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## THE INTERPRETATION OF EXODUS

*Studies in Honour of Cornelis Houtman*



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# The picture of Moses in the history of interpretation

Klaas SPRONK

What did Moses look like? And does it matter? Does the bible say something about this subject? What do specific ideas about the looks of Moses tell us about the way their advocates read the biblical stories? The first person one would turn to for an answer to these questions is Cornelis Houtman. He is the author of one of the most comprehensive commentaries on the book of Exodus.<sup>1</sup> There are complaints of reviewers getting tired of so many different issues raised in the commentary<sup>2</sup>, but this can also be regarded as a suiting compliment. Not even in this commentary, however, does one find an answer to the questions posed above. Apparently, the biblical texts about Moses left this aspect open. That does not imply that Cornelis Houtman would not be interested. On the contrary, much of his research deals precisely with these white spots in biblical stories that have been filled in by later commentators, writers and artists. The history of interpretation of biblical texts turns out to be a very fruitful field of research, teaching us much about the traditions in exegesis, but also offering new insights in the meaning texts can get, as I learned having the privilege of working together with Cornelis Houtman on this interesting meeting place of exegesis and church and art history.<sup>3</sup> I offer the present short study on the picture of Moses in the history of interpretation<sup>4</sup> to Cornelis Houtman as a small token of my great respect for him as a scholar and of my gratitude for the opportunities he created for me as his assistant.

<sup>1</sup> C. Houtman, *Exodus vertaald en verklaard* (COT; Kampen: Kok, 1986, 1989, 1996); English Translation: *Exodus* (HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 1993, 1996; Leuven: Peeters, 2000, 2002). Citations are from the English translation.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Houtman, *Exodus* Vol. 3, 737.

<sup>3</sup> C. Houtman, *Een wellustige en valse vrouw? Over een intrigerende 'affaire' in Schrift en uitleg* (Kampen: Kok, 1998); C. Houtman, K. Spronk, *Jefta's dochter: Tragedie van een vrouwenleven* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1999); C. Houtman, K. Spronk, *Ein Held des Glaubens? Rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studien zu den Simson-Erzählungen* (CBET 39; Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See on the history of interpretation of the stories about Moses in art B. Britt, *Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text* (JSOT Sup. 402; London: T&T Clark, 2005), who does not, however, address the issue of the looks of Moses.

### A beautiful boy?

As a rule the bible gives little information about the outward appearance of the characters playing a role in the stories, especially when they are male. An exception to this rule is found in the stories about David describing his predecessor Saul as a handsome (טוב) young man: 'There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else' (1 Sam. 9:2). Young David appears to be handsome as well: 'he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes (יפה עינים), and was handsome (טוב ראיה)' (1 Sam. 16:12). Exodus 2:2 uses the same word טוב to describe Moses. According to the text it was an argument for his mother to protect him against the Egyptian soldiers killing male Hebrew babies.

There is difference of opinion with regard to the right translation of the word טוב in the present context. In the New King James Version טוב in Exodus 2:2 is translated as 'beautiful': 'So the woman conceived and bore a son. And when she saw that he was a beautiful child, she hid him three months.' The same translation is found in the New American Standard Bible and in many other modern translations.<sup>5</sup> Not every translator and commentator is convinced, however, that 'beautiful' is the right translation here. The King James Version and Revised Standard Version translate with 'goodly', The New International Version and the New Revised Standard Version with 'fine'.<sup>6</sup> The problem with the translation 'beautiful' is that this is what nearly every mother will say of her baby, whereas the text seems to suggest a special reason for the subsequent action taken.<sup>7</sup> Houtman translates with 'well-formed' and explains טוב as indicating that the child is 'healthy and without flaw' and that this 'raises expectations'.<sup>8</sup> Others relate it – as is done already in the Midrash Rabba – to Genesis

<sup>5</sup> Cf. also most Dutch translations: Statenvertaling, Leidse Vertaling, NBG vertaling 1951 ('schoon'), Willibrordvertaling and Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling ('mooi'); the German Elberfelder and the Einheitsübersetzung ('schön'); and the French Bible de Jérusalem and Traduction Oecuménique ('beau').

