



# 1819 NEWS

## Allen Mendenhall: Alabama at the edge of Egypt

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 03.02.26



*(Picryl)*

Two things converged – quite by accident, or perhaps not – to bring me back to that enormous, impossible film: I had reached Moses in my Daily Bible, a chronological edition I read through each year with the persistence of habit or hope, and “The Ten Commandments” was celebrating its 70th anniversary.

Seventieth!

It was made in 1956 – a year before my parents were born – when the world still believed in absolutes, and Hollywood knew exactly how to photograph them.

I did what I always do: ordered popcorn from AMC through Uber Eats – because ritual matters – and conscripted my daughter, Gabriela, to sit beside me after I’d tucked my youngest into bed. Somewhere in the watching, my

maternal grandparents returned to me: Nina and Papa materialized in the dark as the dead sometimes do: quiet, specific, close.

There's a particular quality of light that exists only in memory, and it was in that light that I first saw the film, cross-legged in Nina and Papa's carpeted living room, a child still young enough to believe that what appeared on a screen was, in some essential way, happening.

Nina – Opelika-born and bred – and Papa, from Monroeville, took their places behind me in chairs that, at the time, felt as fixed and fated as courthouse pews. I can still feel the weight of their watching: that peculiar Southern vigilance, full-bodied and reverent, as if attention itself were a form of prayer. They didn't fidget. They didn't whisper. They regarded the screen as their parents must've regarded a coffin: straight-backed, solemn, wholly present.

The picture itself thinned in my memory over the years. What remained was not a story but scale, an aftertaste of magnificence, the sense that I had once stood very small before something vast and shimmering. To see it again now was less an act of recollection than of excavation: I approached it carefully, as one might a relic half-buried in red clay, brushing away decades of dust and discovering, to my astonishment, that it still held a pulse of warmth.

The film opens not with images but with the director, Cecil B. DeMille himself – the man, corporeal, walking through an actual curtain, a full orchestra preceding him like a herald announcing a king. He addresses the camera as a congregation, announces the film's length and moral architecture, and asks, implicitly, for your faith.

What strikes you watching this in 2026 is the sheer confidence of the gesture and the civilization it implies: one with shared cultural reference points, a common moral grammar, and a willingness to be told that what you were about to experience mattered. The film does not represent a moral order so

much as simulate one, constructing, through spectacle, a hyperreal America in which the ancient struggle against totalitarianism becomes the origin myth of democracy.

Charlton Heston as Moses. Yul Brynner as Pharaoh. The casting alone is semiotic: Heston's chiseled jawline a monument to American righteousness, Brynner's shaved head and liquid eyes encoding otherness, empire, the seductive danger of power unchecked.

The Egyptian costumes perform their own symbolic work: gold as excess, as oppression, as the spectacular emptiness of a civilization that worships its own reflection. Each headdress and broad collar is not merely a decoration but a signifier, pointing toward a moral taxonomy as legible as scripture.

Yet the film is not simple. Pharaoh's daughter emerges from water with young Egyptian women in white linen gone translucent with wetness – tantalizing, frankly gorgeous, and the camera lingers because it knows exactly what it is doing. Sin is present here; the film flirts with what it will ultimately condemn.

There is a scene – Moses standing over his mother, Jochebed, in a small, firelit room, his chest bare, his whole physical presence like a statue that has learned to breathe – in which she tells him he is not her son if he enslaves the Israelites or worships idols. She calls her desert God the “hope of the hopeless,” and then Aaron and Miriam emerge from the shadows to claim him as their brother.

Elsewhere, an old man dies in Moses's arms beside the mud, having whispered his wish to behold the Deliverer before he died – without knowing that the Deliverer is the very one holding him. The irony is not cruel but tender, the rarest thing.

My daughter sat beside me, my son asleep down the hall. I thought of how I had met Moses on the page that morning, then watched him move across a screen that same evening, Heston's voice dropping into that register that is neither acting nor prayer but somewhere between the two.

I found myself studying Gabriela's face in the flickering light. Children watch differently than adults do; they don't yet ration belief. When the Nile turns to blood, it is not a metaphor but an event. When the sea parts, it is not a special effect but a possibility. She leaned forward at the plagues: frogs, fire, and that terrible darkness passing over lintels marked in lamb's blood.

There we were, on a couch in Alabama, watching an American epic from the Eisenhower era rehearse an ancient argument about freedom and power. The Red Sea rose in walls of improbable blue, and though I know – of course I know – about matte paintings, studio tanks, and the earnest trickery of mid-century cinema, the old astonishment returned.

For a moment, I was again cross-legged on the carpet, my grandparents breathing behind me. For a moment, my daughter was very small, the world very large, and deliverance not an abstraction but a thing that might break through at any hour.

Moses does not belong to 1956, to Hollywood, or even to the screen. He belongs to the long-unbroken thread of people who needed to believe that the hopeless could be delivered – and who, to their astonishment, found that they were right.

*Allen Mendenhall is a Senior Advisor for the Free Enterprise Initiative and a Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. A lawyer with a Ph.D. in English from Auburn University, he has taught at multiple colleges and universities across Alabama and is the author or editor of nine books. Learn more at [AllenMendenhall.com](http://AllenMendenhall.com) (<http://AllenMendenhall.com>).*

*The views and opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of 1819 News. To comment, please send an email with your name and contact information to [Commentary@1819news.com](mailto:Commentary@1819news.com) (<mailto:Commentary@1819news.com>).*

*Don't miss out! [Subscribe to our newsletter](https://1819news.com/newsletter-sign-up) and get our top stories every weekday morning.*

Tags: alabama news 10 commandments moses charlton heston