

**“Seven Green Withs that Were Never Dried”
(KJV Judges 16:7):
Cecil B. DeMille’s Cinematic Rendition of this Verse-
cum-Prop within *Samson and Delilah* (1949): Valid,
Authentic, Artistic?**

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Abstract

The relationship between Holy Writ and Hollywood is long, complex and full of exciting pedagogic possibilities for the interdisciplinary study of Scripture, film, religion, theology and cultural studies. Legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille was an American icon and cinematic lay preacher whose biblical epics are nowadays considered by mainstream Scripture scholars to be genre masterpieces, and thus worthy of deeper investigation. His rendition of the verse-cum-prop “seven green withs that were never dried” (KJV Judg. 16:7) within *Samson and Delilah* (1949) was explicated to demonstrate some of the problems and possibilities inherent within sacred text-to-silver screen adaptations of the Good Book. It was concluded that DeMille was a far defter biblical filmmaker than has been hitherto acknowledged. Further research into the interface and exciting pedagogic possibilities of the Bible and cinema is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.

Introduction: Holy Writ and Hollywood

Not only is the Bible a foundational text for Judeo-Christianity but it is also a touchstone of Western culture and civilization. With the genesis of the cinema in 1895, and its subsequent survival into this second century of the “Age of Hollywood” (Paglia, 1994, p. 12), the Bible quickly became a source of filmic adaptations that has had a long, complex and proud history (see Campbell & Pitts, 1981; Lang, 2007). It has also generated numerous academic dialogues exploring the intricate interface, revelatory possibilities and its practical utility as a teaching tool for today’s media-saturated youth and society (e.g., Babington & Evans, 1993; Boyer, 2002; Christianson, Francis & Telford, 2005; Exum, 2006; Forshey, 1992; Hallbäck & Hvithamar, 2008; Reinhartz, 2003; Scott, 1994; Shepherd, 2008). Therefore, in addition to providing relaxing entertainment, feature films can reveal biblical issues normally ignored via the creation of a locus theologicus, that is, a safe place to explore religion and theology beyond mainstream scriptural exegesis, and alongside other exciting religion-and-film issues (Blizek, 2009; Lyden, 2009).

Since “film is so hot and the culture of movie-going so strong...having a “place” to talk about film through the lens of theology can be a relevant way to bring faith and life closer together” (Pacatte, 2000, p. 33). Unfortunately, Christians have tended to focus upon the powerful negative aspects of the media. For example, as John W. Carter (2011) noted:

The media, largely through television, movies, and films, have tremendous influence on the mores of culture. Film and television producers are often trying to push the limits of acceptable social conduct, and as they do so those limits are continually moved away from conservative, ethical, and moral values. One cannot browse through evening television programs without being bombarded by violence, sex, and foul language, the very model of society that Christians should rise above (p. online).

True and valid as this general observation is, there are *also* powerful positive applications of the media that should not be overlooked simply because of its bad cousins.

Exploring movies as an extra-ecclesiastical resource is a contemporary form of visual piety that does not necessarily undermine the authority of Holy Writ, but rather, it can supplement it by providing new perspectives when filmmakers have to make audio-visually *explicit* what may have only been *implicit* within the sacred text. This pedagogic pathway provides a proverbial breath of fresh air into an exegetical domain sometimes bogged down by an over-reliance upon traditional book-centred technologies (which itself superseded technological transformations of the Bible that started out with oral renditions and developed through clay, papyrus, velum, print, radio, film, television, and the Internet). This post-modern, post-print approach can thus reveal new insights into the formation and interpretation of Scripture hitherto overlooked or under-appreciated.

Cecil B. DeMille: Master of the Biblical Epic

Legendary producer-director Cecil B. DeMille¹ (1881-1959), affectionately known as CB, was an American icon (Birchard, 2004; DeMille & Hayne, 1960; Eyman, 2010; Louvish, 2008; Ringgold & Bodeen, 1969). He was also a cinematic lay preacher and a master of the American biblical epic who was the “Golden Age of Hollywood summed up in a single man” (Mitchell, 1993, p. 17). As classicist Jon Solomon (2001, p. 175) argued: “For all their contrivances, DeMille’s parting of the Red Sea in 1956 [*The Ten Commandments*] and his Samsonian destruction of the temple of Dagon [in 1949 *Samson and Delilah*]...will be remembered as the most representative and iconographical Old Testament depictions of the twentieth century.” Scripture scholar David Jasper (1999, p. 51) similarly claimed: “In the Hollywood tradition of Old Testament epics...the cinema has occasionally contributed in a significant way to the history of biblical interpretations, perhaps unwittingly and most notably in the figure of Cecil B. De Mille in films like *Samson and Delilah* (1949) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956).”