<sup>6</sup> The recently published Naardense Bijbel offers, according to its principles, a translation as close as possible to the Hebrew: 'goed' and thus joins here the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version; cf. also the Revidierte Lutherbibel (1984): 'ein feines Kind'.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. W.H. Schmidt, *Exodus* (BKAT II/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 67-68. Nevertheless, he suggests to translate with 'schön' because of the parallels in Gen. 6:2 and Judg. 15:2.

<sup>8</sup> Houtman, *Exodus* 1, 271.

1:4: with God calling the light He created  $\text{טָרַב}$ .<sup>9</sup> The thought of the creative power of God which she now sees in her newborn son, would have inspired Moses' mother to resist the earthly powers acting against God's creation. Within this framework it is interesting to note the use of the related verb in the previous chapter: 'and God did good ( $\text{וַיֵּשֶׁב}$ ) to the midwives' (Exod. 1:20). It underlines that the birth of this 'good' baby can be seen as a meaningful act of God.

The story of Moses' birth is referred to twice in the New Testament. In both cases the word  $\acute{\alpha}\sigma\tau\epsilon\acute{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  is used, just as in the Septuagint of Exodus 2:2. In Acts 7:20 the qualification of the baby is interpreted as a sign of his special relation to God: 'At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful before God.' According to Hebrews 11:23 he was beautiful in the eyes of both his mother and his father: 'By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful.' Compared to Exodus 2:2, the father was added as a witness of Moses' beauty, but this beauty is not interpreted here as something extraordinary. These New Testament texts show not only that apparently it was customary to refer to the young Moses as beautiful, but also that different explanations, theological and aesthetical, of the word were used next to each other.

In a number of manuscripts of the Masoretic text the first letter of the word  $\text{טָרַב}$  is enlarged.<sup>10</sup> This points to the importance attributed in later rabbinic tradition to this description of Moses. It seems to have been interpreted as an early sign of his special vocation. Philo of Alexandria worked out this theme in his book about Moses. When he retells the story of his birth he puts extra emphasis on the baby's beauty, which was not only apparent to the mother: 'Now, the child from his birth had an appearance of more than ordinary goodness ( $\acute{\alpha}\sigma\tau\epsilon\acute{\iota}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ ), so that his parents as long as they could actually set a nought the proclamations of the despot' (*Vita Mosis* I, 9).<sup>11</sup> When the daughter of Pharaoh found him, 'surveying him from foot to foot, she

<sup>9</sup> J. Siebert-Hommes, 'Twelve Women in Exodus 1 and 2. The Role of Daughters and Sons in the Stories Concerning Moses,' *ACEBT* 9 (1988), 47-58; esp. 53; idem, *Let the Daughters Live! The literary Architecture of Exodus 1-2 as a Key for Interpretation* (Biblical Interpretation Series 37; Leiden etc.: Brill, 1998), 114-115. See also H. Jagersma, *Exodus* (Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse Bijbel; Kampen: Kok, 1999), 38.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. K. Albrecht, *ZAW* 39 (1921), 165; Schmidt, *Exodus*, 50.

<sup>11</sup> F.H. Colson, *Philo with an English Translation*, VI (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 281.

approved of his beauty and fine condition (εὐμορφίαν καὶ εὐεξίαν) (*Vita Mosis* I, 15)<sup>12</sup> and when Moses grew up he appeared to be 'noble and goodly (εὐγενῆ καὶ ἐστεῖλον) to look upon' (*Vita Mosis* I, 18).<sup>13</sup> Josephus, in his description of Moses' birth, gives no information about the way his mother looked at her baby, but like Philo he tells us that when the daughter of Pharaoh found him she 'loved him very much because of his size and beauty' (*Antiquitates* II, 224).<sup>14</sup> Josephus supersedes Philo in describing the beauty of the child Moses as he grew up: 'When he had attained the age of three years old God gave him wondrous increase of his stature, and no one was so indifferent to his beauty that on beholding Moses he was not astonished at his handsomeness. And it happened that many people who happened to meet him as he was borne along the road turned back at the sight of the child and left aside their serious affairs and used their time to view him. For the vast and undiluted childish charm that enveloped him captivated those who saw him' (*Antiquitates* II, 230-231).<sup>15</sup> Likewise, a Midrash on Exodus 2:10 states that Moses was so beautiful that people could not take their eyes from him (*Exod. Rabba* 1:26). This Midrash also reports his extraordinary length (*Exod. Rabbah* 1:27). In rabbinic literature Moses' beauty is even compared to that of an angel (*Pirkei de R. Eliezer* 48.21).

