

Ben-Hur (1959) • 60 Years Later

When a Jewish prince is betrayed and sent into slavery by a Roman friend, he regains his freedom and comes back for revenge.

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B*en-Hur* was, at the time, the ultimate event movie: lavishly produced, massively hyped, and long enough that it needed an interval. But although it still has many powerful moments, much of the film has dated badly. Nowadays it's difficult to believe it comes from the same year as [North by Northwest](#), *Some Like It Hot*, and *Rio Bravo*. In its grandiloquent style and its melodramatic, never-self-aware manner, it looks backwards rather than forwards. At times it feels more like something D.W. Griffith could've directed before WWI than a product of the same era that gave us Barbie, Castro, and NASA.

It must've felt like that to some people, even in 1959, for the short-lived yet lucrative Hollywood tradition of postwar Biblical epics was already drawing to a close. Throughout the 1950s a succession of hits like *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953) and *The Ten Commandments*

(1956) had shown that a lurid mixture of cruelty and spectacle wrapped up in reverent Christianity could work box office magic. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was relying on *Ben-Hur* to rescue the studio from a financial hole.



Image for post

Ben-Hur delivered, breaking many records (for revenue, Academy Awards, the longest musical score, the largest set), while also marking the beginning of the era's end. The films that followed in a similar vein like *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) got a much cooler reception-although the genre would stagger on in the less pious form of the Italian sword-and-sandal flicks.

It's no surprise, then, that *Ben-Hur* smacks of an earlier age: it was old-fashioned even when it was new. But perhaps this was inevitable. Producer Sam Zimbalist and director William Wyler had been working since the days of silents, and their film was based on the hugely

successful 1880 novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Jesus* by Lew Wallace. This had remained popular into the 1930s despite being the kind of book where people say things like “our horses of the best blood are derived from the Nesaeen pastures of Persia”; informality and wit are not its strong suits, and its leaden tone is reflected in the movie.



Similarly, the existence of two earlier film versions (a major MGM production of 1925 and an obscure, one-reel short of 1907), as well as a long-running stage play, must have bound *Ben-Hur* to the styles of the past. Even the employment of fine writers — including the relatively highbrow playwright Christopher Fry, and the novelist and pundit Gore Vidal — failed to lift *Ben-Hur* into modernity. Indeed, they were asked by Wyler to make the dialogue of the original scriptwriter Karl Tunberg (who received the only screen credit) less contemporary.

The movie begins with Jesus’s Nativity but soon skips forward some 25-years to tell the story of Judah Ben-Hur

(Charlton Heston), a wealthy Jew living in Jerusalem during the days of "this Messiah business". The "carpenter's son who goes around doing magic tricks" drifts in and out of the story, not at first seeming important to Judah himself.... although of course, the audience realises he's certain to become central.



After falling out with his childhood friend Messala (Stephen Boyd, in the film's most stunningly *bad* performance), who has become a senior Roman officer, Judah is sent to the galleys as a slave. Dramatic twists and turns ensue, not least his involvement in a naval battle which is the movie's second most famous sequence. In time he gains his freedom and returns to Jerusalem, where he defeats Messala in the now-legendary chariot race considered the highlight of *Ben-Hur*.

Audiences hoping this might conclude the three-and-a-half-hour movie are then sorely disappointed as it meanders on through a maudlin saga involving Judah's imprisoned mother and sister, any sense of conflict missing now that Messala is out of the picture before the

writers seem to suddenly remember that it was supposed to be uplifting.



It concludes, therefore, with the Crucifixion and Judah's own spiritual reawakening. When he heard Jesus on the cross forgive his enemies, Judah says "I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand". He has spent years fighting for revenge against Messala and the Romans, but now he will be led by love instead of anger. It's strongly implied, if not stated as explicitly as in Wallace's novel, that Judah will become a Christian and settle down with Esther (Haya Harareet), the daughter of a family friend who has been an intermittent, adoringly-lit love interest.

The plot isn't terribly complex, then, and this leads to the main problem with *Ben-Hur*: it's much longer than the drama justifies. Despite the passage of years, not enough *stuff happens* and, in the absence of story developments, we get very long scenes with protracted individual shots (a favourite approach of Wyler) and repetitive dialogue.



This lack of meaty material is peculiar, given that one of the movie's most ungainly features is its sudden jump from Judah as galley slave to Judah as successful charioteer — that missing period could have provided many substantial subplots. But it's explained by the way that despite its many epic features (300 sets, a reputed 50,000 extras), *Ben-Hur* is fundamentally *not* an action film.

The action sequences, which are its best element, nevertheless spring fairly naturally from a personal and emotional narrative about Judah's resentment of Rome, his betrayal by Messala, his thirst for vengeance, and eventually his acceptance of a more peaceful path. It's notable that despite all the political backstory, Judah's fall to the status of slave and then his elevation back to Roman citizen both happen purely as a result of relationships — and also that Wyler, by this stage in his career, had become a director of often intense drama rather than fast-moving action.



