

# The Charioteer and the Christ

## *Ben-Hur* in America from the Gilded Age to the Culture Wars

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*Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* was published in 1880, the second novel by Civil War general Lew Wallace. Millions of Americans in the late Victorian period purchased the story of betrayal and revenge, and attended pantomime, tableaux vivants, and stereopticon performances of it. Through the first two decades of the twentieth century, as many as ten million people on three continents attended performances of a staged version of the novel. The 1925 film adaptation remains a landmark of the silent cinema, while the 1959 screen version won a record number of Oscars and influenced a generation of directors, musicians, and special effects engineers. Today, the novel continues to resonate in American popular culture. For all of its effect, few scholars have used Wallace's novel and its subsequent incarnations as a lens through which to view American culture.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, the "*Ben-Hur*

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<sup>1</sup>The only prior effort to do this comprehensively is in the last two chapters of Robert E. and Katharine M. Morsberger's *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (New York, 1980), 453-96. But see also Blake Alexander, "Toga! Toga!" in *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, eds. Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Alexander (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 32-49.

tradition” can illustrate and explain the peculiar way in which the United States became “modern” in the century-and-a-quarter since the book’s publication.

We are accustomed to linking modernization to secularization.<sup>2</sup> As a society becomes modern, scholars tell us, the sacred—religion and its institutions—loses its traditional place at the center of society. This notion does not, however, fit the case of the United States, where religion has remained remarkably vital even as society has become increasingly secular. Through a complex process of negotiation, Americans in the late Victorian era and well into the twentieth century embraced many aspects of modernity without rejecting religion. They maintained their religious identities while feeling free to take part in the emerging marketplace of American consumer culture.<sup>3</sup> The growing gap that has since developed between those Americans who hold to traditional religious beliefs and those who reject them outright has been a key element of the culture wars that have dominated American society over the past two decades. To understand that gap, scholars of secularization insist, we need to focus on the *different* ways in which societies become secular. Lew Wallace’s great novel, published just as this process was beginning in the U.S., can help us understand the peculiar way in which Americans resolved, for a time, the tensions of secular and sacred.

I would like to suggest two reasons for the remarkable persistence of religion as a vital force in American culture. First, religion in America over the past century-and-a-half has developed a remarkable, possibly unique, symbiotic relationship with popular culture. Second, American Christianity has become dominated by Jesus to an extent that sets it apart from the rest of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Living in a democratic society uncontrolled by established churches and finally free of Calvinist determinism,

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<sup>2</sup>Useful introductions to current understandings of secularization theory may be found in Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, U.K., 2004), 83-110; and Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999).

<sup>3</sup>See Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005); R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York, 1995); Charles H. Lippy, *Being Religious American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, Conn., 1994); and David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York, 2003); and Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (San Francisco, Calif., 2004).

American Christians found in Jesus a God who was a virtual pantheon in himself, one who could be many things to many people. And they did all this just as scholars embarked on “the quest for the historical Jesus”—a person whose life and ministry they could actually study and *know*.

Lew Wallace wrote *Ben-Hur* just as this personalized view of Jesus began to gain popular and scholarly favor in the United States. He originally planned a short piece on the role of the Magi in the Nativity, but then made an extraordinary change of plans: he would make Jesus a character in a work of fiction.<sup>5</sup> To effect this change, Wallace intertwined the human experiences of the incarnate God with the daily life of the fictional Judah Ben-Hur, an enslaved prince-turned-charioteer. Wallace shaped his novel around their two stories, beginning when they were boys and moving gradually to the book’s climax at the cross on Golgotha. In Wallace’s telling, the two first meet when Jesus gives the young Judah water to drink as his slave caravan stops in Nazareth on its way to the sea. Judah never forgets the kind act or the face of the one who performed it. He survives his slavery to become the greatest charioteer in Rome, and defeats the young aristocrat Messala in the race that lies at the heart of the novel. Seeking his mother and sister, who have contracted leprosy as a result of their imprisonment in Messala’s infected jail cell, Judah encounters Jesus for a second time. Judah becomes a follower of the Nazarene, hoping him to be the promised leader who will overthrow the Romans and then rule Israel as an earthly king. But after Jesus miraculously heals his mother and sister, Judah realizes that Jesus is to be a spiritual savior for all mankind, not a temporal ruler of the Jews alone, and attends the Nazarene’s death on the cross.