Historically speaking, DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* was a “watershed film” (Schatz, 1997, p. 394) that had reinvigorated the then-moribund genre, filled Paramount’s purse at the box office, and triggered the 1950-60s rash of Hollywood Bible films. Nowadays, DeMille’s page-to-projector adaptation of the Samson saga is admired by mainstream biblical scholars as a significant cine-text that changed popular perceptions of the Bible, religion and American culture in general. As scripture scholar J. C. McCann (2002, p. 92) noted: “The last

and probably best known of the judges is Samson, although most people's knowledge of Samson is limited to his relationship with Delilah (16:4-31); and the source of people's knowledge is as likely to be Cecil B. DeMille's film *Samson and Delilah* as it is the biblical text." For scripture scholar J. Cheryl Exum (2002, p. 255), DeMille's cinematic Samson saga is "a masterpiece of biblical film making (it gets better after repeated viewings); the 1949 film sparkles in spite of its age, with memorable dialogue and impressive overacting." It also:

...offers a good example of cinematic impact on the culture at large. It is not a little-known film; I have seen it at least four times on television in the UK in the past three years. With the kind of promotion television offers, De Mille's Oscar-winning epic has certainly reached more audiences than when it was first released, and through repeated television showings it continues to be influential in forming people's opinions about the biblical story. For all its hokeyness *Samson and Delilah* is a brilliant film (Exum, 1996, p. 13).

Part of DeMille's brilliance was his deft deployment of carefully crafted sacred props culled from his reading of the Bible and supplemented by the historical-archaeological evidence of his day. Despite their potentially minor on-screen importance, they are significant cinematic sites for verifying the depths that DeMille plummed for the sake of correct outcomes, most of which are still grossly unappreciated today. There are many exciting examples to investigate, but for the purposes of this paper, the critical discussion will be limited to DeMille's cinematic rendition of the verse-cum-prop "seven green withs that were never dried" (KJV Judges 16:7) within *Samson and Delilah* (1949).

"Green Withs" Within *Samson and Delilah* (1949)

When Delilah first tried to extract the secret of his extraordinary strength, Samson deliberately lied to her three times,² and in his first lie he said that he could be overcome if bound with "seven green withs that were never dried" (KJV Judg. 16:7), and elsewhere reiterated as "seven green withs which had not been dried" (KJV Judg. 16:8), and "the withs" (KJV Judg. 16:9). Yet, what exactly are "withs" and what exactly is meant by "green" (whether meaning colour or immaturity), in addition to being "never dried" and "seven" in number? The writer initially imagined this to be a simple screen prop to acquire and/or craft once its exact nature was known, but herein laid a profound scriptural conundrum-cum-practical filmmaking problem of almost maddening proportions. The following is a detailed explication of Judges 16:7 within various English translations of the Bible (see Table of Abbreviations below) in pursuit of this puzzle.

"Green Withs" as a Meat Product

Various biblical translations have rendered this scriptural passage differently, and with subtle and not so subtle changes and associated implications beyond the putatively obvious. For example, the "withs" became "seven bowstrings...that are fresh and haven't been dried" (AAT Judg. 16:7), "seven fresh bowstrings, not yet dried" (NKJV Judg. 16:7), "seven fresh bowstrings that are not dried out" (NRSV Judg. 16:7), "seven fresh bowstrings not yet dry" (TNEB Judg. 16:7), "seven new bowstrings that are not dried out" (GNB Judg. 16:7), "seven new bowstrings that have not yet been dried" (NBB Judg. 16:7), "seven new bowstrings that had not yet been dried" (TJB Judg. 16:7), "seven new bowstrings which had not yet been dried" (TNJB Judg. 16:7), "seven new bowstrings that have not been

dried” (NCV Judg. 16:7), **“seven new bowstrings that have never been dried”** (TBFT Judg. 16:7), **“seven fresh bowstring that have never been dried”** (Moffatt Judg. 16:7), **“seven new and moist bowstrings”** (CCB Judg. 16:7), or **“seven fresh tendons that had not been dried”** (JSB Judg. 16:7) with an accompanying endnote that explained: “For use as bowstrings” (Berlin, Brettler & Fishbane, 2004, p. 545). These bowstrings were “binders made out of organic material” (Bal, 1987, p. 52), or more precisely, “from the tendons of slaughtered animals; with tanning they underwent a process of desiccation and shrinking” (Soggin, 1987, p. 254).

