don has crafted his thesis into a truly publishable work. I am an associate editor of the journal *Arethusa* (Johns Hopkins), and frequently review manuscripts for Cambridge University and other presses. In the last five years, the representation of Rome on film has become a very hot topic, with several major new books; I may be biased, but if I were to receive his manuscript anonymously, I would regard it as a significant, well researched, and well written contribution to this debate.

Specifically, Don makes a new and persuasive argument that post-World War II Roman movies were an unmatched force for the solidification in popular culture of the newly minted concept of the

"Judeo-Christian." As these films shifted responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ from the Jews to the Romans, the latter were reborn as oppressive stand-ins for fascism and communism. Thus history was rewritten (not so much the irrecoverable history of the crucifixion itself, but American political history) so that Judaism and Christianity could appear as one faith, without conflict, while the formerly positive role of Rome as a major influence on the shaping of American political and legal institutions was eclipsed. Don further exposes the contemporary relevance (and fragility) of the "Judeo-Christian" by parsing the religious Right's awkward response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Whether or not it captured what the crucifixion was "really" like, this film threatened to unravel the illusion of a single harmonious tradition by shifting the blame back to the Jews, thus bringing the tradition of Passion plays and widespread Christian anti-Semitism back into the picture. Highly defensive about exposing the "Judeo-Christian" to the grim, undeniable history of Jewish-Christian relations from A.D. 50 - 1950, the Right, Don argues, greatly preferred to frame the debate around the quality and accuracy of Gibson's portrayal of twelve hours in Roman Judea.

Scrupulous in its documentation from the films, the ancient historical tradition, and post-war politics, I regard this manuscript as very nearly ready for submission to a major press. In fact, I have already asked Don to fashion a chapter of it into a contribution for a book I am writing about masculinity in Roman film epics (*Titus Androgynous: Troubled Masculinity in the Roman Movie*). This is the strongest recommendation I can make for the work of an undergraduate, who (just as we all hope) has really emerged as a colleague. This fall, Don will be a graduate student in Classics at the University of Minnesota - I'll certainly miss him as a student, but I can't wait to collaborate with him as a thinker and a writer.