

GREAT FILMS *from* THE GREATEST BOOK

By Peter S. Haigh



Pictured on this page are scenes from three films based upon the scriptures. In the top half of the page, Yul Brynner and Gina Lollobrigida are seen as "Solomon And Sheba," developing their famous relationship. In the lower half, Moses, portrayed by Charlton Heston, descends from Mount Sinai in DeMille's "The Ten Commandments," and in another DeMille biblical spectacle, Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr play the name parts in "Samson And Delilah."

THE Bible is the best-selling book of all time. The American Bible Association estimates that fifty million copies are distributed throughout the world every year.

More films have derived from The Good Book than from any other. This is understandable, for not only is the Bible a treasury of the best loved stories of all time, but from many of them can be gained spiritual uplift.

This article deals solely with films that stick to incidents and characters in the Bible. It ignores films like *Ben-Hur* and *The Robe*, which are based on novels that have used biblical incidents as backgrounds for fictitious stories.

One of the earliest examples of putting a scripture story on the screen was D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, in which the trial and crucifixion of Christ was one of its four stories that illustrated the title. Another of its stories had a setting that was modern, and the same idea of contrasting ancient and modern was also used eleven years later, in 1927, by Cecil B. DeMille for *The Ten Commandments*. When he remade *The Ten Commandments* in 1957, he dealt entirely with the story of Moses.

Although DeMille's name became synonymous with biblical "epics," only four of his many films related scripture stories without fictitious embellishments. Apart from his two versions of *The Ten Commandments*, the others were *Samson*

And Delilah and the silent *King Of Kings*.

The *King Of Kings* that opened to acclaim in London last month cannot, in all fairness, be regarded as a remake of the DeMille film of that name. The script of this brand new, inspired account of the life of Christ, has been written directly from the scriptures with no reference whatever to the earlier film.

Salome, one of the characters in *King Of Kings*, had a whole film built around her in 1953 when Rita Hayworth portrayed her in the company of Stewart Granger (Claudius) and Charles Laughton (Herod). Herod, Barabbas and Pontius Pilate, three other persons in *King Of Kings*, are central characters in three new films, and two more films are planned about Saint Luke and Saint Paul.

The Old Testament, as well as the New, has provided material for many a colourful and spectacular film. Among them are *Solomon And Sheba* and *David And Bathsheba* (Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward). Looking ahead, films being made from the Old Testament include *Cain And Abel* and *The Last Days Of Sodom And Gomorrah*.

Finding the actor to portray Jesus Christ in M.G.M.'s current *King Of Kings* presented producer Samuel Bronston with the most difficult casting assignment in film history. Jeffrey Hunter was finally chosen because of his sincerity, personal integrity and rugged strength, and because of his crystal blue

eyes that impart visionary warmth and devotion.

During filming, Hunter adopted a self-imposed code of behaviour in keeping with the reverence of his role. He stopped smoking and avoided public appearances. He found that, out of respect for his portrayal, fellow-actors and technicians did not engage him in conversation between shots, but allowed him to return to his dressing-room and prepare quietly for his next scenes.

Filming was done entirely in Spain, making use of Madrid's two largest studios, and shooting exteriors in countryside closely resembling the primitive terrain of the Holy Land in the days of Christ. The filming of the Sermon on the Mount (pictured on pages 16 and 17) took three weeks, and 7,000 people were recruited from neighbouring villages to appear as pilgrims.

"When I appeared in my robes," says Hunter, "many dropped to their knees as I passed. Although they knew I was merely playing a part, I was still a living representation of a figure they had regarded from childhood with sacred awe. It was then I realised the extent of the task I had undertaken. I felt it more and more deeply as the film progressed."

The year 1961 happens to coincide with the 350th anniversary of the publication of the King James version of the Bible, and it is from this that Philip Yordan has drawn for his screenplay. Before beginning the script, he undertook



Jeffrey Hunter as Jesus

exhaustive research with Samuel Bronston and director Nicholas Ray, seeking the counsel of leading biblical scholars.