Alternatively, the meat rendition of the word **“withs”** was translated in other Bibles and commentaries as: **“seven still-moist sinews that have not been dried out”** (NWT Judg. 16:7), **“seven cords made of sinews not yet dry, but still moist”** (Douay Judg. 16:7) with **sinews** referring to “undried tendons taken from a freshly slaughtered animal” (Smith, 2005, p. 434), **“seven pieces of fresh gut”** (Boling, 1985, p. 245), **“seven fresh, strong gut-strings, still moist”** (TAB Judg. 16:7), **“seven strands of gut, still fresh and undried”** (Knox, Judg. 16:7), **“seven raw-leather bowstrings”** (TLB Judg. 16:7), **“seven fresh thongs that have not been dried”** (NIV Judg. 16:7), which implied leather strips, or **“seven fresh cords that have not been dried”** (NASB Judg. 16:7), which is vague about its precise material construction. Likewise, biblical scholars have referred to them as **“seven fresh tendons”** (Brams, 1980, p. 155), **“moist tendon cords”** (Brown, Fitzmyer & Murphy, 1990, p. 143), **“seven fresh bowstrings”** (Bal, 1987, p. 52; Bellis, 1994, p. 124; Crenshaw, 1978, p. 12; Soggin, 1987, p. 251), and **“seven freshly-made bowstrings”** (Comay, 1993, p. 292). Despite this range of variations, at least their animal, organic nature is very clear, until one discovers in other biblical translations that **“withs”** may actually be a plant-based material!

“Green Withs” as a Plant Product

Within the Jewish tradition, the ancient historian Josephus specified green withs as being **“of vine. fresh indicates full of natural sap,”** or as John Trigilio Jr. and Kenneth Brighenti (2005, p. 212) put it: **“seven green bowstrings...these ripe vines,”** which was a plant (not animal) restraint placed upon Samson. Its plant nature was particularly common in children’s versions of the Bible where Samson was bound with **“seven green sticks”** (Blyton, 1985, p. 6), **“seven green reeds”** (Storr & Lapper, 1986, npn) and **“seven green twigs of willow”** (Wildsmith & Turner, 1980, p. 43). Within the English language, a **“withe”** referred to “a strong flexible twig, esp. of willow, suitable for binding things together” (Hanks *et al.*, 1982, p. 1665), and thus referred to as **“tough ropes of withy”** (Duchet-Suchaux & Pastoureau, 1994, p. 118), **“green withies”** (Weldon, 1995, p. 81), **“green withs or twigs”** (Lockyer, 1967, p. 43), or according to *The Holy Bible: The Berkeley Version*: **“seven fresh, wood fiber cords not yet dried”** (Judg. 16:7). At least their plant, organic nature is very clear here.

What’s a Biblical Filmmaker to Do?

Overall, opinion “is divided as to whether these really were willow withs from which mats, baskets and a type of cord were made, or whether they were new, still moist lengths of twisted animal gut used for bow strings, or again tough leather ropes of new hides, all of which were very strong and would test him [Samson] to his limits” (Thomas, 1982, p. 84). Therefore, what was DeMille-the-authenticity-stickler and biblical cineaste *par excellence* to do under such contradictory scriptural circumstances? DeMille-the-pragmatist chose a plant-based, reed interpretation of “seven green withs” for his Samson saga. Regrettably, some

commentators condemned his film claiming that *Samson and Delilah* “was certainly the worst and most absurd of all his films in that genre” (Norman, 1985, p. 182) along with DeMille’s costumer Edith Head who complained that he “never did an authentic costume picture in his entire career, and in my opinion that made him a damn liar as well as an egotist” (Head & Calistro, 1983, p. 81). For those viewers who preferred the animal product interpretation of “green withs” (i.e., bowstring/sinew/gut/cord/thong/tendon) then this automatically proved that DeMille was a “bad” biblical filmmaker because he got the scriptural “facts” wrong, which was an error made even more grievous because of DeMille’s publicly-touted reputation for biblical authenticity. How good could DeMille be if he got such a simple and obvious detail wrong?

The writer argues that DeMille did *not* get it “wrong” (just different), and that his prop choice was valid, authentic, artistic and entirely appropriate for the scene that he rendered on-screen. DeMille referred to a plant-based “seven green withs” at Delilah’s oasis pool, including the deft engineering of a “withs”-“reed” link when Delilah held up the green plaited bonds and said to Samson: “*Seven green withs* for our seven days Samson” [my emphasis]. When they left the oasis water pool and sat on the steps of the nearby Temple ruins, the following DeMilleian dialogue ensued:

Samson: What do you want with those *green withs*, planning to snare a rabbit?

