
Rosetta

Baddeley, A.; *Exodus: Gods and Kings*

Rosetta **17**: 179 – 183

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue17/baddeley.pdf>

Review: Exodus: Gods and Kings

Alice Baddeley

Exodus: Gods and Kings (2014), directed by Ridley Scott, was released December 2014 to an atmosphere of anticipation. *Empire* magazine was enthusiastically following its progress in the months preceding its release and was keen to comment on the impressive statistics for this film.¹ Over 400 frogs were used in the film as well as 125 horses, cheetahs and cobras. The film is set in Egypt in c.1300 BCE, so we are informed from the subtitles at the start of the film, and follows the biblical story of Moses and the Hebrew slaves. This is a story that has been filmed many times before, most famously with *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and most recently in *The Prince of Egypt* (1998).² The promotions for the film were keen to draw in viewers of the success of Scott's earlier triumphs; *Gladiator* (2000). However, even before its release the film was heavily criticised through social media for its casting of white actors in principal roles and there were calls to boycott the film.³ *Exodus: Gods and Kings* heads a new wave of films and TV programs that feature ancient Egypt: *Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb* (2014), *The Pyramid* (2014), *Tut* (2015) and upcoming projects *Gods of Egypt* (2016) and *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016). It would seem that cinema has as much an obsession with ancient Egypt as it ever did.

As expected from Ridley Scott, the scope of this film was enormous. The hand-built interior sets and large depth of field meant that Ancient Egypt was realised on a scale akin to the 1950s epic *The Ten Commandments* (1956).⁴ Scott knows how to use the technology available, combining wide establishing shots of CGI and natural landscapes with the spectacle of thousands of extras and animals. This worked particularly well with the battle scenes at the beginning of the film, but also in the scenes where the slaves left Egypt, where the landscape and cinematography combined made the film visually stunning. The special effects were also visually stimulating and suitably epic in scale. The plagues, in particular, were well realised.

¹ For Empires coverage of *Exodus* see *Empire* September 2014: 10-13, *Empire* October 2014: 82-84, *Empire* February 2015:53.

² To review a fuller listing of biblical films and TV programs featuring Egypt consult Van den Berg 2000.

³ Rosen: 2014. Twitter users used the hashtag #BoycottExodusMovie to raise awareness and share opinions.

⁴ Construction took three months to complete see *Empire* September 2014: 10-13.

Lightning strikes, hailstorms and even CGI crocodiles effectively tormented the Egyptian people. The result was the sense of observing another world, something the director is known for in his earlier work.

Despite misgivings over the choice of actors, which I shall comment on later in this review, the two leads were well suited to their roles. Joel Edgerton plays the pharaoh, who becomes increasingly paranoid and tyrannical in his fight to hold onto his way of life. He begins executing officials when they fail to alleviate the plagues from Egypt. He is fearful in a quiet way, at times being softly spoken before suddenly verbally exploding. The scenes immediately before and after the death of his young son are particularly poignant, as pain is taken to establish his position as a nervous first parent. Even with the advantage of foresight, the image of Ramesses holding out his dead son to his wife is haunting.

As a whole, the film seemed confused in its approach. It was an ambitious project that chose to tell an epic story on a grand scale; however its ambitions frequently misfire. For example Scott seemed to want to make God's involvement in the liberation of the Hebrew slaves ambiguous and in doing so, he encouraged a different perspective on his film. So the meeting between Moses and God is facilitated by a rock slide on a mountain. Only after Moses has been injured (hit on the head by rocks) does he begin to see and speak to God. The film goes on to make his later meetings with God appear very one-sided to outside audiences, expressed through the eyes of Joshua, who, at one point, observes Moses apparently alone and yelling at a rock. To modern audiences, an increasingly secular one, this is an interesting take on the traditional view of prophets. It raises more questions than it answers. Was Moses a prophet inspired by the word of God to free the Hebrew slaves? Or did his injuries, sustained during the rock slide, motivate his actions from that point onwards? Moses was portrayed almost as an atheist before this event, dismissing the beliefs of his wife and his adopted Egyptian family. So the complete change in his beliefs is jarring both to the fictional characters on screen and to the cinematic audience. Christian Bale is quite clear in his opinion of Moses at a press conference: 'I think the man was likely schizophrenic and was one of the most barbaric individuals that I ever read about in my life'.⁵ This damning statement is one the film would seem to support and is surely

⁵ Shoard 2014.

something that would cross the minds of viewers who are not reading the film in a religious light.

This angle of the story is an interesting one that is perhaps borne out of a need to rationalise and reinvent the telling of the story. Ridley Scott competes with decades' worth of cinematic interpretations of the Exodus story that has changed little in the course of its reception, so it is refreshing to see a director try to inject new angles into this story. However, the difficulty with following this thread too far is that it essentially unravels the rest of the film's events. The acts of divine intervention, such as the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea, can *only* be explained in the scope of the film as divine and to have this made ambiguous, in any way, disrupts the story and, dare I say, it makes the events unbelievable. The film becomes awkward in its handling of this material the more the film progresses.

