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Introduction

> As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.' But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD.'
>
> 1 Samuel 1:12–15 NRSV

In the first chapter of the first book of Samuel, the aging priest Eli observes the woman Hannah at prayer from his seat by the doorpost of the old temple at Shiloh. Seeing that Hannah speaks but makes no sound, Eli deduces that something is wrong – there is evidently something amiss, something irregular and problematic in speaking which is silent. That the problem which prompts Hannah's silent speech is not her drunkenness as he assumes, but rather a deep distress is discovered by the priest only after he has drawn his erroneous conclusion. In doing so, Eli unwittingly highlights a further and more telling complication: the silence requires interpretation. The particular silence which this book claims to interpret relates to the representation of the Bible in the first three decades of the cinema. While we will see that the earliest biblical films were rarely truly silent, the complications of a medium in which 'only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard' should not be underestimated. Such complications may be to blame, at least in part, for the silence of previous scholarship on the history of the early biblical film – a silence which has been the primary prompt for the present book.[1]

[1] According to the basic distinction drawn first by A. Bach, 'Cracking the Production Code: Watching Biblical Scholars Read Films', *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 7 (1999), 11–34, and affirmed recently in A. Reinhartz (ed.), *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films* (London and New York: Routledge,

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It would be misleading of course to suggest that the scholarly silence on our subject has been complete.[2] However, while an early essay by Ronald Holloway explored the early silent cinema's fascination with the ancient narratives associated with Jesus, his invitation to attend to the Jesus films of the silent period has by and large not been taken up by students of religion.[3] In considering the cause of this undoubtedly benign neglect, one might point to the challenges of accessing silent films held in national and institutional archives (about which more below), but it is also clear that the allure and hegemony of Hollywood's 'Bible' and the sound era have proven difficult to resist.[4] With biblical and religious studies only attending in passing to the 'Jesus' of the silent period, the pioneering work has largely been left to scholars of the early cinema, not least those who contributed to the seminal collection in the early 1990s: *Une invention du diable? Cinéma des premiers temps et religion*.[5] In offering a series of meticulously researched perspectives on the earliest silent films of the Passion and Life of Christ, this volume should have paved the way for a systematic account of the cinematic representation of gospel traditions up to the end of the silent era. Two decades on, however, a full account of the silent 'Jesus' tradition has yet to be undertaken and the same may be said of the wider story of the silent biblical film, even if, as we will see, initial soundings have been taken.

2013), our interest is in the 'Bible on film' (i.e. films self-conciously depicting biblical narratives) rather than the 'Bible in film' (i.e. films disclosing biblical influence in the shape of references, motifs and themes).

[2] C. B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) is discussed by Richard Stern, Clayton Jefford and Guerric Debona, *Savior on the Silver Screen* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 29–60, and Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: a Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2004), pp. 47–60, the latter of whom also offers a brief analysis of the Judaean story in Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), pp. 35–46, and Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), pp. 27–34. Overviews which stop short of extensive analysis of the earliest films are offered by Roy Kinnard and Tim Davis, *Divine Images: A History of Jesus on the Screen* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992), Reinhold Zwick, *Evangelienrezeption im Jesusfilm: Ein Beitrag zur intermedialen Wirkungsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments*, Studien zur Theologie und Praxis der Seelsorge 25 (Würzburg: Seelsorge/Echter, 1997), and Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 16–20.

[3] Ronald Holloway, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), pp. 45–59, offers a readable overview, though detailed analysis of the films themselves is beyond its purview.

[4] While the focus of Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus of Hollywood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) is largely on later films, she includes *Der Galiläer* (1921), *INRI* (1923) and *Intolerance* (1916) in her discussion at various points. See also Caroline van der Stichele, 'Silent Saviours: Representations of Jesus' Passion in Early Cinema', in Maria Wyke and Pantelis Michelakis, *The Ancient World in the Silent Cinema* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 169–88.

[5] Roland Cosandey, André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning (eds.), *Une invention du diable? Cinéma des premiers temps et religion/An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema* (Lausanne/Quebec: Payot; Lausanne: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1992). For still earlier discussion see the essays in Michel Estève (ed.), *Études cinématographiques* 2 (1961), nos. 10–11.