The more than normal length makes Moses look like the later king Saul. One can also relate these legendary traditions about Moses to the representation of the king in many Egyptian and Mesopotamian pictures, where the king can be recognized by his superhuman measures.<sup>16</sup> In this regard the king comes close to the gods. The same can be said of the image of Moses as can be found in the *Exagoge of Ezekiel*, a recounting from the second century BCE of the story of Moses and the Exodus in the form of a Hellenistic drama. In the 'throne vision' (lines 68-82)<sup>17</sup> Moses dreams that he receives a scepter, a crown, and is invited to take his place on 'a great throne which reached to the corners of heaven'. From his throne Moses can

<sup>12</sup> Colson, *Philo*, 283.

<sup>13</sup> Colson, *Philo*, 285

<sup>14</sup> L.H. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities 1-4* (Flavius Josephus, Translation and Commentary, 3; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 195.

<sup>15</sup> Feldman, *Judean Antiquities*, 197-198.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. O. Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament* (Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1977), 224-286.

<sup>17</sup> See on this text P.W. van der Horst, 'Moses' Throne Vision in Ezekiel the Dramatist', *JJS* 34 (1983), 21-29; and 'Some Notes on the Exagoge of Ezekiel', *Mnemosyne* 7 (1984), 354-375.



see 'the full circle of earth and what was below the earth and above heaven'. The 'heavenly bodies' fall on their knees before him. This can hardly be interpreted otherwise than Moses having come very close to a divine status.<sup>18</sup> The comparison of Moses with an angel in *Pirkei de R. Eliezer* mentioned above points in the same direction. In this connection it is interesting to note the parallels with Psalm 45. In this wedding song the king seems to be called 'god' (vs. 6 and 8) and he is also praised as 'the most handsome of men' (vs. 3). The word used here to denote the beauty of the king is the verb יָפָה and not טוֹב as in Exodus 2:2 and one may wonder whether it is reasonable to suggest that the use of the word טוֹב leaves open the room for the speculations outlined above and even whether it is wise to translate it with 'beautiful'. It seems to be more in line with the book of Exodus not to speak too high of Moses, as becomes clear when we now turn to the most famous text about Moses' appearance.

### The shining face

According to Exodus 34:29 when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, 'the skin of his face shone (קָרַן) because he had been talking with God'. This made the people afraid to come near him. But Moses called them and told them everything God had said to him. After that he put a veil (מַסְוֵה) on his face (vs. 33), which he would only take off when he had contact with God again.

In some rabbinic texts Moses has been more or less deified for reasons that can be related to this story: 'When a mortal goes up to the Holy One, blessed be He, who is pure fire, and whose ministers are fire – and Moses did go up to Him – he is a man. But after he comes down, he is called God' (*Midrash Psalms* 90.1). 'When he went up to heaven he was a man. And in which respect was he a man? Compared with the angels who are made entirely of fire. But when he came down from heaven he was as God' (*Deuteronomy Rabba* 11.4, commenting on Deut. 33:1).<sup>19</sup> So here the interpretation goes even further than the comparison of the young Moses with an angel.

The text in Exodus 34, however, does not describe Moses as divine. His shining face is no more than the reflection of his meeting

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. Lierman, *The New Testament Moses. Christian Perceptions of Moses and Israel in the Setting of Jewish Religion* (WUNT 2, 173; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2004), 90-91.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Lierman, *New Testament Moses*, 96.

with God. It legitimizes him when he speaks in the name of God.<sup>20</sup> It is only mentioned in the situation where Moses acts as intermediary between God and the people. This is underlined by the use of the veil. According to verse 33 Moses puts the veil before his face after he had handed down God's commandments to the people, whereas we read in verse 35 that Moses removes the veil again when he enters in the presence of God. There can be no doubt about Moses' great authority, but as it is described here the emphasis is on his function, not on his person: 'his idealization is at the cost of personal identity'.<sup>21</sup>

