

Deliver Us to Cinema: *The Prince of Egypt* and Cinematic Depictions of Religious Texts

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Introduction

There is a pervasive Hollywood culture of appropriating and commodifying biblical concepts and imagery into films that do not explicitly address the Abrahamic belief systems that consider the Old and New Testaments as sacred texts. Many such films received mixed reviews. Christian and Jewish groups have heavily criticised particular adaptations of scriptural stories, including *Life of Brian*,¹ *The Last Temptation of Christ*,² *The Passion of Christ*,³ and *Noah*,⁴ for their blasphemous or ill-intentioned treatment of biblical figures. Despite the protectiveness of religious people

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¹ The 1979 religious satire reimagined the fictional life of a man named Brian who gets mistaken for Jesus. The film was considered blasphemous by some Christians who protested against the release and the film was banned in many countries upon its release, including in Ireland and Norway. See Ben Dowell, 'BBC to dramatise unholy row over Monty Python's *Life of Brian*', *The Guardian* (21 June 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2011/jun/21/bbc-monty-python-life-of-brian>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

² Scorsese's depicted Jesus Christ dealing with worldly temptations like everyone else. This caused outrage amongst some Christian groups, even leading to an incident in Paris where a theatre showing the film was set on fire. See Steven Greenhouse, 'Police Suspect Arson In Fire at Paris Theater', *The New York Times* (25 October 1988), p. 21.

³ The graphic and violent 2004 epic about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ received immense criticism upon release. The Anti-Defamation League even stated that the film's portrayal of Jewish people could fuel anti-Semitism. See Abraham H. Foxman, '*Passion* Relies on Theme of Anti-Semitism', *Anti-Defamation League* (25 January 2004), <https://www.adl.org/news/op-ed/passion-relies-on-theme-of-anti-semitism>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

⁴ The 2014 epic, *Noah*, was notably controversial due to its unorthodox depiction of the Biblical figure and narrative. The film was criticised by Christian groups and was banned in several Muslim countries. Bryan Alexander, '*Noah* hits rough religious waters on-screen', *USA Today* (25 March 2014), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2014/03/25/noah-religious-controversy-darren-aronofsky/6300751/>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

over scripture, some filmmakers have managed to create meaningful films that evade religious backlash by remaining respectful and faithful to the source material, while presenting their narratives in a ‘new and improved’ light. Cecil B. DeMille’s 1923 and 1956 versions of *The Ten Commandments* are amongst the several biblical epics that earned him titles such as “master of the American biblical epic,”⁵ “King of the epic biblical spectacular,”⁶ and “high priest of the religious genre.”⁷ DeMille could be called a Christian apologist who used film as a tool to preach. His success in the realm of biblical adaptation suggests there is room in Hollywood for meaningful adaptations of religious narratives as long as their purpose is ‘pure’ or not merely for financial or status gain. This article suggests that a biblical adaptation can be both: a market-focused product designed for entertainment that presents a commodified version of religion as well as a transformative and meaningful artistic creation, that will later be defined as ‘cinema’.

DreamWorks’ first animated musical film, *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), despite being a direct and arguably commodified adaptation of the story of Moses encapsulated in the Book of Exodus somehow avoided the criticism directed at other religious adaptations and was generally well-received. This essay—using a humanist approach to film analysis—suggests that although *The Prince of Egypt* was produced under financial pressures and is the product of an industry built on commodifying ideas, it remains ‘cinema’. According to those in the field, from scholars like S. Brent Plate and influential director Martin Scorsese,⁸ a cinematic experience provokes a transformation within the viewer and has meaning beyond mere entertainment. *The Prince of Egypt* is cinema as it uses the medium of film, and particularly music and animation, to elevate and expand upon a religious epic in a tasteful yet respectful manner that

⁵ Anton Karl Kozlovic, ‘Meek, Mystical, or Monumental?: Competing Representations of Moses within Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956 & 1923)’, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2015), pp. 45-62.

⁶ J. W. Finler, *The Movie Director’s Story* (London: Octopus Books, 1985), p. 32.

⁷ Ronald Holloway, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: World Council of Churches in cooperation with Interfilm, 1977), p. 26.

⁸ S. Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, 2nd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Martin Scorsese, ‘Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema. Let Me Explain’, *The New York Times* (4 November 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/martin-scorsese-marvel.html>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

provokes an emotional change within the viewer, while still being accessible and appreciated by general audiences.

This article will examine the opening sequence of the film as it expresses the film's aesthetics and exhibits its treatment of religious material. In the first section, the terms 'film' and 'cinema' will be distinguished, and the humanist methodology outlined. In the second section, the plot of the film will be summarised and its production contextualised. Finally, a summary of the opening sequence and an analysis of it will conclude that *The Prince of Egypt*, is in fact a cinematic masterpiece as well as a successful Hollywood repackaging of a biblical tale for mainstream entertainment purposes.

Film and Cinema

Plate makes a distinction between the terms, 'film' and 'cinema', in the preface to *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*.⁹ Plate refers to both film and cinema as mediums. The former, a physical medium, is a "strip of plastic material on which a series of still images are captured, processed, and eventually projected."¹⁰ The latter is a medium for projecting psychic, social and religious audio-visual environments onto audiences. Plate deems it imperative to explore the audience's cinematic experience and how this experience can affect or transform their lives. In his opinion, cinema is the preferred, more refined art as opposed to film, which he calls "somewhat anachronistic" and merely created for entertainment.¹¹ Plate prefers to use 'cinema' in his research into the similarities in worldbuilding between film and religion as he believes that only cinema, can create a transcendent place that audiences can journey to and to immerse themselves into. A film for entertainment alone would not be cinema by his standards.