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Facilitated by the important if inevitably limited cataloguing of Campbell and Pitts,[6] discussion of the genre of the biblical film features in various studies which emerged in the 1980s and '90s. While illustrated surveys of the ancient world in the cinema understandably reference and catalogue the biblical film, their comprehensiveness necessarily precludes any sustained analysis of particular biblical films – including those of the silent era.[7] Specific reflection on the genre of the biblical film was stimulated in the early nineties, first by Gerald Forshey, who offers a wide-ranging interrogation of the cultural, social and historical resonances of American biblical and religious spectaculars – though, again, only of the sound era.[8] Bruce Babington and Peter Evans' clearer focus on the 'biblical epic' and theorising of spectacle represents a significant advance.[9] Yet, again, their treatment of the silent era is extremely selective and does not, in any case, extend earlier than Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1914), a limitation which in turn prevents a contextualisation of the emergence and development of the biblical epic whose primarily later history they attempt to chronicle.

Happily, various biblical films from the silent period have attracted the attention of those whose interests are only partially or tangentially related to the 'biblical' film per se. Richard Abel's exploration of modes of representation in the French cinema up to 1914 helpfully situates various 'biblical' films within the wider context of the development of a national cinema.[10] Given the importance of French companies such as Gaumont and Pathé-Frères in the early history of the biblical film, Abel's contribution should not be underestimated, yet a purely national focus prevents his history from describing the evolution of a genre shaped also by the early cinema of America. Moreover, the magisterial scope of Abel's work and the sheer

[6] Richard H. Cambell and M. R. Pitts, *The Bible on Film: A Checklist (1897–1980)* (Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1981).

[7] Both Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge, Keegan and Paul, 1984), and Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (Yale University Press, 2001) mention in passing a variety of silent films in their respective surveys of films based on the Old and New Testaments. Only DeMille's *Ten Commandments* (1923), p. 30, and Curtiz' *Noah's Ark* (1928–9), pp. 27–8, are discussed in any depth by Elley, while Solomon restricts fuller treatment to the latter film along with DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) and the various silent versions of *Ben Hur*. For the most comprehensive cataloguing of the ancient world in the silent cinema see Hervé Dumont, *L'Antiquité au cinéma: Vérités, légendes et manipulations* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2009), and for the most recent analysis see Maria Wyke and Pantelis Michelakis (eds.), *The Ancient World in the Silent Cinema* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[8] Gerald Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport: Praeger, 1992).

[9] Bruce Babington and Peter Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in the Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester University Press, 1993).

[10] Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema, 1896–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

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volume of genres he explores do not permit him to linger on even the French 'biblical film' at any length or to trace the development of it in its own right.

Mention must be made here of the excellent work of Uricchio and Pearson on the 'Quality' films produced by Vitagraph, which includes an illuminating study of Blackton's *Life of Moses* (1909–10).[11] Their consideration of the conditions of production and reception of *The Life of Moses* alongside other 'Quality' films based on historical and literary subjects allows Uricchio and Pearson to draw important conclusions – not least about the way in which Vitagraph deployed such films in an attempt to legitimate their films and the American cinema in general as a respectable medium. As valuable as Uricchio and Pearson's study is, their more general focus on Vitagraph does not permit a detailed interpretation of the *The Life of Moses* itself nor an appreciation of how it relates to even the other biblical films produced by Vitagraph, let alone those of other firms during the same period.

Given Cecil B. DeMille's legacy in the genre of the biblical epic, it is unsurprising that his biblical offerings in the silent era have also attracted analysis from various quarters, whether as part of a study of DeMille's oeuvre[12] or in the case of *The Ten Commandments* (1923) as part of the story of Moses' reception in the literature and art of Western culture.[13] Such treatments well illustrate (and indeed serve to interrogate) the blurred boundaries and important contiguities of cultural reception through time and across various media. However, insofar as such studies seek to interpret particular expressions of the 'Silent Bible', an under-developed understanding of cinematic precursors and the biblical genre during the silent era (especially in its earliest phases) inevitably leaves such analyses wanting. It is into this scholarly silence, no less deafening for being partial, that this book attempts to speak, in chronicling the inception and evolution of the biblical film before the final advent of sound in the cinema.

An explanation of how this history will be told begins with reflection on Babington and Evans' theorising of Hollywood's 'biblical epic' of the '50s as indissolubly and fatally associated with notions of 'spectacle'.[14] On the basis

[11] William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films* (Princeton University Press, 1993).

[12] See, for instance, Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[13] Brian Britt, *Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text* (London: T&T Clark International/Continuum, 2004) discusses *The Life of Moses* (1909–10) and *The Ten Commandments* (1923) in passing and *Die Sklavenkönigin/Moon over Israel* (1924) at slightly greater length.

[14] Babington and Evans, *Biblical Epics*, p. 64.