In the history of interpretation there has been much debate about the precise meaning of קָרַן in verse 29.<sup>22</sup> The Hebrew leaves open two possible translations, relating it either to the verb 'to shine' or to a denominative verb of the well known substantive קָרַן, 'horn'. The second option was advocated by Jerome and was for a long period commonly accepted via the Vulgate: *Cumque descenderet Moyses de monte Sinai, tenebat duas tabulas testimonii, et ignorabat quod cornuta esset facies sua ex consortio sermonis Domini*. It can also be found in some medieval Jewish sources.<sup>23</sup> Nowadays most commentators and translators agree that the first option is more likely. It has been suggested that a double meaning is possible<sup>24</sup> or that the writer deliberately left open the two possibilities so that one could associate this description of Moses with what was told two chapters earlier: the sin with the golden bull-calf. Comparing the two stories, one may note that the veneration of the lifeless image of the bull brought nothing but death, whereas the one who looks like a bull comes from the living God and brings the signs of a covenant as a guarantee for life.<sup>25</sup> The problem with this interpretation, however, is that there is only an

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Houtman, *Exodus* 3, 733.

<sup>21</sup> T.B. Dozeman, 'Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority in Torah', *JBL* 119 (2000), 21-45; esp. p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the survey by Houtman, *Exodus* 3, 730-733; more elaborate in his article 'Het verheerlijkte gezicht van Mozes,' *NedThT* 43 (1989), 1-10.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. R. Kasher, 'The Mythological Figure of Moses in Light of Some Unpublished Midrashic Fragments,' *JQR* 88 (1997), 19-42; esp. p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that in Babylonian lexicography there appears to be a conceptual connection between horns and light. The Sumerian word *si*, as it is used in Babylonian astronomical texts can mean both 'horn' and 'shining', attesting to an ancient understanding of light as material. Against this background one could say that according to Exodus 34:29 Moses' face radiated horns. Cf. S.L. Sanders, 'Old Light on Moses' Shining Face', *VT* 52 (2002), 400-406.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. C. Dohmen, *Exodus 19-40* (HThK.AT; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2004), 374.

indirect reference to horns in Exodus 32 and that as a rule a bull-calf (עגל), as it is mentioned there, does not have clearly visible horns.

### The Image of Moses in Art

Although the reference to his shining face (Exod. 34:29) appears to say more about Moses' function as an intermediary than about his person, and although his description as 'good' or 'beautiful' (Exod. 2:2) originally was hardly meant as elevating Moses above normal human standards, these texts play a prominent part within the tendency in the history of interpretation to describe Moses as more than mortal. When we now take a look at the way Moses is pictured in art we may note that in the course of time things seem to move in the opposite direction: from the godly to the human sphere, although there are also exceptions to this rule.

To begin with, in some paintings the problem of the correct interpretation of קרן in Exodus 34:29 (Moses with horns or with a shining face) is solved by picturing the 'horns' as rays of light.

A good example of this is the painting of a number of scenes of the life of Moses by the 15<sup>th</sup> century painter Cosimo Rosselli on the south wall of the Sistine Chapel (see picture 1).<sup>26</sup> Moses is portrayed in a similar way in numerous paintings by Marc Chagall.<sup>27</sup>



1. *Moses by Rosselli*

In ancient pictures we nearly always see Moses with horns, pointing to his special status. Compared to the biblical record this is an exaggeration, because what is said in this one text in Exodus 34 on this special occasion of Moses returning from God is generalized to

<sup>26</sup> Cf. [http://mv.vatican.va/3\\_EN/pages/CSN/CSN\\_Sud\\_StMose.html](http://mv.vatican.va/3_EN/pages/CSN/CSN_Sud_StMose.html). It is wrongly attributed on this website to Sandro Botticelli.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dohmen, *Exodus 19-40*, 378, speaks of 'Eine vorsichtige "Rückführung" des ikonografischen Motivs (...), indem er die Hörner des Mose als Strahlen dargestellt hat.' One can also note the parallel with the Babylonian concept mentioned in n. 24 above.

his whole life since then. It has even been projected to Moses' life before that moment.