A similar perspective can be drawn from a very different source. In November 2019, *The New York Times* published an article written by Academy Award-winning director, writer and producer, Martin Scorsese. In it, he claims that Marvel films—or "superhero movies" as he calls them—are not works of cinema despite being visually impressive

⁹ Plate, *Religion and Film*, pp. ix-xii.

¹⁰ Plate, *Religion and Film*, p. x.

¹¹ Plate, *Religion and Film*, p. x.

productions made by talented people.¹² Scorsese likens these productions that dominate the modern film industry to theme parks; commodities made according to a well-worn template in order to satisfy a demand based on market research and audience testing. He argues such films are simply remakes of each other, “perfect products manufactured for immediate consumption.”¹³ He claims they lack the key components that make up the art form that is cinema, including aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation, mystery, complex characters and above all, risk.

In short, in Scorsese’s view, cinema must have meaning beyond its market value and provoke a transformation or reflection within the viewer rather than entertain them for ninety minutes for purposes of economic gain and profit.¹⁴ Plate’s definition of ‘film’ and ‘cinema’, and Scorsese’s distinction between the two both reveal that while all cinema is in essence ‘film’, not all film can be considered ‘cinema’ as not all films take risks to provoke aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation, nor are they all transformative for the audience. This distinction might be supported by Charles Harvey, who demonstrates that contemporary entertainment can play a central role in producing meaning in our lives and informing humans on what constitutes the reality of our world.¹⁵ He states that:

entertainment puts our guard down and prepares us to be constituted by what has been constituted by and for us. Art and entertainment flow out of the world into ourselves and make us what we are. We become what we behold, and then in a dialectical turn-about, we make the world in terms of what we have become. In this way, entertainment promotes real changes in the real world.¹⁶

The term ‘entertainment’ in the above quote can be substituted with the term ‘cinema’ as used by Plate and Scorsese as it distinguishes entertainment for the sake of entertainment, from entertainment that is transformative and meaningful. The “real changes in the world” that Harvey speaks of can only be promoted if the people that promote them

¹² Scorsese, ‘Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema’.

¹³ Scorsese, ‘Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema’.

¹⁴ Scorsese is widely regarded as one of the most influential film directors in history and his films are renowned for their ability to immerse the audience and take them on a cinematic journey. See Catherine O’Brien, *Martin Scorsese’s Divine Comedy: Movies and Religion* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

¹⁵ Charles W. Harvey, ‘Epochē, Entertainment and Ethics: On the Hyperreality of Everyday Life’, *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 6 no. 4 (2004), pp. 261–69.

¹⁶ Harvey, ‘Epochē, Entertainment and Ethics’, pp. 265-266.

have undergone ‘real changes’ too. However, not all entertainment has such transformative potential.

As Richard Maltby puts it, the experience of “going to the movies” can be a transient, leisure-time experience, akin to going out for dinner at a restaurant or enjoying some drinks with friends at a bar. Maltby writes: “Like food or drink [...] when we finish consuming a movie, we have only a ticket stub to show for our transaction.”¹⁷ Plate, Scorsese and Harvey all suggest that cinema is closer in essence to art. Art, however, is not exempt from commodification. Whether art can still be transformative, despite being created for the purposes of mainstream entertainment, is a consideration here. Biblical adaptations in film can often lead to a commodification of religious imagery, symbols, narratives, and characters, decontextualizing them from their scriptural and lived resonances. Unlike supernatural ventures like the Marvel films that adapt and reinterpret comic book plots and characters already belonging to the Marvel Universe, adaptations of religious themes or events are risky as they often alter fundamental pillars of truth that many people uphold, and ‘misrepresentation’ can cause serious offence. However, because religious epics offer creatives narratives that are already replete with emotion, they can be productive foundations on which to build transformative new artistic expressions of important stories.

Methodology

The methodology employed to analyse this sequence is based on Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack’s humanist film critique, a general approach to analysing film that emphasizes individual intuitive insight and sensitive interpretation.¹⁸ To clarify the connection to the previously defined ‘film’ versus ‘cinema’, Bywater and Sobchack, amongst others, use the term ‘film’ similarly to how Plate uses ‘cinema’. The humanist approach attempts to identify transformative experiences in film, or ‘cinematic experiences’, and to communicate their value. Bywater and Sobchack present two main assumptions. First, that film, is capable of provoking emotional and transformative experiences and is therefore an artistic expression rather than mere entertainment. Second, that film, as an

¹⁷ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 39.