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of both the films themselves and the discourse surrounding them, Babington and Evans suggest that spectacle is disseminated in the genre of the biblical epic by various means, including the spectacle of: scale (e.g. size of cast, scenic architecture, running length), opulence (the visual splendour of costumes, fabrics etc. and gifts/offerings etc.), indulgence (as manifest in the 'feast/orgy' with its display of the physical appetites, culinary and sexual), the cult (worship both orthodox and heterodox, especially of foreign gods), destruction (especially massive scenic collapse) and the miraculous (e.g. acts of God such as the parting of the Red Sea).[15] While the spectacle of the biblical epic reaches its zenith in the middle of the twentieth century, Babington and Evans are quick to acknowledge its origins at the dawn of the cinema:

> Like other genres, the Biblical Epic has a complex prehistory, both pre-cinematic and cinematic. In treating nothing earlier than D. W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) we bypass the importance of religious subjects in the primitive cinema. But our emphasis is on the mature narratives of the Hollywood cinema, rather than progress toward them.[16]

While Babington and Evans' passing-over of the pre-history of the 'biblical epic' itself offers an obvious inducement to consider the significance of spectacle in the biblical films of the silent period, it is by no means the only incentive. Additional encouragement is furnished by a growing recognition of the importance of 'spectacle' in scholarship on the early cinema more generally. Since it was proposed more than two decades ago, Gunning and Gaudreault's now classic conceptualisation of the early cinema as a 'cinema of attractions' – in which the tendency to show or display the spectacular is pervasive – remains integral to the analysis of the earliest cinema.[17] Unsurprisingly, subsequent analysis has complicated the assumption of a simple and linear evolution from the 'showing' of spectacle in the earliest cinema to the 'telling' of story in an increasingly narrative cinema of the later silent period. Thus, on one hand, Charles Musser has identified narratival aspects of the cinema of attractions created by the intertextuality of early film

[15] This inventory depends on, but also revises, that offered in *ibid.*, pp. 64–5. [16] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[17] Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 56–62, and André Gaudreault and Tom Gunning, 'Le Cinéma des premiers temps: Un défi a l'histoire du cinéma', in Jacques Aumont, André Gaudreault and Michel Marie (eds.), *Histoire de cinéma. Nouvelles approches* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1989), pp. 49–63. For reprints (and translations) of these and other seminal articles and a re-evaluation of the concepts associated with the 'cinema of attraction(s)' see Wanda Strauven, *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (University of Amsterdam, 2007).

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programmes.[18] On the other, Richard Abel's analysis of French cinema (1896–1914) demonstrates the recurrence of various aspects of the 'cinema of attractions' in particular film genres being produced in France long after 1904. Indeed, Gunning's own suggestion that the 'cinema of attractions' (with its attendant 'spectacle') continues to resurface in particular genres, despite the long-established hegemony of narrative cinema, continues to be explored.[19]

If, as Abel has suggested, biblical films of the earliest cinema were strongly associated with a cinema of 'spectacle'[20] and the biblical epic of the 1950s displays an equally noteworthy dependence on various species of 'spectacle' some half a century later, various questions may be seen to arise, including: what is the relationship between the biblical film and notions of spectacle during the silent cinema and how did this relationship change and evolve throughout the period? How, if at all, do particular species of spectacle wax and wane within particular phases of the Bible's realisation in the silent era of the cinema? Without assuming a linear and uncomplicated progression from spectacle to story in the early cinema, what is the relationship between the 'showing' of biblical spectacle and the 'telling' of biblical story in the silent cinema? In hermeneutical terms, to the extent that films of the silent cinema tell the biblical story rather than assume it, in what ways (mediated and unmediated) do they interpret the biblical text? Indeed, given the long history of both the Bible's 'showing' and 'telling' over two millennia, to what extent do pre-cinematic visual and theatrical interpretations (especially those of the nineteenth century) shape the earliest biblical cinematic 'spectacles'? More particularly, how do these precursors anticipate and shape the admixture of the visual and the verbal (e.g. intertitles, accompanying oral lecture) in the Bible of the silent cinema? Moreover, how are earlier biblical films reflected, refracted and responded to by later biblical films given the competitive, transnational nature of the silent cinema from its very infancy? Finally, recognising that biblical films were produced alongside a wide variety of genres promoted as such within the industry, to what extent is the interplay of story and spectacle within the

[18] See, for instance, Charles Musser, 'Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity', *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1994), 203–32, and 'A Cinema of Contemplation, A Cinema of Discernment: Spectatorship, Intertextuality and Attractions in the 1890s', in Strauven, *Reloaded*, pp. 159–80. On the dialectical interplay of attractions and narrativity, see also Tom Gunning, 'Attractions and Narrative Integration', Society for Cinema Studies Conference, Los Angeles, 23 May 1991.

