

BEN-HUR: A TALE OF THE CHRIST

Directed by William Wyler
Produced by Sam Zimbalist
Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
Released in 1959

It was the last great triumph of the studio system. No epic to follow could equal *Ben-Hur*. *Gone With The Wind* represents Old Hollywood at its peak, but M-G-M only released it; legendary independent David O. Selznick made the movie. *Ben-Hur*, in contrast, was expressly designed to save M-G-M from bankruptcy. It was their money on the line and it taxed the abilities of their ablest help, even causing producer Sam Zimbalist's death, of heart attack.

It is a huge movie of one man and how another man changed this man. That other man was the Other-Man, Jesus Christ. Even though our story focuses on the fictional Judah Ben-Hur, it ultimately concerns the real-life Jesus of Nazareth, and the effect He has on all of us.

Looking out on the unpopulated desert wastes of New Mexico, General Lew Wallace could feel the heat and grit familiar to a great civilization now lost. He was imagining himself back in the time of Christ.

A lesser hero of the Civil War, the general was the appointed governor of this hardscrabble land. Far from the refinements of the East, nearly two thousand years separated him from the days of Christ's work, but the textures were the same. And the common concerns of man had hardly changed since B.C. passed to the Years of Our Lord—man was still searching out a path of salvation, no matter how temporal.

The general had already written a novel, and was starting work on another, but found inspiration lacking. Then one day, he happened to meet renowned agnostic Robert Ingersoll. Wallace was forced to reconsider his own beliefs. Never a strongly religious man, he endeavored to research the life of Jesus and the efficacy of the Bible. This was the path to *Ben-Hur*.

At our story's beginning, Judah Ben-Hur may be under the foot of Rome, but he commands everything under that foot. He's a prince of his people, one of the wealthiest Hebrews, the pride of Jerusalem. He is generous to his slaves and enjoys the company of a loving mother and sister. Judah's so great, he's a touch boring. We are introduced to him through the arrival of old friend Messala, whom we'd watched marching his troops through Nazareth, under the eye of old Joseph. Messala's ready to lower the iron fist on recalcitrant Judea, but hopes by giving Judah the velvet glove the whole sordid business can be resolved quickly. Pressured to betray his people, Judah is wounded, violently refusing. With old friends made enemies, now Judah's character development begins in earnest. He feels sadness and regret. After the tiles fall, he becomes exasperated, then white-hot angry. Once he's wrongfully

sent to the galleys and his family tossed in prison, Judah becomes a man dead-set on making dog food of Messala. Four years later something like justice prevails, in the arena.

But there is no end to revenge. Remembering too warmly Messala in his youth, Judah turns his sights on the prime mover—Rome, of which, by a strange twist of fate, Judah is now a part. His mother and sister are lepers, and there is no placating him. Pontius Pilate tells Judah that Messala went overboard, and that with anything as large and far-reaching as the Roman empire, terrible mistakes will be made. But Judah thinks there was no mistake. He knows Rome values men, like Messala, who ruthlessly maintain order.

However, even as Rome rewarded Messala for his actions, the choice and the will were Messala's alone. Judah sees the problem as one of politics and power, not of the heart. He fails to see that evil transcends the daily affairs of man. Environments that reward good and punish bad can soften its impact, but the capacity for wrongdoing lurks in the breast of every human being. Evil strikes anew, somewhere, every day, in every generation. It continues, undaunted by changes in political structure, contemptuous of our attempts to regulate, outlaw, ban, substitute, and shame. But Judah only sees the rotten fruit of evil, and not its deep roots. As a consequence, Judah dismisses the message of Christ. For him, as for all of us, the laws of man do nothing to transform the heart.

As Jesus's reputation grew, some tried to tear Him down, especially religious leaders in the Jewish community. Jealous of His popularity or genuinely fearful that the teaching of this Nazarene could jeopardize the security of their people, the Pharisees and Sadducees constantly challenged the validity of His teachings, especially Jesus's assertions of divinity. Other people embraced Jesus, but for the wrong reasons, finding in His talk of a new kingdom a declaration of freedom from Roman oppression. But Jesus was referring to a hidden kingdom, beyond the principalities of this broken world. When He was seized and sentenced to die, His misunderstanding boosters turned on Him with derision—to these, frustrated and ashamed, Jesus was just another disappointment. That's how The King of the Jews could ride into Jerusalem to the acclaim of her denizens, palm branches waving, and one week later find the same people shouting for His crucifixion. They wanted a Messiah to deliver them from physical bondage, not spiritual bondage. Jesus wasn't the king for them.

But Judah was afforded a different perspective. He had encountered the Man long before, when Jesus kept him alive on that brutal chain gang march to the sea. He gave him water that preserved his life. But He also changed his perspective. When he was lead away from Nazareth, Judah stood tall. He looked at his shackled hands in a way that says, *What concern is this? Though I'm physically bound, my soul has felt the tug of freedom.* Finding that a "strange fate" has brought him full circle, he has the chance to return the favor. When Jesus falls along the Via Delarosa, Judah offers Him an impromptu drink of water. But a cruel Roman kicks away the gourd before Jesus can sip. Thus, eloquently expressed, is a bracing truth—what Jesus accomplished for us, we cannot return in kind. There is no good work we can perform to set right what we've made wrong. What Jesus gives He gives with no expectation of repayment.