In the Nuremberg Chronicle published in 1493 Moses is pictured with some kind of horns already in the revelation at the burning bush (see picture 2).<sup>28</sup>



2. Moses in the 'Nuremberg Chronicle'

In some copies of the *Biblia Pauperum* published in the same period, but probably representing centuries-old traditions, the same phenomenon can be observed (see picture 3).<sup>29</sup>



3. Moses in the 'Biblia Pauperum'

<sup>28</sup> Cf. S. Füssel, H. Schedel (eds), *Weltchronik: kolorierte Gesamtausgabe von 1493* (Köln: Taschen, 2001); see also the excellent website [www.beloit.edu/~nurember/index.htm](http://www.beloit.edu/~nurember/index.htm).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. C. Wetzel, H. Drechsler, *Biblia Pauperum. Armenbibel. Die Bilderhandschrift des Codex Palatinus latinus 871 im Besitz der Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana* (Stuttgart: Belser Verlag, 1995) folio 4 recto.

The classic picture of Moses is the sixteenth century statue by Michelangelo in the Church of St Peter in Chains in Rome. Moses is also represented as horned, sitting with the two stone tablets under his right arm and apparently looking in a far distance to his left. There has been much discussion about the question at precisely which moment of his life Moses is pictured here. Following the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century art historian Jacob Burckhardt many people see in this statue Moses when he was in great anger, just before smashing the two tablets in reaction to Israel's sin with the golden calf. According to Sigmund Freud, however, in his famous study of 1914 on this piece of art, Moses is controlling his angry reaction to the infidelity of Israel, because he is eager to give his people the words of God he received on Mount Sinai.<sup>30</sup> The problem with this interpretation is that it seems to confuse the story of Moses returning from Mount Sinai in Exodus 32 with the story of his second return in Exodus 34, with new tablets and with his horns or shining face.<sup>31</sup> In favour of both Burckhardt's and Freud's interpretation one could advance the argument derived from the history of representing Moses in art, that previous artists were used to picturing Moses horned without paying attention to the biblical chronology.

Some modern interpreters<sup>32</sup> relate the statue more directly to the coming death of Moses. He would have been pictured here in the moment just after God had told him, face to face, that he is going to die before his people shall enter the promised land. This seems to be more to the point, especially when one takes into account the fact that from the beginning Michelangelo intended this statue as part of a funerary monument. The problem with this interpretation is, just as with that of Burckhardt and Freud, that one has to assume that it was inspired by a combination of biblical texts. God's announcement of the 'premature' death of Moses is related in Numbers 20:12 and not related to the giving of the tablets, nor to Moses being 'horned'. A more attractive proposal, therefore, is to assume that Michelangelo had in mind precisely what is told in Exodus 34:6.<sup>33</sup> Moses has cut

<sup>30</sup> Cf. I. Grübrich-Simitis, *Michelangelos Moses und Freuds "Wagstück". Eine Collage* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2004).

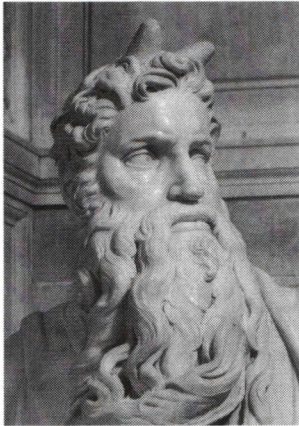
<sup>31</sup> F.-J. Verspohl, 'Michelangelo und Machiavelli. Der David auf der Piazza della Signoria in Florenz', *Städel-Jahrbuch* 7 (1981), 204-246.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Grübrich-Simitis, *Michelangelos Moses*, and F.-J. Verspohl, *Michelangelo Buonarroti und Papst Julius II* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2004).

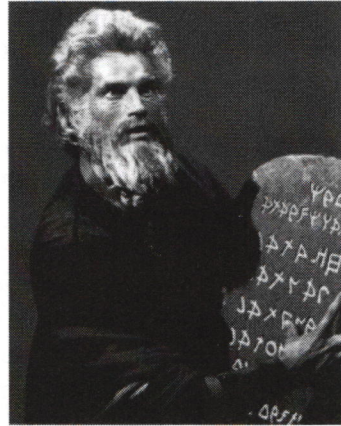
<sup>33</sup> Cf. H. Raguse, 'Moses im Angesicht seines Todes? Zu zwei neuen Büchern über den Moses des Michelangelo', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 61 (2005), 162-170.

two new stone tables and has climbed the mountain again. Then God comes down and passes before him, a very solemn moment. This is the moment Michelangelo immortalized in his statue: Moses with the two uninscribed tablets under his arms as he turns his head in the direction God went by. When we take into account Exodus 33:22-23 we have to assume that Moses was allowed only to see his back. What is characteristic here of Moses are not only the horns but also his attitude which expresses eminence.<sup>34</sup> All interpreters will agree that Michelangelo pictured Moses as elevated above the status of a mere mortal human being.