[19] Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions', 57. See, for instance, the essays in parts 4 and 5 of Strauven, *Reloaded*, many of which develop Gunning's original connection of the cinema of attractions with the avant-garde.

[20] Abel, *Ciné Goes to Town*, pp. 82, 156.

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biblical film shaped by generic influences which are in turn reflective of trends in the wider cinema?

In attempting to offer answers to such questions, this study must necessarily and primarily have recourse to the filmic texts themselves. Given the dearth of biblical films in some subsequent periods of film history, the sheer volume of production, particularly during the first fifteen years of the cinema, may be pleasantly surprising to some. At last count well over 120 films depicting biblical narratives were produced in Europe and America, between 1897 and 1927/8.[21] While this conservative estimate reflects the author's own communication with various film archives and the combing of catalogues, the FIAF 'Treasures' database and other relevant sources, the lamentable lack of precision reflects the absence until now of any systematic cataloguing of 'biblical films' in the silent era and the consequent likelihood that more films shall yet come to light. Even a conservative estimate, however, is sufficient to demonstrate the difficulty of undertaking an exhaustive survey of the field. While the reader is directed to Hervé Dumont's work[22] or an eventual web-based resource for the fullest current list of films relating to the Bible, the intention in the present work has been to include a sufficient number and range of biblical films to allow a fully fledged account of the evolution of the genre in the silent era to be offered.

Because the development of the biblical film was, from its inception, no less international than the evolution of the cinema itself, this book necessarily draws upon films produced by a wide range of national cinemas. While we endeavour to consider the contributions of the national cinemas of Italy, Germany and Austria-Hungary at their points of greatest influence on the development of the biblical film, the primacy of films produced in France and America in what follows reflects the importance of their respective national cinemas in the evolution of the cinema generally and the biblical film in particular. Likewise certain studios, such as Pathé-Frères, feature more prominently than some others in our study, as do certain directors. Indeed, with some exceptions, this study focuses on directors whose interest and situation allowed them to make more than one biblical film. This is so, for the simple reason that in most cases, it was these directors' films which most fully exemplify and illustrate the evolution of the genre which they most helped to shape.

Of these directors' films only Griffith's and DeMille's are widely accessible thanks to commercial distribution. As a result, the viewing of films for

[21] Such conservative estimates are supported by the initial cataloguing found in Campbell and Pitts, *The Bible on Film* and subsequent surveys by the author.
[22] Dumont, *L'Antiquité*.

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this study was facilitated by means of prints in major archives including: Museum of Modern Art (New York), Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.), British Film Institute (London), Archives Françaises du Film, Cinémathèque Française and the Gaumont Pathé Archives (all in Paris). Because some archival copies reflect early exhibitors' well-documented practice of editing and otherwise altering prints which came into their possession, multiple copies of the same film have been viewed whenever this has been possible. Sadly, as is common in films of this period, the beginnings and endings of some of the prints which have been preserved do show evidence of alteration or indeed excision – a fact which will be noted in the discussion where relevant.

The fact that many of the films which feature in this book are not often or easily viewed and have never been the subject of critical scrutiny will hopefully justify the decision to provide fuller descriptions of some films than might otherwise be expected. For the same reason, we have endeavoured to furnish our description and analysis with appropriate illustrations, most of which have been drawn from the films themselves, rather than harvested from the collections of production stills which are more widely available for the later films.

In addition to the films, which form the primary object of our scrutiny, this study draws upon copyright deposit descriptions, studio production catalogues as well as advertisements, reviews and other references to biblical films and the practice of their exhibition found in the trade and popular press on both sides of the Atlantic. Such documentation as is provided here does not pretend to offer a full account of the conditions of production and reception of the biblical film, which in any case remains well beyond the purview of the present study. What such documentation does do, however, is shed some light on the interplay of story and spectacle in the biblical film, as it was perceived and projected both within and beyond the film industry. Indeed, for those biblical films thought to be lost and unlikely ever to be found, it is only thanks to such documentation that our study can account for them at all.

Given this study's primary focus on the films and indeed on those films produced by mainstream commercial producers, it may be read profitably alongside Terrence Lindvall's excellent work on the Church's relationship to and engagement with the cinema in the silent era (see *The Silents of God* (2001) and *Sanctuary Cinema* (2007)).