¹⁸ Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack, *An Introduction to Film Criticism: Major Critical Approaches to Narrative Film* (New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 24-47.

artform, is open and subject to humanist interpretation and analysis since the experiences provoked by it are human.¹⁹

According to Ambros Eichenberger, a humanist approach seeks to identify exceptional films that are not merely a source of entertainment or escapism, but a form of art that represents human values and truths of experience and provides a suggestion of what it means to be human.²⁰ Again, the term ‘exceptional films’ here may be replaced by the previously defined ‘cinema’. Eichenberger also notes that the humanistic approach to film criticism focuses on the context of a film as well as its text and structure. He claims that the aesthetic elements of a film—camera work, casting, editing, soundtrack—combine with the content to produce a meaningful and relevant product. He places importance on the examination of the relationship between the film, as well as the social or psychological effects film can have on an audience.²¹

Films that deserve a humanist critique are those that offer deeper meaning, making use of symbolism, analogy and allegory. These films take risks that demand to be explored, these films are ‘cinema’ as we have previously defined it. The humanist approach asks human questions such as: What meaning is being given to this film? What emotions are being conveyed? What creative methods are being employed to do this? Answers can be found in all elements that make up the world *inside* the frame: the *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, sound design, editing, and narrative form.

The breadth of the humanist approach and its emphasis on a subjective experience can be seen as a weakness. However, Anton Karl Kozlovic, amongst others, believes it to be an appropriate methodology to critique film, since film is, in essence, a subjective medium. Kozlovic, who writes extensively on biblical film adaptations and Christian ideology in film, frequently uses “textually based, humanist film criticism as the analytical lens” in his work.²² As Kozlovic notes himself: “This analytical focus is thus tailor-made for the writer’s research task.”²³ He often chooses the humanist approach as it is flexible and applicable to a wide variety of

¹⁹ Bywater and Sobchack, *An Introduction to Film Criticism*, pp. 25-27.

²⁰ Ambros Eichenberger, ‘Approaches to Criticism’, in *New Image of Religious Film*, ed. John R. May (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), pp. 6-7.

²¹ Eichenberger, ‘Approaches to Criticism’, pp. 6-7.

²² Anton Karl Kozlovic, ‘Sacred Cinema: Exploring Christian Sensibilities within Popular Hollywood Films’, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2007), p. 199.

²³ Kozlovic, ‘Meek, Mystical, or Monumental’, p. 46.

films. In an article reflecting on the different representations of Moses in DeMille's 1923 and 1956 versions of *The Ten Commandments*, Kozlovic uses humanist film criticism to approach the two films. He examines the film's faithfulness to the biblical account of Exodus, acknowledging their attempts to respect the source material, while simultaneously shedding light on the creative liberties taken by DeMille and the actors to create stories that resonate with the audience. Kozlovic questions the reasons behind the omission or downplaying of some of Moses' Biblical character traits and expands on the emphasis of others. He does this in an attempt to understand the intention behind the different adaptations of Exodus and the different representations of Moses.²⁴

The humanist approach can demonstrate that a film is more than just entertainment, that it can have lasting transformative value as an artistic work of 'cinema' that is also respectful of religious beliefs and narratives as DeMille's work is. The humanist critique is also concerned with the context of the production of the film. The approach, therefore, allows for a juxtaposition of the commodification of religion, including the purposes and intent of the film's making, with the transformative nature of the film. The humanist approach will be employed to examine both the text and structure of the opening sequence of *The Prince of Egypt* as well as the context of the film's production. This article will seek to demonstrate that the text and structure of the opening sequence of *The Prince of Egypt* provokes an emotional and transformative experience that elevates this film to the status of 'cinema'. This is despite the film being, at its core, a product of commodification of religion, produced for the purpose of entertainment. The essay will analyse, in Kozlovic-fashion, the faithfulness of *The Prince of Egypt* to the story of Moses and seek to determine the justification for any omissions, downplays or emphasis of any aspects of the biblical narrative in conjunction with the tensions surrounding the production of the film.

Summary of the Film and Context of Production

DreamWorks' 1998 film, *The Prince of Egypt*, is an animated musical drama based on the book of Exodus.²⁵ The film follows the life of Moses

²⁴ Kozlovic, 'Meek, Mystical, or Monumental', p. 58.

²⁵ *The Prince of Egypt*, dir. Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner, and Simon Wells, DreamWorks Pictures (1998).

(voiced by Val Kilmer), an Egyptian prince who, upon discovering that he is a Hebrew and part of the people that his father Pharaoh enslaves, decides to flee Egypt. After rediscovering himself and building a new life as a shepherd in the desert, Moses is commanded by God to return to Egypt and deliver his people, the Hebrews, out of slavery. Despite Pharaoh's resistance, Moses frees and guides his people out of Egypt with the help of God, and they begin their journey towards the promised land.

The film was the first traditionally animated DreamWorks film.²⁶ Produced by Jeffrey Katzenberg and directed by Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner, and Simon Wells, it included songs written by lyricist Stephen Schwartz, composer of the Tony-award winning *Godspell* (1972), a musical re-telling of the Gospel of Matthew. It was scored by composer Hans Zimmer, who had won a 1995 Academy Award for his soundtrack for Disney's *The Lion King* (1994). It also featured a star-studded voice acting cast including Val Kilmer, Ralph Fiennes, Michelle Pfeiffer, Sandra Bullock, Jeff Goldblum, Danny Glover, Patrick Stewart, Helen Mirren, Steve Martin, and Martin Short.