So does Judah give up? Once he realizes that if anybody had cause to seek revenge it's this crucified King of the Jews, once he feels the sword taken from his hand, does he forget

about Rome? Christ never said that His followers should remove themselves from the world. They should render to Caesar what is Caesar's and render to God what is God's. But if Jesus can forgive, why can't Judah Ben-Hur? He may still work for change, but an armed rebellion (as we can suspect he was planning) is now unthinkable. Finally Judah can see beyond politics. He was always right to believe in the future of his people. He still does. But through the work of Jesus Christ our hero may finally realize, as Jesus hinted during His ministry, that God was calling unto Himself a new chosen people, and that even as Romans abuse Hebrews, and Hebrews curse Romans, all men malign God. With our actions we express our contempt for God every day. Each of us, in rebellion, tear Him down and take His place on the throne of the heart. The love of God, perfectly expressed in the sacrifice of Jesus, conquers all, not the arms of man. Indeed, if the love of Christ can quench the thirst of Judah's barren soul, what couldn't it do for the haughty practitioners of Roman might?

Judah expressed an understandable frustration, lamenting that he would have been better off pouring that proffered cup of water into the sand. Because if this—a daily struggle against self, against others, fighting back fear, barely grasping the futility of our earnest attempts to make sense of it all in the face of impending death—if this is all we've got, then life is a cruel joke. We might as well get it over with and just die now. But, as *Ben-Hur* so eloquently teases, "the world is more than we know."

Our film began with Christ in a manger. Jumping ahead about thirty years, we're shown, through visual means, the imposition of imperial might on the defeated Israelites, as Roman troops march through Nazareth. Joseph and a friend comment on their presence, but Jesus is unconcerned with physical might—He's up in the hills, communing with the Father.

This armored company is headed by a young man named Messala. Following him to Jerusalem, we now meet an elder Roman, whom Messala is replacing as garrison commander. Commenting on Jerusalem's truculent populace, the old commander says it's not their strength of arms but their strength of will that tax him. Rome will never rule in their hearts. He laments that this obstinacy is impossible to fight—threats, prison, death—nothing works. Messala, the ignorant hothead, is on the right track: He replies that to fight an idea, offer another (another more compelling, by implication). This is what he tries to dangle before his old friend, Judah. He knows that Judah feels passionately about his race, but Messala sees no hope for Jewish survival unless the Hebrews align themselves with Rome. But Judah knows better than to accept short-term glory at the expense of his, or his nation's, soul. He may be less aggressive than younger men to whom he counsels patience, but, like them, he knows Israel will find its way. And he knows that, sooner or later, Rome will eat dirt. This enflames Messala, who now sees his plans crumbling around him. The prior commander of the garrison was right—these are a stubborn people. And so Messala resorts to force. Ultimately, of course, he is unsuccessful. But Judah doesn't kill Messala. In the great race, Judah catches the whip that Messala foolishly directs at him. With their chariots entangled, Messala's crumples, and he is fatally trampled. Both men hate each other and wouldn't mind seeing the other die. And it is Messala who falls.

But Judah finds no satisfaction in his old friend's death.

So now Rome is worried. Judah is more powerful than ever, and he's ready to snare a bigger fish. Pontius Pilate tries to handle him gently, this extraordinary man who has survived against all odds and has bases of power in Rome and Jerusalem. Again, Judah won't hear of compromise or conciliation. Pilate, keeping his cool, threatens him, but he's cagey enough to stay vague. Ultimately, of course, he's got force in mind, too.

All this time we've been granted glimpses of Jesus at work, a Man for our world, but never ensnared by it. He moves just above it all, a beacon of sanity for the distressed and broken.

But Judah's not buying it. He deals in reality, and to him that means struggle. When he first met the man who would become his adopted father, Arius, with approval, saw Judah's defining characteristic as hate. Later in the film, Balthasar saw the same dangerous intent behind the eyes. Rage—it's all Judah knows, and he has nothing more at his disposal than blind brute force. But that won't topple Rome, and it won't bring him peace.

Judah doesn't believe in the unifying power of one government to lead mankind against barbarianism (Messala's probable philosophy) any more than the Romans believe in his concept of free will, decency, and mercy for conquered peoples. No, he just threatens them like they threaten him. Neither side has an idea powerful enough to generate an overwhelming paradigm shift. But Jesus does. Though it took a circuitous road getting there, many of the old Jewish descendents, now Christians, convinced the Romans of the efficacy of their faith, and eventually Rome adopted Christianity as its official religion, just before collapsing on itself. It wasn't Rome becoming Jewish or the Hebrews adapting to Roman ways—it was an idea, Christianity, which brought unity, reconciling the irreconcilable.

There is no end to pain in this world. The agony of Judah's mother when she reports that Tirzah is dying is as sad as this movie gets. But though leprosy is now a rare occurrence, there is AIDS. And though we don't see chain gangs force-marched to the sea, we do hear ghastly tales of whole religious and ethnic groups wiped out in machete raids. Just as for General Wallace, two thousand years separate us from the work of Christ, but the textures are the same, and the need for transcendence still remains. *Ben-Hur* is a passionate film that inspires and comforts. It is not pedantic nor condescending. It takes a serious subject and handles it respectfully. It is not as much a sermon as it is a question: Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?