

Sympathy for Pharaoh

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [January 21, 2015](#) issue



Some called 2014 the year of the biblical epic. Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is the third entry in the category after *Son of God* and *Noah*, and Ang Lee reportedly has his own Exodus-based film in the works. But *Exodus* does not resemble these films as much it does Oliver Stone's 2004 film *Alexander*. That sword-and-sandal disaster signed up great actors, dragged on interminably, delivered characters who were impossible to care about, and told the story of Alexander the Great without bothering to tell us why it matters. In *Exodus*, too, great actors are wasted, the story retells and rewrites scripture without benefit, and the whole endeavor feels joyless.

As a director Scott has produced some of the best science fiction ever made (*Blade Runner*, *Alien*), and his ability to work on a grand scale is visible here. Scott's ancient Egypt is magnificent. Sculptures, pyramids, and memorials are thrown up one after another by legions of Hebrew slaves.

The squalor of the Hebrews' living conditions and their harsh treatment are believable. Chariots look fast and furious as dirt clods fly at the viewers' 3-D glasses during fight scenes. The Red Sea collapsing on the Egyptian army looks like the wrath of God. The angel of death approaches in the night, soft as a whisper, and life

is taken from the firstborn without a sound—until the wails. The camera work, computer-generated effects, and set design are not the problem; the story is.

Scott misses the deeper context that makes these biblical stories work. There is no dramatic “Let my people go!” spoken by Moses (Christian Bale) to Ramses (Joel Edgerton). Instead Moses sneaks into the palace at night, puts a sword to the king’s throat, and says his people deserve the same pay and rights as any Egyptian. Then the plagues start: crocodiles attack a small boat on the Nile (the scene reminded me of *Jaws*). The river is stained red with blood, which fouls the water and kills the fish. Then come flies, followed by frogs to feed on the flies. It’s a quasi-naturalistic rendition of the plagues that comes off as low-grade rationalist biblical criticism. But this approach is abandoned when it comes to magical elements in the movie, like the plague of hail or the passage through the Red Sea, and you have to wonder why it’s included at all.

The most sympathetic character in the film is Pharaoh. He has depth, pathos, and the deepest range of emotion. This is an interesting shift from the Bible’s perspective—in Exodus the book, Pharaoh isn’t even named. We see tenderness in Ramses’s boyhood friendship with Moses, nervousness as he takes his throne, and blood-red anger when he seeks vengeance.

From Moses we see hardly more emotion than Bale gave us from under his bat suit in Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Knight* trilogy. When he’s thrown out of Egypt for being a Hebrew he seems indifferent. He’s supposed to fall in love with Zipporah (María Valverde), but it’s hard to tell why, or why she loves him back. This is a fine actor wasted, and he’s not the only one. As Nun, Joshua’s father, the majestic Ben Kingsley is given nothing to do. Sigourney Weaver, who would look queenly in blue jeans, appears in spot duty as Ramses’s mother. And as Joshua, Aaron Paul (who was often the emotional epicenter of *Breaking Bad*) does no more than stare off into the distance, as though still sampling crystal meth.

Then there’s God (Isaac Andrews). He’s a child named Malak, who speaks to Moses at random times and places. He comes off as snotty and occasionally creepy yet mostly uninteresting. Is he Moses’ childhood self? Is he the God of Abraham and Sarah? We’re not told. His pronouncements are oddly indirect (“What should I do?” Moses asks. “I think you know,” Malak replies).

In the book of Exodus, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob hears his people's groaning and remembers his covenant. He calls a people out into the wilderness to worship him on a specific mountain. It's a pretty good story, with themes of liberation, righteousness, faithfulness, and promise. It can be tweaked, sure. But the burden of proof is on the fruit yielded by changing the story. The fruit here is bland indeed.

Maybe Ang Lee can do better.