The context of the film's production, and its significance to Katzenberg, reveals the intent of the production and, its treatment of religious themes and commodification of a biblical narrative, and whether the resulting product transcended commodification. DreamWorks Pictures was co-founded by Katzenberg, Steven Spielberg, and David Geffen in 1994, mere months after Katzenberg resigned from Disney following tensions with former Disney CEO Michael Eisner and Roy E. Disney, Walt Disney's nephew and long-time senior executive for the Disney Company.²⁷ While chairman at Walt Disney Studios, (1984 to 1994), Katzenberg was credited with the production and much of the commercial success of animated films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994), some of

²⁶ Traditionally animated refers to hand drawn animation. DreamWork's first animated film *Antz* (1998) was computer animated and went head to head with Disney's *A Bug's Life* (1998) in the same year causing rumours of idea-stealing, imitation, and sabotage. See Andrew Pulver, 'The Katz that bit the mouse', *The Guardian* (18 May 2001), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2001/may/18/culture.features>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

²⁷ Edward Helmore, "'I think I hate that little midget,'" *The Guardian* (16 May 1999), <https://www.theguardian.com/business/1999/may/16/observerbusiness.theobserver18>. Accessed 13 July 2020. See also James B. Stewart, *Disney War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

Disney's biggest hits that made up Disney's 'Renaissance era'. During this time, Katzenberg had also suggested that the film *The Ten Commandments* (1956) be adapted into an animated film.²⁸ Eisner rejected this proposal, but the idea later grew into *The Prince of Egypt*, the first animated film produced by DreamWorks.²⁹

The desire to retell an Old Testament/Torah story also had roots in Katzenberg's own Jewish heritage, presumably indicating a personal affiliation with the product being created. Katzenberg employed artists who previously worked for Disney, including co-director Chapman, in part to employ the best in the business but also to beat Disney at its own game.³⁰ Katzenberg's lawsuit against Disney, resulting in a settlement of approximately \$250 million, clearly was not enough.³¹ Immense pressure was, therefore, riding on *The Prince of Egypt* to be a ground-breaking box office hit that would propel DreamWorks into a new age of animation. Perhaps more importantly, *The Prince of Egypt* was born out of Katzenberg's desire to rival Walt Disney Studios. At the very least it sought to bring to the table a grand and risky biblical epic, something Disney had refused to even attempt.

While Katzenberg is not heralded today as the "master of the religious epic" or the "King of the epic Biblical spectacular" as DeMille has been, *The Prince of Egypt* did prove to be ground-breaking in its own way. It blended traditional hand-drawn animation and computer-generated imagery using state-of-the-art technology. It grossed over \$218 million worldwide, making it the most successful non-Disney animated film at the time.³² Reviews were generally positive and a pop version of the song 'When You Believe', performed by Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, won Best Original Song at the 1999 Academy Awards. These facts all point to *The Prince of Egypt* as a successful commodification of a biblical story for mainstream consumers.

²⁸ Helmore, "I think I hate that little midget".

²⁹ Helmore, "I think I hate that little midget".

³⁰ Brenda Chapman, interviewed by Petrana Radulovic, 'Prince of Egypt director Brenda Chapman: "We wanted to do something that reached more adults"', *Polygon* (17 December 2017), <https://www.polygon.com/2018/12/17/18131286/the-prince-of-egypt-director-brenda-chapman-dreamworks>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

³¹ Helmore, "I think I hate that little midget".

³² Box Office Mojo, 'The Prince of Egypt', <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r14067132929/>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

DreamWorks successfully repackaged a well-known Judeo-Christian narrative for the purposes of entertainment, rivalry and market share: a risky venture. However, DreamWorks modest marketing strategies after the release of the film hint at the fact that the film possibly meant more to Katzenberg and DreamWorks than just money. Despite the commercial success of the film, DreamWorks refrained from marketing it through toys or fast food chains deeming that it would be inappropriate given the religious themes of the film.³³ Further, as the following analysis of the opening sequence suggests, a great deal of creative energy was invested, in embedding emotion into the story of Moses as the divinely chosen leader of the Israelites responsible for their exodus from Egypt.

‘Deliver Us’: The Opening Sequence

This section analyses the film’s opening number, a seven-minute musical number titled ‘Deliver Us’. Composer and lyricist for *The Prince of Egypt*, Schwartz claims that opening sequences are in many ways the most important number in a show or film. It introduces the audience to the world they are about to enter, sets up the theatrical rules of what they are about to witness and presents the central characters, challenges and conflict of the story.³⁴ In the following analysis, it will be argued that the opening sequence serves these three purposes, and more. First, it introduces the setting, the characters, narrative, and conflict so to make the viewer comfortable and settled into the on-screen world. Second, it presents the suffering of the Hebrews in a raw and uncensored manner thereby attempting to cause a human reaction from the viewer. The result is an empathetic emotional response; depiction of physical pain is a powerful way to create relatability as the audience will usually sympathise with the oppressed or underdog heroes. Finally, it allows the directors, producers, and artists of the film to inform the audience, particularly religious viewers, that the film intends offer a respecting and faithful adaptation of scripture, and will not make light of the sombre themes of this biblical epic.