Michelangelo not only influenced many painters of later centuries, but also modern movie directors. Cecil B. deMille seems to have cast Charlton Heston as Moses in his movie-epic, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), because of Heston's physical resemblance to Michelangelo's Moses.<sup>35</sup> The parallels between Michelangelo's and DeMille's picture of Moses carrying the stone tablets are striking (see pictures 4 and 5).



4. *Moses by Michelangelo*



5. *Charles Heston as Moses*

In another scene of the movie, with Moses towering authoritatively above the people, he even seems to be horned (see picture 6).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. H. Mackowsky, *Michelangelo* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1925), quoted by Raguse, 'Moses im Angesicht seines Todes?', 163, who speaks of the 'Erhabenheit' of the statue.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Britt, *Rewriting Moses*, 45.



6. A horned Moses (in DeMille's movie)

As a rule Moses is pictured in movies, paintings and in literature, as a tall man with a long beard, old but full of mental and physical power. For a man of his age one could also call him handsome. In recent representations one can note some kind of degradation of Moses, emphasizing his common human traits. In this respect Thomas Mann set a new standard. He describes Moses as a man with a broken nose as a lasting memory of his fight against the Egyptian he killed. This adds to Moses' appearance as a rather rough person:

ein Mann auf der Höhe der Jahre, stämmig, mit gedrückter Nase, vortretenden Backenknochen, einem geteilten Bart, weitstehenden Augen und breiten Handgelenken, wie man besonders sah, wenn er, was oft geschah, grübelnd Mund und Bart mit der Rechten bedeckte.<sup>36</sup>

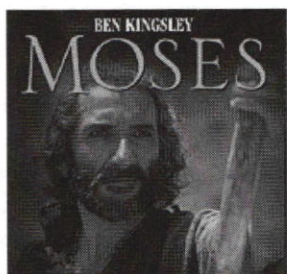
A similar reserve to picture Moses as more than human can be found in recent movies about Moses showing him as less divine and more human. In the animation picture *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) this is well illustrated in the first part of the film about Moses growing up together with the son of the Pharaoh. They look the same as normal Egyptian boys. In the film *Moses* (1996) directed by Roger Young the role of Moses is played by Ben Kingsley. This actor is famous because of the way he played Gandhi in the movie with the same title (1982). His apparent 'eastern' looks may have been a reason to ask him for the role of Moses. As in *The Prince of Egypt* the Egyptian background of Moses is emphasized (see picture 7).



7. BenKingsley as Moses

<sup>36</sup> T. Mann, 'Das Gesetz', in: *Die Erzählungen*, 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1975), 621-672; esp. p. 627. This story was first published in an English translation in: *The Ten Commandments. Ten Short Novels of Hitler's War Against the Moral Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1943).

This can be interpreted as a reaction to previous movies and other examples of retelling the biblical story. Moses has lost much of his western looks and of his beard (see pictures 8 and 9) and is presented as a normal human being with normal human emotions. In *The Prince of Egypt* he even seems to have lost some of his age.



8. *A modern Moses*



9. *Moses in 'The Prince of Egypt'*

Some of the elements discussed above indicating that Moses was more than a normal human being can still be found in *The Prince of Egypt*. Compared to the Egyptian magicians he certainly looks like a handsome man. More important and even fascinating, however, is the final scene of this movie. After Moses has led his people through the Sea of Reeds we see him return from mount Sinai carrying the stone tablets. One cannot see his face because of the glaring light behind him. Only when he has passed do we see his back as he looks out over the multitudes below him. This reminds anyone familiar with the biblical story of what is told about Moses entering in the presence of God (Exod. 33:18-23): Moses was not allowed to see God face to face and only saw Him from behind. So next to picturing Moses as a mere mortal – a tendency found in most modern representations of Moses – the movie eventually seems to suggest that Moses has reached divine status after all. As may have become clear in this article, this surprising end of the movie is not new as it stands in a long tradition of picturing Moses.