The result is a film that lurches awkwardly from highly cinematic extravaganzas to much more intimate (and, it must be said, frequently dreary) passages that often feel stagey. An impression heightened by the duration of individual scenes and shots, as well as by sets that are not convincing to modern eyes. (For example, the episode where Judah's mother and sister return to his house as lepers and try to hide from Esther.)

It suffers, too, from a lack of real connection between the two principal narrative threads: Judah's anti-Roman fury, and the developing movement around Jesus. (The love affair with Esther is too sketched-in and dutiful to really count as a principal storyline.) Just as the young Saint Augustine prayed "Lord, make me pure, but not yet", *Ben-Hur* — like other Biblical epics of the period — intends to linger as long as it can on thrillingly pagan sport and combat, and then hurriedly put on its Sunday best in time for the last few reels. The script does make an effort to unify the two through the idea of Judah learning to forgive, but we're not convinced it really

means what it's saying.

For all that, there are some interesting ideas bubbling beneath the surface, as well as some individually terrific sequences.



It must've been impossible in 1959 to make — or watch — a movie about Jews being oppressed by a militaristic European power without being aware of what had happened in Germany, Poland, and elsewhere less than two decades ago. And although it is surprisingly little commented-on today, *Ben-Hur* makes some clear allusions to the Holocaust: a Roman addresses Judah by his galley-slave number (an incident not in the novel) and later he is given a Star of David to wear (albeit not by a Roman). "You may slaughter the people," he says, "but that is not the end... we will rise again."

This also casts the movie's treatment of Messala in an intriguing light. In many ways, he's the villain of the piece, and the film differs significantly from Wallace's novel in showing Messala as unsportsmanlike during the chariot race. Wallace's book, by contrast, has *Judah* deliberately

wreck *Messala* 's chariot.



Even so, *Ben-Hur* is careful not to depict Messala from an entirely negative perspective. He's not anti-Jewish, as such, but pro-Roman and a careerist. His anger when his old friend Judah won't help him identify rebel Jews is, if not justifiable, at least understandable. Later, even Judah argues that Messala was not intrinsically bad but became infected by Rome; Esther counters that Judah, consumed by hatred, is himself becoming *like* Messala.

These subtleties may be easy to miss in a film which is generally far from subtle. It would be stretching the parallel too far to propose that Messala represents the controversial figure of the "good German" — *Ben-Hur*'s sources long predate Nazism, after all — but the movie is surely suggesting that moral judgements aren't always as clear-cut as they appear.



More mischievously, years later Vidal discussed a possible gay subtext involving Judah and Messala, attributing the latter's bitterness to the ending of their youthful romance, and claimed he had told Boyd (as Messala) to act the big falling-out scene that way without informing Heston. It's not clear whether this *actually* happened or whether the supposed recollection was merely Vidal trying to be provocative, but it does cast a new light on those half-naked muscular Romans lounging around the Roman baths with Messala.

These hinted-at issues add layers of interest to *Ben-Hur*, but many individual scenes are also engaging in themselves, even if separated by long duller stretches. The chariot race and related episodes form a prime example of this unevenness: there is an unnecessarily lengthy earlier sequence where we are introduced to the horse-training sheikh who encourages Judah to compete, and later there are 10-minutes of lead-up to the race itself, beautifully choreographed but lacking in tension, seemingly there to show off the vast and costly 18-acre set constructed at Cinecittà in Rome.



Then, suddenly, we get 9-minutes of *superb* racing action where impressive photography and editing generate a real sense of speed and motion (Sergio Leone was an assistant director, as was the renowned stuntman Yakima Canutt). But this ends equally suddenly with an oddly anti-climactic conclusion, typifying the stop-start feel of the movie as a whole.

Almost as celebrated is the naval battle in which Judah participates as a galley slave. Exciting and, for 1959, quite convincing, it's preceded by an even better scene below-decks where the Romans order rowers to work faster and faster. Here there's very little dialogue, just drumbeats and swift cuts between masters and slaves, in a rare example of a long scene in *Ben-Hur* that's completely absorbing.



Other highlights include Judah returning after years of hardship to his old house in Jerusalem, decaying and overgrown with leaves blowing across the courtyard; soon afterwards, we see *Messala* 's clean, bright courtyard, and the contrast of their positions is obvious. In a later prison scene, there's genuine horror in the dank, low spaces and the way that the camera refuses to show us two lepers, only the Romans' shocked reactions to them.

And there is even genuine, lively humour, rare for this film, in that bathhouse scene where Messala is goaded into betting heavily on the chariot race. (This scene does verge into Pythonesque territory at moments, not helped by the terrible brownface makeup of Hugh Griffith as an Arab sheikh, and indeed the typography of the *Ben-Hur* poster was parodied 20-years later in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.)