³³ James Bates and Claudia Eller, ‘Waters Don’t Part for DreamWorks’ *Prince of Egypt*, *Los Angeles Times* (22 December 1998), <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-dec-22-fi-56384-story.html>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

³⁴ Stephen Schwartz, ‘Stephen Schwartz on Musicals and His Strategies for Making Musicals,’ (2010), <https://www.stephenschwartz.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/SchwartzOnMusicals.pdf>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

The opening musical number can be separated into three main acts: The first act takes up the first two minutes of the sequence and portrays the Hebrew people's plea to God for deliverance from their dire situation. The film opens to a view of clouds in the sky and the hot Egyptian sun, immediately setting the stage to which the viewers are transported. The gaze descends to a giant statue of the Pharaoh who, from his own position of height and power, presides over the slaves who build his empire. Below, the Hebrews, enslaved and subjugated, desperately call out to God to 'deliver them' from suffering to their Promised Land. The next two minutes of the sequence consist of the second act. Here we see a change in location and pace, the music is quieter, slower and less dramatic, but a sense of urgency is evident. The shot moves from the slaves' work site to their homes, and focuses in on a cowering mother and her children. The choir fades, and the voice of Yocheved, Moses' mother, can be heard singing in Hebrew to her baby. Yocheved is then seen running through the streets with two children and carrying the infant to escape the Egyptian guards. The final three minutes make up the third act. The eldest child, Moses' sister Miriam, follows the basket along the banks of the river watching in horror as her brother narrowly survives peril after peril including crocodiles and hippopotami, large boats and fishing nets. The river finally guides the basket into the presence of the Pharaoh's wife, the Queen, who discovers the baby and adopts him as her own, naming him Moses. The onlooking sister, now satisfied that her brother is safe, sings a prayer of her own to the tune of their mother's lullaby.

Act I

The opening act begins with a solo trumpet instrumental and a view of clouds. This view of the heavens hints at the presence of God: He is there and is looking down upon Egypt, the Hebrews and Moses. The trumpet's melody is the motif or theme for the relationship between Moses and the Hebrews. It yearns and prophesises the coming of Moses and God's protection over him. It symbolises triumph and God's word, "I will be with you"³⁵ and indeed He is, all throughout the film and even says these very words to Moses later in the film. This opening gently reminds us of the origins of the story, preparing us for the grandeur to come. The trumpet

³⁵ Exodus 3:12. All quotes from Old Testament and New Testament are from the New International Version unless specified.

forecasts the story of Exodus, as though it has already been determined and is quietly waiting to be initiated by God. Similarly, the film has already been created in its entirety, and is about to begin a new interpretive experience of Exodus. The anticipation ends as the clouds part and the music breaks into an oratorio-like drum-laden orchestral track composed by Zimmer. Joining the dynamic orchestra is a male choir, singing as the Hebrew slaves of Egypt.

The animation also thrusts viewers into a new world. The first shot is angled towards a giant imposing statue of Pharaoh being pulled by slaves emphasising the immense power Pharaoh possesses over the Hebrews. Then the Hebrews themselves are shown as nameless, hunched over and generally faceless characters, their bodies drawn with signs of famine and fatigue. These scenes are intertwined with grand aerial shots over the Giza pyramids and Egyptian landscape. These shots help viewers visualise the scale of the Egyptian empire, its power and highlight the suffering of the slaves who build it. Plate writes extensively on the significance of large-scale shots and close-ups for worldbuilding in film. He notes that these allow for an expansion of the mind to include the world projected on-screen, a crucial element in provoking emotional response from viewers.³⁶

The first words come from the Egyptian guards who shout orders and whip the slaves, reinforcing the visual representation of the plight of the Hebrews. When the singing begins, the lyrics provide relatability since they are sung from the perspective of the Hebrews, setting the film's tone. They inform the viewer, particularly the religious viewer, that the research has been done, the film is not meant to make light of the Biblical narrative and it takes the dark themes of the story of Exodus seriously and seeks biblical accuracy. The sequence does not shy away from portraying the suffering of the Hebrews.³⁷ The first lyrics as sung by the slaves are: "With the sting of the whip of my shoulder / With the salt of my sweat on my brow." The physical suffering of the Hebrews is not symbolic or metaphorical, it is raw and exposed within the first minute of the film. Even the sound effects layered over this act, such as the crack of the whip, guards shouting "Faster!", and the choral harmonies inspired by verses from the Hebrew

³⁶ Plate, *Religion and Film*, p. 12.

³⁷ A stark contrast to other animated musical films adapting biblical stories such as *Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie*, dir. Phil Vischer and Mike Nawrocki, (2002), a comedic children's film in which all characters are anthropomorphic vegetables.

Bible,³⁸ depict the gruesome reality of the world the audience is observing. This is enhanced with the act's colour palette made up of hues of brown, yellow and orange that help the viewer empathise with the grim existence of the Hebrews and their long days of work under the scorching Egyptian sun. The mention of salt and sweat is also a nod to the *Seder* meal, a Jewish Passover ritual involving the dipping of bitter herbs into saltwater—reminiscent of tears—in remembrance of the suffering of the slaves in Egypt. All these elements consist of a worldbuilding that Plate views as essential to the cinematic experience.³⁹

The lyrics also incorporate several quotes and narratives directly from Exodus. For instance, the Hebrews cry out to their God, “Elohim, God on high, can you hear your people cry? Help us now, this dark hour.” The context behind the use of the Hebrew name for God, ‘Elohim’, shows significant historical and religious consideration from the lyricist.⁴⁰ Schwartz explained that he felt it imperative to have “an authentic sounding Hebrew reference to God to help set the time and place.”⁴¹ Initially, the lyric was “Elohim, Adonai, can you hear your people cry?” invoking two Hebrew names of God. However, the name ‘Adonai’ was dismissed upon review by religious consultants who suggested the name would not yet have been used during the plight of the Hebrews, and that it could be sacrilegious to invoke a name commonly used in modern Jewish prayer. ‘Elohim’ on the other hand had an archaic demeanour according to Schwartz.⁴² It first appears in Bereshit/Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning Elohim/God created the heavens and the earth.” As Nathan Stone comments, the name ‘Elohim’ emphasises God’s might, creative power, sovereignty and justice but also describes Him as the faithful keeper of the

³⁸ “They made their lives bitter with harsh labour in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labour the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.” Exodus 1:14.