In making the divine aspect of this film ambiguous, Scott misses one of the biggest production value draws from the Exodus story: the parting of the Red Sea. It is one of the most anticipated moments in the entire story and represents a pivotal point for audiences and characters alike. For Scott to attempt to explain away the divine element in the parting of the Red Sea he makes the plot unnecessarily convoluted and confusing for audiences to follow. The Red Sea is parted by a meteor strike but this is not at once made apparent. The shot that shows the meteor travelling across the night sky is immediately followed by a dramatic sequence of the Egyptian army travelling across a narrow mountain pass. Then the narrative returns to Moses and his followers discovering that the sea has all but trickled away in the night. The significance of the original meteor is not immediately made evident to the audiences watching and for a few, like myself, it is all but forgotten. As an audience member you feel that you have missed something. Where was the scene of Moses striking the sea with his staff? For me the film missed its biggest payoff. Think about watching *Gladiator* (2000) without any arena scenes.

While the above mentioned disappointment can be dismissed as personal opinion, the following faults are historically inaccurate ones. As an Ancient History student and one who is particularly interested in ancient Egypt (and who is currently writing a dissertation on ancient Egypt in film), it is sometimes hard to simply enjoy a film about the ancient world.

Exodus: Gods and Kings (2014) cannot be said to have suffered from poor research or consultancy, since it was Dr. Alan Lloyd, who was asked to consult on the project.⁶ Yet the film begins with a female priest performing haruspices to determine whether the Egyptians should go into battle. The Egyptians did participate in oracular consultancy and there is a wealth of evidence for this taking place from Deir el-Medina but haruspices were, by and large, a Roman practice.⁷ Furthermore the character of the female priest appears to be wearing a headdress that is very similar in style to that of Nefertiti (famous from her bust in the Neues Museum in Berlin).⁸ Headdresses are routinely abused in films about ancient Egypt with the nemes headdress being the one that most commonly appears.⁹ Certainly priests would not have been permitted to wear them because they were a symbol of royalty. But as an easy visual cue for audiences to identify Egyptian elites this headdress is routinely used this way in films.

As the film was quick to tell us at the beginning the dramatic date is c.1300 B.C, which would place the events in the New Kingdom. However you would be forgiven for doubting the reliability of this claim as the camera shows the ongoing construction of pyramids in establishing shots of Memphis. While there were still superstructures being constructed over tombs, the scale of the pyramids was left behind in the Old Kingdom. There are other chronological confusions with the battle of Kadesh seeming to occur in the reign of Seti and not in year 5 of his son Ramesses II. Abu Simbel, a well-known site of Ramesses II, is likewise usurped by his father and bizarrely appears to be his tomb. However, it must be said that this particular scene was again refreshing in its depiction of the Opening of the Mouth ritual, which is rarely, if ever, rendered on film.

Finally, although it cannot be decisively determined how ancient Egyptians may have looked and attempts often get involved in sensitive issues of identity and race I think it can be said that ancient Egyptians would not have looked quite as caucasian as they did in this film. As a filmmaker Ridley Scott has a responsibility to create visibility and representation in his films and his disregard to even try is quite disturbing. When asked about his casting decisions Scott responded with: 'I can't mount a film of this budget,

⁶ Utichi 2014.

⁷ For oracles at Deir el-Medina see Baines 1987.

⁸ Society for the promotion of the Egyptian Museum Berlin 2015.

⁹ Nemes headdresses can be seen in *The Egyptian* (1954), *Land of The Pharaohs* (1955), *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *The Mummy Returns* (2001).

where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such. I'm just not going to get it financed. So the question doesn't even come up.'¹⁰ This is, unfortunately, a routine situation with films about ancient Egypt with many British actors playing main characters in films from the 1950s and after.

In conclusion this film was a visually stunning and beautifully shot product, but seemed to lose some of its emotional impact in the process. The intricate details of the set and the sheer spectacle of *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) cannot be denied, but the project suffered from its own ambitions. It posed some interesting questions about religion and faith but did not seem to want to develop these themes any further. The disturbing trend of whitewashing continues to go on, despite increasing outcries on social media platforms.

Bibliography

Baines, J. 1987. 'Practical Religion and Piety', *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 73, 79-98.

Child, B. 2014. 'Christian Bale defends Ridley Scott over Exodus 'whitewashing'', <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/09/christian-bale-defends-ridley-scott-exodus-whitewashing> (accessed 13th March 2015).

Shoard, C. 2014. 'Christian Bale: Moses was 'barbaric' and 'schizophrenic'', <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/oct/27/christian-bale-moses-was-barbaric-and-schizophrenic> (accessed 13th March 2015).

SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM BERLIN. 'Room 2.10: Bust of Queen Nefertiti', <http://www.egyptian-museum-berlin.com/c53.php> (accessed 19th March 2015).

Utichi, J. 2014. 'Gilt Ridden 'Exodus' Director Ridley Scott and his Egyptologist expert mined the ancient details', <http://deadline.com/2014/12/exodus-gods-and-kings-ridley-scott-egyptologist-dr-alan-lloyd-1201330818/> (accessed 13th March 2015).

¹⁰ Shoard 2014.