To Yordan, the most interesting of the figures who lived in the turbulent time of Christ was Pontius Pilate. "To me," he says, "he has been both sanctified and maligned. I have tried to present him simply as an ambitious administrator who was not aware of the holiness of the man who stood before him on trial. There were so many prophets in those days that Pilate failed to distinguish Jesus from the others. We must remember that Pilate

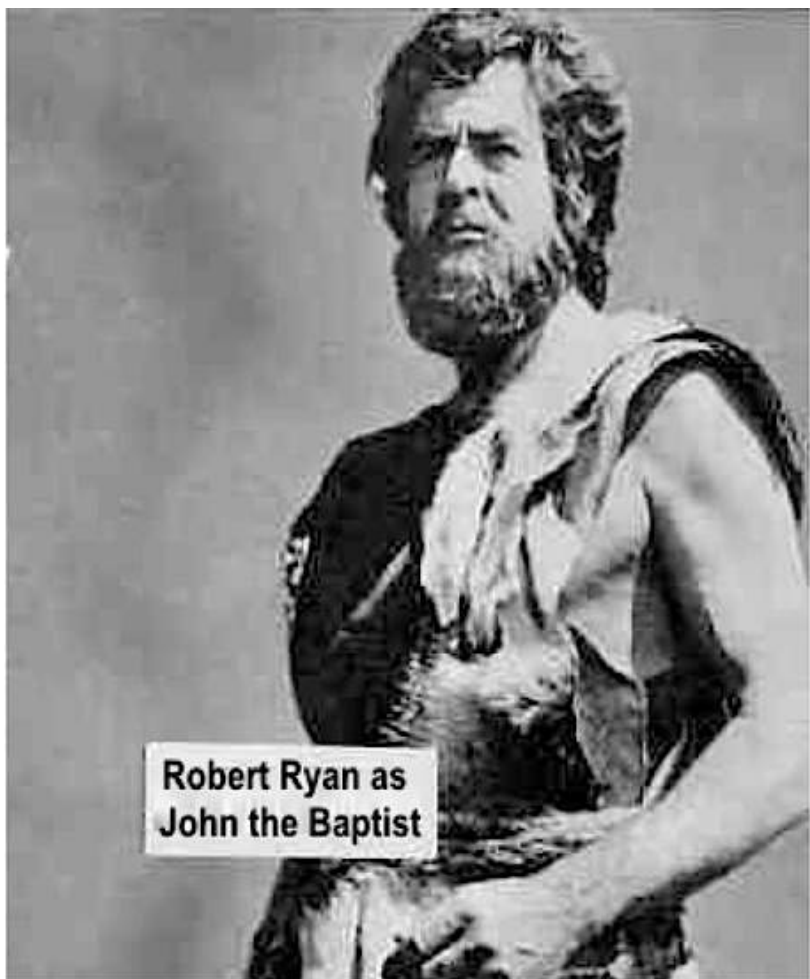
was a Roman, and that Romans were pagans with no respect for the Jewish concept of Jehovah."

Pilate is played in *King Of Kings* by Hurd Hatfield. Could you imagine Spencer Tracy in the part? That was the intention in a film to be called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, but the plans have now been shelved. Elizabeth Taylor was to play Mary Magdalene, John Wayne was to be the Roman soldier at the crucifixion, Sidney Poitier was to be Simon of Cyrene, and the Swedish Max Von Sydow was to play Christ. It appears that its producers were wise to postpone the project, for it more or less covers the same ground as *King Of Kings*.