³⁹ Plate, *Religion and Film*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Although, to some ultra-religious people, even the use of the word ‘Elohim’ in a film may be sacrilegious or disrespectful as it is reserved for prayer.

⁴¹ Stephen Schwartz, ‘Stephen Schwartz Comments on the Movie The Prince of Egypt - The Songs’ (2010), at <https://www.stephenschwartz.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/PrinceOfEgypt-GeneralQuestions.pdf>. Accessed 13 July 2020.

⁴² Schwartz also mentions that he consulted with Rabbis in Los Angeles about using Hebrew and extracts from the Old Testament in songs such as this extract as well as ‘When You Believe’. See Schwartz, ‘Stephen Schwartz Comments on the Movie The Prince of Egypt’.

covenant relationship illustrated by the scriptures,⁴³ for example, in the Hebrew translation of Psalm 91:2: “My Elohim; in Him will I trust.”

This represents a small but significant choice that transcends this film from mere blockbuster to ‘cinema’. Consulting religious authorities for every lyric or image would most likely have been time consuming, undesirable for a market-focused film. Such acts demonstrate a concern for how the film would be received by those to whom Exodus is a highly important historical and religious event. Following the lyric invoking Elohim, the central driving motive of the story is presented: the Hebrew plea for deliverance. The male slaves, now joined by female voices, explode into the chorus:

Deliver us / Hear our call, deliver us. Lord of all, remember us here
in this burning sand / Deliver us / There’s a land you promised us /
Deliver us to the promised land.

Later the chorus is repeated with minor changes, it reads:

Deliver us / Hear our prayer, deliver us from despair / These years of
slavery grow too cruel to stand / Deliver us / There’s a land you
promised us / Deliver us out of bondage and deliver us to the
Promised Land.

The second chorus is sung during the second act but it can be addressed with the first rendition. The phrase, “Deliver us,” is clearly inspired by translations of Exodus 6:6, a verse in which God tells Moses:

‘say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you
out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you
out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched
arm’.

So, the Hebrew slaves cry out for God to relieve them of their suffering and to bestow upon them a land that was promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁴⁴ Needless to say, the first act is abundant in scriptural references. As the opening of the film, it serves as both musical and visual exposition, describing the plight of the Hebrews and introducing the power dynamics between the Egyptians and the slaves.

This act shows that while the narrative of the film is not completely accurate to the scriptures, it remains faithful and respectful as the language and biblical terminology has been thought out and displayed in a respectful manner. This was achieved through the producers understanding of the religious tradition, and their instinct to involve religious authorities such as

⁴³ Nathan J. Stone, *Names of God* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), p. 32.

⁴⁴ Genesis 15:19-21, 26:3, 28:13.

consultants and reviewers in the making of the film.⁴⁵ This allows this film to be enjoyed by religious audiences while not being wholly limited by the original text.

The act also establishes the Hebrews' relationship with God, one that is stable and unchanging throughout the film. The Hebrews have complete faith in God, they are neither angry nor resentful towards Him for their current situation. God's presence in the beginning of the act gives the audience a sense of knowing that He has heard their cries, and while their present circumstances are miserable and uncertain, they are hopeful that He will deliver them to a better future. This is in reality, the universal value and truth that the audience, no matter the background or religious affiliation can connect with: Hope.

Act II

The second act of the opening sequence begins when the audience's perspective is guided away from the slaves at work towards the Hebrew living quarters. The music slows and becomes quiet while Moses' mother, Yocheved, appears, hiding her baby son from the Egyptian guards who have been commanded to slaughter male Hebrew infants.⁴⁶ Voiced by the late Israeli singer and voice actor Ofra Haza (1957-2000), Yocheved first sings to Moses in Hebrew. Her words translate as: "My good and tender son / Don't be frightened and don't be scared", a clear nod to the deep connection the Israeli and Jewish people have to this narrative. Schwartz adds that the choice to start this act in Hebrew was to bring a sense of authenticity to the moment and to emphasise the mother's emotional state.⁴⁷ While not all viewers will understand the words, Haza's voice is enchanting, soft, and loving all while conveying a sense of heartbreak and urgency. Haza continues in English: "My son, I have nothing left to give, but this chance that you may life / I pray we meet again, if He will deliver us." The music once again explodes as Haza ululates the song's and a booming reprise of the chorus follows. On-screen, Yocheved is seen weaving through the streets with her children and avoiding the guards. As the chorus dies down, they arrive at the banks of the Nile river.

⁴⁵ Schwartz, 'Stephen Schwartz Comments on the Movie The Prince of Egypt'.

⁴⁶ Exodus 1:22.

⁴⁷ Schwartz, 'Stephen Schwartz Comments on the Movie The Prince of Egypt'.