Small details are often effective too: for example the bloody feet of prisoners on a forced march, the way that fire spreads during the naval battle, the dolphin-shaped devices used to mark each lap in the chariot race.

The visuals are the one area where *Ben-Hur* is consistently good. Shot using MGM's Camera 65 widescreen system (which later became Ultra Panavision, employed occasionally in the 1960s before disappearing until Quentin Tarantino resurrected it for 2015's [*The Hateful Eight*](#)), *Ben-Hur* is always colourful and often bright, with the most striking images coming in the Jesus scenes. The Nativity is immensely painterly — shepherds gazing at the manger, the Holy Family gathered around the crib — and there is a haunting, if stylistically out-of-keeping, shot near the very end of the crucified Jesus reflected in a bloody puddle. Rain washes blood into a stream, symbolising the dissemination of his message

into the world.



Also making a strong, if sometimes overrated contribution, is the score by Miklós Rózsa. The quantity of music required was a challenge and, like many movie composers, Rózsa tackled it with a leitmotif approach, using different themes for individual characters and narrative threads. The most effective elements are the strong overture at the beginning, and the recurring "Balthasar's Theme"; by comparison, the saintly music for the Jesus scenes is often weak and unmemorable. (Incidentally, it's not true that they are scored for organ alone, as sometimes suggested.)

Where Rózsa really shows imagination, though, is in his use of music to distinguish the different faiths and cultures swirling around the eastern Mediterranean two millennia ago, rather as he had for *Quo Vadis*. One moment the score might have an Arab tinge, the next a Roman brassiness. The styles aren't strictly historical, indeed couldn't be, for we don't know precisely how ancient music sounded; for all the exotic hints it's still conventional Hollywood orchestral writing at heart. But

Rózsa manages to integrate this diversity into a cohesive score, even if it's a pity that the originally commissioned music from Sir William Walton — one of the greatest British composers of the century — wasn't used.



These are the strengths of *Ben-Hur*. The weaknesses are those interminable trudges through the flaccid scenes between the fine ones; some of the cheesier dialogue ("I wish you the joy of many grandchildren!"); and, above all, the performances. It's tempting to say that there isn't a single good one in the entire film, though to be fair, Finlay Currie as Balthazar — one of the Three Kings who treks to visit the infant Jesus, and in *Ben-Hur* also reappears later — isn't bad. And neither is Jack Hawkins as the Roman consul Quintus Arrius.

Heston in the title role, though, manages to be both lifeless and almost hysterically melodramatic (imagine his final outburst in *Planet of the Apes* extended for an entire movie). Often looking like he's about to burst into tears, he's never credible as an action hero or as a first-century man of *any* kind. Even Wyler thought him wooden and any of the other actors considered for the role would've been preferable: Marlon Brando, Rock Hudson,

Montgomery Clift, Richard Burton, Burt Lancaster, Tony Curtis, Kirk Douglas, Paul Newman, even a young Leslie Nielsen...



Boyd's Messala, meanwhile, moves his head and eyes like an action figure and appears afflicted with ghastly paralysis of his facial muscles. Harareet as the love interest Esther, a star-in-waiting who never became one, doesn't do much except be bathed in radiant light. Jesus is played by opera singer Claude Heater, in his only feature-film role, and we never see his face, which makes him the most convincing performer of the movie.

And yet... *Ben-Hur* worked. Critical reception was mostly positive (despite some doubts about Heston and the excessive running time), and it won 11 Academy Awards including 'Best Picture', 'Best Director', 'Best Cinematography', 'Best Score', 'Best Supporting Actor' for Griffith and — mind-bogglingly — 'Best Actor' for Heston. Its Oscar record wasn't beaten until *Titanic* (1997). It was the grand hit of the year and, at that point, the all-time second-biggest grosser after *Gone with the Wind* (1939) by some accounts. Heston became a

superstar.



Wyler made a few more movies — notably, *The Collector* (1965) and *Funny Girl* (1968), both about as different from *Ben-Hur* as could be — further evidence, perhaps, of just how much *Ben-Hur* and its kind were hangovers from a vanished cinema.

Given that a quest for sheer *scale* can seem to take priority over all else, it was likely inevitable that *Ben-Hur* would be so deeply flawed. But it remains a vivid demonstration of what the great Hollywood studios like MGM could achieve even as their powers were waning, and there are moments where it's a pretty good movie, too.



Cast & Crew

director: *William Wyler.*

writer: *Karl Tunberg (based on the novel 'Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ' by General Lew Wallace.*

starring: *Charlton Heston, Jack Hawkins, Haya Harareet, Stephen Boyd, Hugh Griffith, Martha Scott, Cathy O'Donnell & Sam Jaffe.*

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