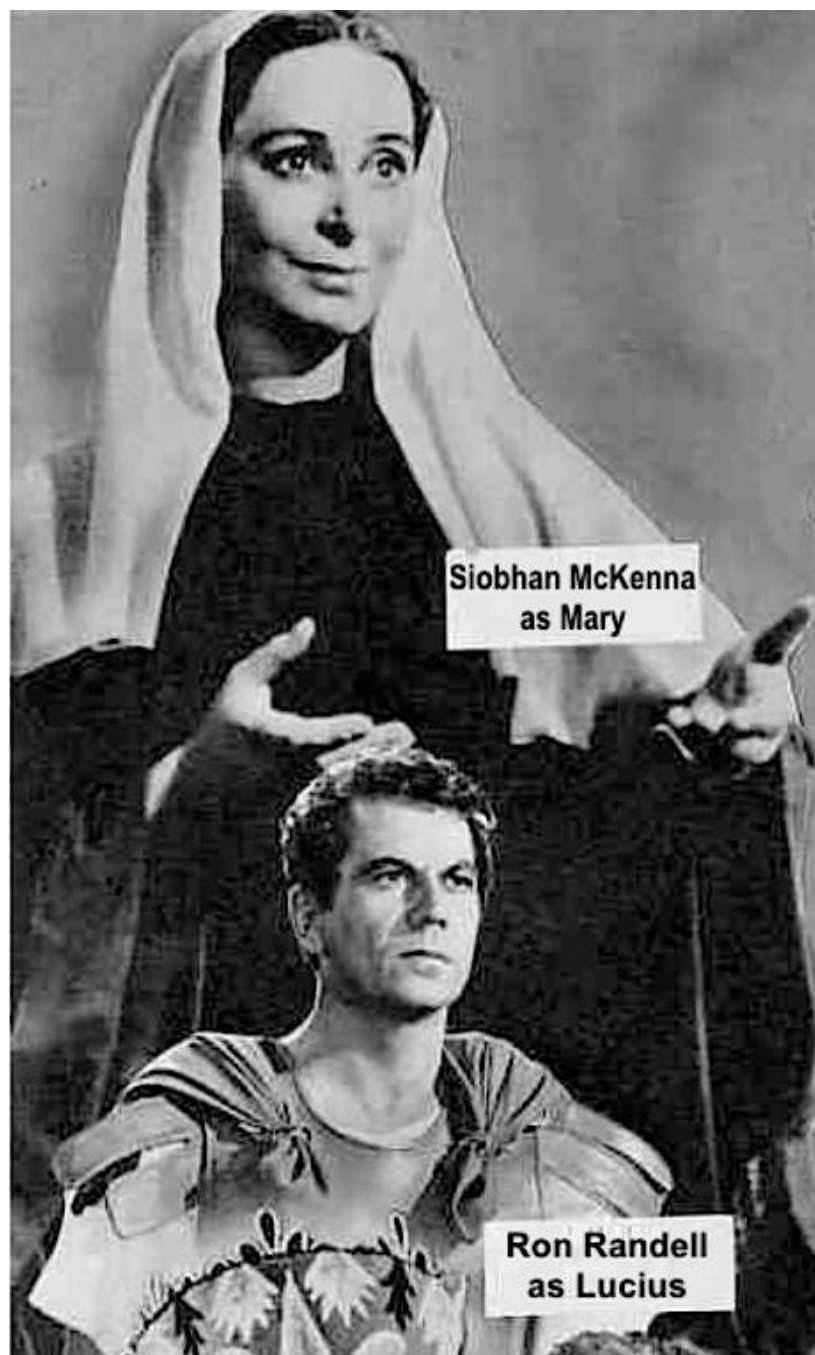
While *King Of Kings* is the crowning achievement in the portrayal of Christ on the screen, there is in the planning stage the Bible film of all Bible films. Its aim will be to present all the highlights from both Old and New Testaments. It is envisaged as a film of monumental proportions, to be shown in three parts on successive evenings, and running ten hours in all. Simply and appropriately, it is to be called *The Bible*. (continued)

King of Kings

AND seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: 2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,



**Robert Ryan as
John the Baptist**



**Siobhan McKenna
as Mary**

**Ron Randell
as Lucius**



**Viveca Lindfors
as Claudia**

**Hurd Hatfield
as Pontius Pilate**



**Frank Thring
as
Herod Antipas**

**Rip Torn
as Judas**



**Gerard Tichy
as Joseph**

**Carmen Sevilla
as Mary Magdalene**



**Rita Gam
as Herodias**



**Brigid Bazlen
as Salome**