Setting her baby in his basket of reeds into the river, Yocheved sings him a lullaby, the melody replicating the theme heard at the beginning of the first act, symbolising the close bond between mother and child, and between Moses and the Hebrews: a bond that is unbreakable and destined to re-emerge despite separation. The reprise of this melody also indicates the presence of God: as Yocheved places her child in the river, she places her child in the hands of God. Yocheved sings the lullaby in two sections, the first to put her son to sleep,⁴⁸ the second to pray for his safety.⁴⁹ Haza provided the vocals for eighteen of the languages this film was translated into and her voice conveys the love and pain felt by Yocheved regardless of language, as was Schwartz's intention.⁵⁰ But Schwartz also comments on how animation is often as important as the music and lyrics in conveying emotion.⁵¹ The previously grim yellow and brown hues are now brighter blues, reds, and greens from the river, the family's clothes and the surrounding vegetation.

The animation of this scene works beautifully with the music to illustrate the untold pain of Moses' mother in an almost melodramatic, Kierkegaardian way.⁵² Søren Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, was interested in the story of Abraham and was particularly fascinated by the great test given to him by God known as the *akedah* (the binding) in Genesis 22. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, and being the epitome of faith and devotion in the Old Testament, Abraham seems unfazed by the command and methodically takes actions to fulfil the sacrifice of his son before being stopped by God.⁵³ Kierkegaard sought to uncover the mental processes and psychological suffering that such a command would naturally have on Abraham. Through what is essentially a humanist lens, Kierkegaard placed

⁴⁸ "Hush now, my baby / Be still, love, don't cry / Sleep as you're rocked by the stream / Sleep and remember my last lullaby / So I'll be with you when you dream."

⁴⁹ "River, o river / Flow gently for me / Such precious cargo you bear / Do you know somewhere he can be free? / River, deliver him there."

⁵⁰ VHS BTS, 'The Prince of Egypt: From Dream to Screen', (1998), at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsmcgv_iv24. Accessed March 2020.

⁵¹ Schwartz, 'Stephen Schwartz on Musicals'.

⁵² Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. H. V. Hong, trans. Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 212-213.

⁵³ Genesis 22:2-8.

great emphasis on the pain, anguish, and conflict surely experienced by Abraham that goes undescribed in the biblical narrative.⁵⁴

In their depiction of Yocheved, DreamWorks has created a similar interpretation of another quietly traumatic event in the scriptures. Here, a parent must again willingly sacrifice their child while simultaneously having absolute faith in God. However, much like the scriptural portrayal of Abraham, Moses' mother is narrated with indifference, her actions methodological, and lacking emotion. The verse concerning Yocheved's actions reads: "But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile."⁵⁵ Despite the discrepancy between the two,—Abraham was sacrificing his son to obey God and Yocheved was attempting to save her son by letting him go—both acts of faith are heart-breaking in that a parent must relinquish their child into God's hands. Just as Kierkegaard attempts to understand the internal torment that Abraham must have experienced, animators of Yocheved's lullaby scene brought this detached verse to life through her facial and physical expressions as well as Haza's voice.

The thoughtful details of the animation add another layer to the scene. For instance, as Yocheved sings the lullaby, she places her child into the basket. The baby loosens his grip on his mother's finger as he falls asleep to her song. She kisses him one last time before sealing him inside and carrying him out to the water. As she releases the basket into the river, she releases her son towards his fate and her hands reach out towards him. The focus is then drawn to her face which is partly covered by her hair and veil. Tears stream down her face as she prays for her son's well-being. Her anguish is unmistakable, the pain of a mother faced with an impossible decision. As British-Somali poet, Warsan Shire, comments on asylum seekers in her undated poem 'Home': "No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land."⁵⁶ Through evocative music and beautiful animation, an impassive scene in Exodus is expanded upon and

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard's famous story of his broken engagement to Regine is thought to have been crucial to the significant themes in *Fear and Trembling* concerning the desire to protect someone from the worst by distancing them from oneself. Similarly, Yocheved must let her son go in order to protect him.

⁵⁵ Exodus 2:3.

⁵⁶ Warsan Shire, 'Home', *Long Journeys. African Migrants on the Road*, eds A. Triulzi and R. McKenzie (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. xi.

made accessible and relatable, providing a glimpse into the internal distress experienced by this character in a way that the scripture does not offer. The depiction of Yocheved in this act also reflects the experiences of the Hebrews throughout the film, the leap of faith that they must take and the deep psychological pain that many of them suffer from while waiting for their deliverance. The concept of 'hope' re-emerges here as a universal human value, giving the film depth worthy of a cinematic experience.