Delilah: No, a lion.

[Further playful banter]

Samson: I couldn’t escape you if you...bound me with these *seven green reeds*.

[Samson highlights the multi-strand, flayed end of the plait].

Delilah: Could *seven little green withs* hold Samson?

Samson: These *green withs* are much stronger than they look. Hold them tight [Delilah complies]. See. If you bound me with these *seven little withs* I’d be as weak as any other man [my emphasis].

So, why did DeMille choose a withs/plant/reed-based interpretation of Scripture for his biblical movie?

Justifying DeMille’s Plant-Based Interpretation of “Green Withs”

It is difficult to verify historically today, but a number of considerations that potentially precipitated DeMille’s prop choice of the withs/plant/reed encompassed the following twelve factors.

One: *Samson and Delilah* was designed to be a family film that conservative church-goers could watch, and so no hint of animal mutilation, potentially gooey depictions and/or references to eviscerated entrails was considered desirable. Plants, on the other hand, were non-problematic (whether financially, management, or prop preparation-wise with no need to placate animal protection agencies), they avoided the slime factor, and their utilisation was more conducive to an atmosphere of playful romantic banter between two lovers.

Two: DeMille was king of the bathtub film. Indeed, if “DeMille had had a coat-of-arms, a cross and a bathtub would have been equally prominent thereon” (Durnat, 1963, p. 11). Therefore, in *Samson and Delilah* he used an outdoor oasis pool as the ancient world equivalent of a bathtub; consequently, a water-plucked plant from this idealistic outdoor setting was thematically consistent with his watery signature sign of old.

Three: Finding a handy (and indigenous?) willow tree, for those who accept the plant-tree interpretation of “withs,” especially in a desert oasis site where palm trees usually dominated, and surrounded by a barren wilderness, may have been too incredulous for audiences to willingly suspend their disbelief. Even if this product was procured by the Philistines for Delilah (KJV Judg. 16:8), and secretly smuggled to her without Samson’s knowledge, it would have compromised the cunningly crafted mood of the film and created other timeline problems. On the other hand, spontaneously plucking several reed/withs from a watery pool and reed bed was far more plausible and a far more credulous filmmaking proposition. It was also less problematic that procuring eviscerated animal gut on cue and without dampening the romantic mood.

Four: In the context of water and foliage, the word “green” automatically implied plants (as opposed to meaning new/young/immature/unseasoned), and water-based greenery was a natural corollary of an oasis watering hole on the fringe of a desert wilderness.

Five: The subsidiary scriptural reference to green withs “that were never dried” (KJV Judg. 16:7) also implied water (as opposed to moist sinew not tanned). A moist green plant with no opportunity to dry (or be dried unaided) readily jibed with reeds recently plucked out of an oasis pool and nearby reed bed, as DeMille depicted on-screen.

Six: Delilah’s on-screen Philistine servant, Hisham (Julia Faye), singly represented the “hiding” Philistine soldiers of Scripture (KJV Judg. 16:8, 9), as she toiled in the nearby reed bed. Thus, a tall reed bed was an appropriate and plausible place for her to “hide” (i.e., work unannounced) whilst in the open, outdoor environment of the oasis; especially since reeds can reach “a height of 4 metres (12 feet)...[and are normally] cut and dried for fuel” (Musselman, 2007, p. 238). DeMille’s choice of withs-reed bed-oasis location and pragmatic need to hide Hisham easily solved these filmmaking requirements simultaneously.

Seven: Since Samson did not initially see Hisham toiling in the nearby reed bed/green foliage area, it could be logically inferred that she appeared to be “lying in wait,” as scripturally specified (KJV Judg. 16:9), during the “withs” binding scene and dramatic aftermath.

Eight: Given the implied romantic context of Samson and Delilah’s verbal exchange (KJV Judg. 16:6-7), DeMille further romanticised it using the oasis as a private swimming pool with associated playfulness behaviour appropriate to young lovers enjoying each other’s company. It was also consistent with the need for a moist green plant nearby for Delilah to bind Samson with, and without the need for a major scene change, or looking obviously contrived for a cunning woman supposedly skilled in the arts of deception and seduction.