Much like the biblical narrative itself, this history of the biblical film is populated by a great cast of characters drawn from across the Christian canon which stretches from the first Adam to the Last. That the figure of Christ enjoys a 'starring' role at various points in our study is hardly surprising, even if what is offered here still falls short of a comprehensive

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account of Christ on silent film. That Moses and the narrative tradition he bestrides should play an equal, if not more prominent, part in our study is perhaps less expected and thus more deserving of explanation. Less trammelled than the Christ film by the constraints of piety and blessed with an abundance of narrative material suited to cinematic adaptation, the Moses/Exodus tradition proved sufficiently popular to attract filmmakers of very different stripes throughout the silent era, uniquely suiting it to furnish evidence for the evolution of the biblical film throughout this period.

In keeping with its subject, this history of the evolution of the biblical film is offered in general chronological order from 1897 through to the advent of sound in the biblical film in 1928. Because the cinema is no more disposed than most other historical subjects to respect the hard and fast periods construed by historians, our history of the biblical film is offered in a series of chapters whose partially overlapping temporal horizons reflect the production history itself. That over the course of these chapters the reader is regularly required to cross the Atlantic is likewise a reflection of the thoroughly international nature of the moving picture industry from its inception.

The decision to begin with the biblical film's birth rather than an account of its gestation or indeed ante-natal development is one taken for particular reasons. It will become clear in what follows that the representation of the Bible on silent film (both generally and in the case of individual films) has much in common with – and in many cases has been directly influenced by – the Bible's representation in a variety of other artistic traditions. As we will see, such traditions include the visual arts, especially the tradition of Western art which culminates in the neo-classical and orientalising paintings and illustrated bibles of the nineteenth century. Influential also are the 'magic lantern' shows whose lectures and projections of such images and photographic views of the 'Holy Land' on screens served as one forerunner of the biblical film. Alongside such visual representations of the Bible, the depiction of biblical episodes and characters in the performing arts was also influential. This includes, as we will see, the tradition of biblical tragedy inaugurated by Jean Racine in the French theatre, the musical traditions of oratoria exemplified in the work of composers such as Handel, as well as nineteenth-century articulations of the medieval liturgical dramatic tradition associated with a production such as the one offered at Oberammergau and even adaptations of biblical stories for the modern (i.e. early twentieth-century) theatre. Novelistic adaptations too will be seen to play their part in shaping the evolution of the biblical film. Yet to devote a chapter to such matters seemed inappropriate on several counts. First, a single chapter would prove entirely unequal to the task of chronicling this phenomenon

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in the nineteenth century alone, let alone the several others which would need to be treated. Moreover, we will see that the influence of these traditions on the cinema is extremely variable, with certain artists or traditions influencing particular types of biblical films at particular times. Finally, to preface a history of the biblical film with a chapter devoted to such influences might create the erroneous impression that non-cinematic interpretations were largely eclipsed by the advent of the cinema. As we will see, however, such interpretations continued to be produced alongside the cinema and in the case of modern theatrical adaptations and novelistic treatments, continued to shape in significant ways the cinema's own rendering of biblical traditions. For this reason, we have preferred to deal with such influences as and when their influence on the relevant biblical films is most manifest as the history of the biblical film is unfolded. This is equally true of the biblical text itself, whose general citation in the King James Version (and where relevant, the French Bible 'De Sacy') in this study reflects the continuing popularity of these older versions in the early twentieth century despite the emergence of the KJV's intended successor, the Revised Version, at the end of the nineteenth century.

By way of anticipation, our account of the biblical film is divided into nine chapters, the first of which explores the genesis of the genre in the earliest Passion films which emerged on both sides of the Atlantic prior to the turn of the century. A second charts the emergence of Old Testament characters as cinematic subjects in their own right alongside the more fully orbed Passion films produced by Pathé-Frères. The third chapter follows the cinematic and narrative evolution of the genre in America in the films of its leading early producer Vitagraph and its most prominent director, Stuart Blackton. In the book's fourth and fifth chapters, we return to France to explore the biblical tragedies of Gaumont's Louis Feuillade and the domestic melodramas mined from the biblical tradition by Pathé's Henri Andréani, before we re-cross the Atlantic in the company of the Italian historical films which propelled D. W. Griffith to realise his own particular vision of the biblical film. The seventh chapter is occupied with the development of the biblical *femme fatale* in the post-war films of Fox and the biblical films which emerged from Austria in the early 1920s. The analysis of the subsequent films of Cecil B. DeMille and Michael Curtiz in the penultimate and final chapters allows for the drawing of various conclusions regarding the history of the genre as a whole and its curious fate at the end of the silent era. In an afterword, we offer some final reflections on the argument of the book and prospects for further research.

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