

# Is Biblical Film On Way Out?

**"Are Biblical Pix Now Passe?"**  
That is the banner-headline question asked by the show business weekly, "Variety," after finding that "for the first time in almost 20 years" no Biblical film epic "is in production, scheduled or even remotely planned by any U.S. or foreign company."

John Huston's "The Bible," just beginning to go into general release, "appears to be the last of its breed for the near future at least," reported "Variety."

The reason for the cutback, the weekly suggests, is not so much due to audience preferences — "The Robe" drew one of TV's biggest audiences when it was shown last Easter — as it is to the preferences of modern film directors.

"In general, and with certain clear exceptions," the weekly noted, "the best and most profitable spectacles were made by the old-line Hollywood directors such as Cecil B. DeMille ('King of Kings'), William Wyler ('Ben-Hur'), Mervyn LeRoy ('Quo Vadis'), Henry King ('David and Bathsheba') and Henry Koster ('The Robe')."

"The newer, post-war, Freudian-influenced directors usually found that their styles wouldn't mix with the necessities of the genre."

The show business weekly explained that the simple requirements of the "spear and sandal" films — whether they were Roman, Egyptian or Biblical pictures — are too simple for directors who seek to bring deep psychological meaning to the screen.

"The late Robert Rossen ('Alexander the Great'), Robert Aldrich ('Sodom and Gomorrah') and Joseph L. Mankiewicz ('Cleopatra') have all readily admitted their failure to mix the epic and 'modern' sensibilities," the weekly said. "Many would claim, however, that they were successfully fused in John Huston's 'Bible' and Stanley Kubrick's 'Spartacus.'"

### Different Emphasis

The difference between an old-style Biblical film, with emphasis on scenery and the traditional "cast of thousands" and the newer-type religious film with emphasis on character is seen in comparing George



Shooting "The Bible."

Stevens' "Greatest Story Ever Told" with Pier Paolo Pasolini's "The Gospel According to St. Matthew." Stevens, who was not from the "spear and sandal" school of filmmaking, created a critical and box-office failure, while Pasolini's sparse-made film about a brooding Christ has been heralded as the best film life of Christ ever made.

Despite the cutback on Biblical epics, religious-themed films are retaining their popularity. Spurred by the success of "A Man for All Seasons" (the Academy Award-winning film on the life of St. Thomas More which just won the annual Grand Prize of the International Catholic Film Office) Paramount Pictures is rereleasing "Becket," the film based on the life of St. Thomas A. Becket.

Although "Ben-Hur" is expected to do well upon its rerelease, as did "The Ten Commandments" a few years ago,

the modern movie industry is reluctant to create new Bible-based epics, however.

"Despite the fact that it has been responsible for such large profits — and large deficits — probably no genre has caused Hollywood more embarrassment in its public relations," the show business weekly reported. "Opinionmakers, intellectuals and other heavy types constantly equated the proliferation of ancient spectacles with Hollywood itself."

### Few Spectacles

Actually, few spectacles were made after audiences in the early 1930's saw DeMille's "Cleopatra" and "Sign of the Cross." When he attempted to revive the genre in 1950 with "Samson and Delilah," many skeptics predicted failure, but it became the biggest money-making film of the year. Shortly afterward, the movie screens were filled with "The Egyptian," "The Prodigal," "The Silver Chalice" and "Land of the Pharaohs," all of which did so-so business until DeMille again laid his hand: this time with the 1956 re-make of "Ten Commandments," which to date is the biggest money-making religious film in history.

The subsequent failure of small-budget films like "The Story of Ruth" and "Esther and the King," the poor showing made by the big-budget 1961 "King of Kings" and "Greatest Story Ever Told" and the mixed reaction to "The Bible" — all have combined to convince movie-makers that people would rather watch a re-run of DeMille than settle for a Biblical film that's merely a re-run of the mill. (Catholic Press Features)

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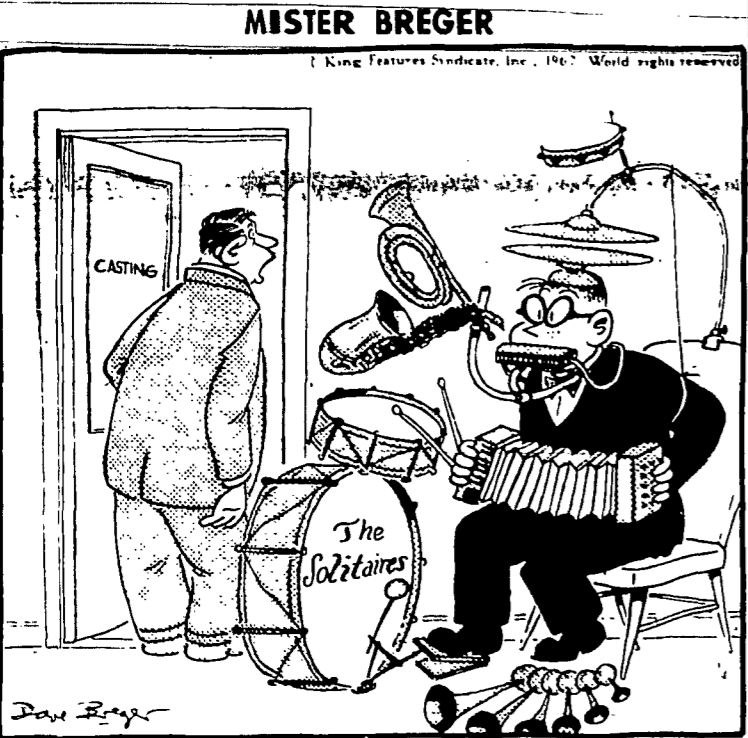
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