Within twenty years of publication, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* stood second only to the Bible as the best-selling book in America. It might be argued that if Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) had helped to divide the Union in the 1850s, Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* helped to reunite the nation in the years following Reconstruction. The novel resonated with some of the most significant issues in late Victorian culture: gender and family; slavery and freedom; ethnicity and empire; and nationhood and citizenship—all of which emerge from the crucial

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<sup>5</sup>In one of the earliest efforts to present Jesus as the center of a work of fiction, the Reverend J. H. Ingraham describes the person and ministry of Jesus through a series of letters from a young girl visiting Jerusalem to her father, back home in Alexandria. J. H. Ingraham, *The Prince of the House of David* (Chicago, 1855).



Lew Wallace writing under his favorite beech tree, Crawfordsville, Indiana, c. 1900

Wallace returned home to Crawfordsville as often as he could to rest and write.

It was there that he began the manuscript of *Ben-Hur*.

Courtesy General Lew Wallace Study and Museum, Crawfordsville, Indiana

relationship of Wallace's two protagonists: one of them exemplifying action, striving, and revenge; the other absolute, sacrificial love and redemption.<sup>6</sup> The combination of their stories proved, for more than a century, irresistible.

Born in the same year in vastly different circumstances, both Judah and Jesus combine masculinity and femininity in ways that challenge any simple notions about Victorian ideas of gender.<sup>7</sup> When we first meet

<sup>6</sup>On the popularity of the novel see Lee Scott Thiesen, "My God, Did I Set All of This in Motion?" General Lew Wallace and *Ben-Hur*," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 18 (February 1984), 33-41.

<sup>7</sup>The best introduction to the study of masculinity in American culture remains Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago, 1995). But see also the more comprehensive analysis in Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, 1996); and E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993). Especially helpful for understanding Wallace and his novel is Susan Curtis, "The Son of Man and God the Father: The Social Gospel and Victorian Masculinity," in *Meanings for Manhood*:

Judah, he is a sensitive boy of seventeen, described as more beautiful than handsome—especially in contrast to the slightly older and more traditionally masculine Messala. The young Jew's father has been dead for ten years, and he is surrounded by powerful female figures: his mother and sister and his nurse, Amrah. But when Judah is betrayed by Messala and condemned to a life of slavery, he quickly develops the masculine attributes—hardness, discipline, determination, and cunning—that will enable him ultimately to triumph over Messala in the great chariot race. That race—which takes up three chapters of the novel—encapsulates the male characteristics most valued by the “strenuous age” in which Wallace wrote his novel:

Out flew the many-folded lash in his hand; over the backs of the startled steeds it writhed and hissed and hissed and writhed again and again; and though it fell not, there were both sting and menace in its quick report; and as the man passed thus from quiet to resistless action, his face suffused, his eyes gleaming, along the reins he seemed to flash his will; and instantly not one, but the four as one, answered with a leap that landed them along the Roman's car.<sup>8</sup>

Wallace's Jesus, too, is a complicated combination of feminine and masculine. Jesus appears only at the beginning and the end of the novel, and he says almost nothing. Yet Wallace describes Jesus's physical appearance and inner thoughts in great detail throughout the book. Like Judah, he is more beautiful than handsome. He has chestnut hair and long lashes over deep blue eyes—looks that will cause Iras, the evil daughter of the magus Balthasar, to deride him as “a man with the face and hair of a woman.”<sup>9</sup> Wallace's Jesus is “the man of sorrows” of Isaiah 53:3, one “despised and rejected of men . . . and acquainted with grief.” He is resigned to his fate, weighed down by the sinfulness of the race for which he is to die.

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*Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, eds. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen (Chicago, 1990), 67-78; and Shaun C. Lighty, “The Fall and Rise of Lew Wallace: Gaining Legitimacy Through Popular Culture” MA thesis, Miami University, Miami, Ohio, 2005.

<sup>8</sup>Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Oxford, U.K., 1998), 348-49.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 479.