Nine: DeMille further romanticised this scene symbolically when Delilah attached a large flower with light purple leaves and a yellow core (which Samson called a “lily”) to her green withs/reed bond, and then playfully bound Samson with it. Although Delilah’s flower did not look like a lily as traditionally conceived in the West, it was a legitimate interpretation of scriptural possibilities because the word “lily” embraced a great variety of flowers including tulips, anemones, hyacinths, irises, and gladioli. The Hebrew designation is derived from an Egyptian word meaning “big flower” (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania/International Bible Students Association, 1988, p. 255), and a big flower is just what DeMille provided on-screen! Furthermore, with her big flower on Samson’s wrists,

Delilah had symbolically tagged him (i.e., the childlike man-of-God) as her prisoner-property that further reinforced the storyline of targeted identification, capture and betrayal.

Ten: Given the traditionally perceived deceptive relationship between Samson and Delilah, DeMille reinforced this theme when Delilah subsequently warned Samson of the impending Philistine attack. Later, she truthfully retorted: “But it was a Philistine” when Hisham was dramatically exposed as the non-threatening “threat” that she really was. DeMille’s capacity to wrap truthfulness in deceptive clothing was another of his auteuristic trademarks. At the same time, Delilah’s retort also reinforced Delilah’s upfrontness (scripturally true—KJV Judg. 16:5-6), just as she did in a previous DeMille scene when Samson asked her: “What would you do if you knew the secret of my strength?” and Delilah quickly and bluntly replied: “Bind you” (aka KJV Judg. 16:6) while she seductively smiled and stared him straight in the eye.

Eleven: Given that green reed-plants that were wet (i.e., not dry) implied water, which itself traditionally implied an outdoor location; DeMille was artistically compelled to have Delilah’s first secret-extraction attempt conducted outdoors at their oasis rendezvous location (i.e., the watery pool as nature’s bathtub and botanical home of the reed beds-cum-seven green withs).

Twelve: There is also the remote possibility that since DeMille’s mother was Jewish, as was his Paramount boss Adolph Zukor and the majority of the Hollywood moguls and film financiers of his day (Gabler, 1988), then his plant interpretation was also a personal concession to his Jewish heritage and professional faith links via Josephus’ withs-as-vine interpretation.

Conclusion

Overall, DeMille’s cinematic rendition of a plant-based “green withs” interpretation of the scriptural verse was valid, authentic and artistic, in addition to being scripturally plausible, thematically congruent, dramatic, and emotionally satisfying. In short, it was the best artistic choice by DeMille the film artist and public pleaser, and in that aesthetic process, his astute prop decision verified Stuart M. Kaminsky’s (1980, p. 83) claim that DeMille was truly a “master at visual detail, gadgetry and period objects.” It was concluded that DeMille was a far defter biblical filmmaker than has been hitherto acknowledged or appreciated. Further research into the interface and exciting pedagogic possibilities of the Bible and cinema is highly warranted, warmly recommended and already long overdue.

Notes

1. Many scholars have spelled Cecil’s surname as “De Mille” or “de Mille” or “deMille” (which he employed for personal private use), however, for professional public use, he spelled his name as “DeMille” (DeMille & Hayne, 1960, p. 6), and so it will be employed herein unless quoting others, along with “Cecil” and “CB” as appropriate.
2. Many religious educators, biblical scholars, commentators and religionists found it difficult to acknowledge that Samson was a blatant liar who deliberately “put her [Delilah] off with a deception” (Parry, 2005, p. 127) regarding the source of his extraordinary strength. Consequently, they frequently whitewashed Samson’s deceptive deeds as “repeated dissimulations” (Murphy, 1999, pp. 110-111), or described it as

“Samson threw her off the scent” (Duchet-Suchaux & Pastoureau, 1994, p. 118), or by having Samson say “HMMM. I’ll have some fun” (Suggs & Gray, 1995, npn).

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Table of Abbreviations - Bible Versions

AAT = *The Holy Bible: An American Translation*

Berkeley = *The Holy Bible: The Berkeley Version in Modern English*

CCB = *Christian Community Bible - Catholic Pastoral Edition*

Douay = *The Holy Bible Douay Version*

GNB = *Good News Bible*

JSB = *The Jewish Study Bible (Tanakh Translation)*

KJV = *King James Version of the Holy Bible*

Knox = *The Holy Bible Knox Version*

Moffatt = *A New Translation of the Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*

NASB = *New American Standard Bible*

NBB = *New Believer's Bible*

NCV = *The Holy Bible New Century Version*

NIV = *New International Version*

NKJV = *The Holy Bible New King James Version*

NRSV = *The Holy Bible New Revised Standard Version*

NWT = *The Holy Bible New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*

TAB = *The Amplified Bible - Expanded Edition*

TBFT = *The Bible for Today - Contemporary English Version*

TJB = *The Jerusalem Bible*

TLB = *The Living Bible*

TNEB = *The New English Bible*

TNJB = *The New Jerusalem Bible*