Act III

After Yocheved sends Moses down the river to his fate, the third and final act of the opening sequence begins. A young Miriam, Moses' sister, follows the basket down the river, watching as it survives hazards that are non-existent in the Biblical narrative. This action-packed scene brings back the commodification and sense that this film is a product meant to entertain. Baby Moses' journey of contrived perils is a demonstration of the artists' abilities and creativity, and gives audiences a taste of the spectacular works of God that are to come later in the film. The computer-generated animation of water is essential to the film, particularly its most defining and dramatic moment: the parting of the Red Sea. This third act serves as an opportunity to test the waters and foreshadow this moment. It also allows audiences to get accustomed to the reality of the world of this film, in which God's presence can be visualised through water and the extraordinary ways in which it moves. The act creates the feelings of credibility in a scene that would otherwise be 'unrealistic'. As French philosopher Christian Metz says:

The feeling of credibility, which is so direct, operates on us in films of the unusual and of the marvellous, as well as in those that are 'realistic'. Fantastic art is fantastic only as it convinces (otherwise it is merely ridiculous), and the power of unreality in film derives from the fact that the unreal seems to have been realized, unfolding before our eyes as if it were the flow of common occurrence—not the plausible illustration of some extraordinary process only conceived in the mind.⁵⁷

Metz also refers to some film—or 'cinema' as we have defined it—as an art form, and the artists who worked on *The Prince of Egypt* strongly

⁵⁷ Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 5.

believed that the film would pave the way for animation to be experienced as cinema, rather than cartoon; as fine art rather than a comic.⁵⁸

The documentary *The Prince of Egypt: From Dream to Screen* about the makings of the film demonstrated the presence of positive tension and freedom for creativity during the production of *The Prince of Egypt* that allowed artists to experiment with new technology.⁵⁹ It was technically ground-breaking in many ways, and the artists mention how the directors' real influence on how the film turned out aesthetically was relatively small because they were given so much creative freedom. This artistry is demonstrated throughout the sequence in moments that the action is allowed to diverge from the textual source. Yocheved's facial expressions and the movement of the river are two great examples of this. The choice to create, script and compose an entire scene differently from the source material makes the film more action-packed and entertaining, but the on-screen world built by the artists is also visually and emotionally riveting enough to draw the audience into it.

While the opening sequence is largely faithful to scripture, its divergences can be justified as serving narratological and foreshadowing purposes. The fateful journey of the basket down the river gives audiences a glimpse of the wonders and powers of God that they will later witness in the film, and places the audiences' trust in God to safely guide Moses, as he does throughout the film. When Moses is found and taken in by the Pharaoh's wife, Miriam sings a prayer to the same melody as her mother's lullaby, which is the same melody of the trumpet heard at the beginning of the entire sequence. Miriam's prayer also foreshadows Moses' future. She says "Grow, baby brother. Come back someday. Come and deliver us too." This melody solidifies the connection between Moses and his family and by extension the Hebrew people. Later, when Moses *is* grown and inadvertently stumbles back into the living quarters of the Israelites, Miriam sings him their mother's lullaby prompting him to remember her and to realise his true identity.

The third act also introduces Rameses as a young boy, the future Pharaoh, who is given extra-canonical character development in the film. As a child, his innocence and desire to be recognised and loved by his parents primes the audience to empathise with the villain later on. As the

⁵⁸ VHS BTS, '*The Prince of Egypt: From Dream to Screen*'.

⁵⁹ VHS BTS, '*The Prince of Egypt: From Dream to Screen*'.

baby Moses is taken into Pharaoh's palace, the perspective shifts to show the slaves working diligently on the inner construction of yet more monumental architecture, and the song explodes back into their choirs, reminding the audience of the epic story of deliverance that is about to unfold before them. The slaves ask God to send a "shepherd to shepherd [them]," and unbeknownst to them, God has already chosen their shepherd and their fate has been sealed. The emotional sequence concludes with Yocheved's voice alone praying for deliverance one last time and ends abruptly, reminiscent of Zimmer's Oscar winning opening track for Disney's *The Lion King*.⁶⁰

Conclusion

There is, undeniably, an entrepreneurial purpose to the film *The Prince of Egypt* that leads to the commodification of its religious themes. There is, however, more to the makings of this film. What fuelled the production above all else was Katzenberg's desire to create something innovative that would rival a Disney feature film. To compete with Walt Disney Studios would be no small feat, a visually impressive film would barely be enough, the film had to be transformative, life changing and based on a story that holds meaning to millions globally. What makes *The Prince of Egypt* different, is Katzenberg's personal motivation, which in turn allowed the artists more creative freedom to produce an emotionally charged, relatable cinematic experience of a religious narrative.

Scorsese is well aware of the type of creative environment that creates such true 'cinema':

When the Hollywood studio system was still alive and well, the tension between the artists and the people who ran the business was constant and intense, but it was a *productive* tension that gave us some of the greatest films ever made.⁶¹

Scorsese, along with Kozlovic, Plate, Harvey, Bywater and Sobchack, all approach the distinction of film and cinema in a similar way despite their differences. They are all primarily interested in the immersive, transformative experience that cinema provides and less interested in films that they perceive as mere entertainment, with a shallower impact on the human experience. There are multiple elements that contributed to the creation of *The Prince of Egypt* to be a film that is meaningful and

⁶⁰ *The Lion King*, dir. Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, Buena Vista Pictures (1994).

⁶¹ Scorsese, 'Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren't Cinema'.

transformative despite being a product of consumerism. It does not offend most audiences, even religious, since it faithfully and respectfully adapts scripture without parodying or shying away from the violent and dark themes of the book of Exodus, and any omissions, interpretations or expansions were choices made with the purpose of enhancing or emphasising the story. The film also appeals to all audiences regardless of religious background because the ultimate truth of the story is hope, not God. Finally, *The Prince of Egypt* exemplifies that films based on biblical narratives and designed for blockbuster success can nevertheless be good 'cinema' if they create transformative experiences through faithful adaptation and expand upon religious stories through beautiful and innovative artistry, cinematography and music.