Although Jesus here appears deeply melancholic, he is also supremely confident and in total control of all he encounters, even his trial and execution. Jesus dies the death of the Victorian hero, and Judah is there to see it:

The face then plainly seen by Ben-Hur, bruised and black with blood and dust as it was, lighted nevertheless with a sudden glow; the eyes opened wide, and fixed upon some One visible to them alone in the far heavens; and there were content and relief, even triumph, in the shout the victim gave. 'It is finished! It is finished!' So a hero, dying in the doing a great deed, celebrates his success with a last cheer.<sup>10</sup>

The sorrowful, feminine Jesus, becomes, finally, the triumphant Christ.

The intertwined stories of Jesus and Judah helped to ensure the novel's cultural vitality for a century. But at the center of *Ben-Hur's* abiding attraction, of course, is the great race. Americans responded to Wallace's chariot race scene as they had reacted to very few literary scenes. Judah Ben-Hur at the reins of a chariot becomes the epitome of the heroic action figure, an embodiment of the time in which the novel appeared. A *Ben-Hur*-inspired chariot race preceded the 1904 Rose Bowl game, while Ben-Hur products began to appear throughout the American marketplace. The Royal Milling Company of Minneapolis advertised its Ben-Hur Flour with an image of Judah and his horses churning up dust in the Roman arena above the declaration that "Ben-Hur Flour is in the race to win your favor."<sup>11</sup> Wallace usually took great pains to protect the text of his best-selling novel, but he appears not to have minded the energy and creativity with which American entrepreneurs hurried his charioteer into the sales arena.

Wallace's Christ narrative had a different sort of appeal, one that attracted readers not through its commercial potential, but by virtue of the irenic, non-sectarian way in which he told his "tale of the Christ." The three Wise Men who appear in the novel's opening pages each reject fanaticism, sectarianism, and bigotry in favor of a shared belief in the

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 513.

<sup>11</sup>*Harper's Magazine*, July 1903.

**BEN-HUR FLOUR**

IS IN THE RACE TO  
WIN YOUR FAVOR  
IF YOU HAVE NOT  
YET TRIED IT  
SOMETHING GOOD IS  
IN STORE FOR YOU  
ASK YOUR GROCER

FREE, we will send one mixing spoon to any lady who will send us before October 1st, 1903, the card or bill head of one retail grocer who does not sell BEN HUR FLOUR.  
Address: ROYAL MILLING COMPANY, Minneapolis, Minnesota.  
MENTION THIS MAGAZINE.

Advertisement for Ben-Hur Flour, 1903

Competing for consumers' loyalty, manufacturers like the Royal Milling Company of Minneapolis used images of Wallace's charioteer, Judah Ben-Hur, to market their products.

*Harper's Magazine Advertiser*, September 1903

One True God. Judah's conversion, which begins at the well in Nazareth, proceeds slowly and cautiously; the accounts that he offers of Jesus's miraculous powers are not based on emotion or faith; they are simply factual, almost clinical reports of what he has repeatedly observed with his own eyes. His conversion is not complete until he has followed Jesus to Calvary, where he hears the Son of God talk to his Father. It is only then that Judah becomes "conscious of a change in his feelings" and becomes able to imagine "something better than the best of his life"—something that will lead to "perhaps another life purer than this one."<sup>12</sup> Wallace himself claimed to have been converted to belief not by a single dramatic life-changing experience with divinity, but by sustained intellectual engagement with the life of Jesus as he wove it into his own "tale of the Christ." Having remained virtually untouched by the evangelical Protestantism that affected so many Americans of his time, he undertook a thorough study of the Bible and the Holy Land as he began to develop his manuscript. That study led him to become a believer in God and Christ, not under the influence of any church or ministry, but through a faith in the incarnation of his Wise Men's One True God.

Readers of *Ben-Hur* quickly placed it alongside other books of the American Christian canon: Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon* and Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Keys to the Scriptures* (1875). Just as thousands of Americans who had read the *Book of Mormon* testified that they knew that it was true, and just as others read Eddy's book alongside the Bible in their quest for true mental and physical health, so many also testified that Wallace's novel made the gospels' account of the life and ministry of Jesus even more believable. Wallace described the actual physical and cultural environment around his fictional character, including the "towns and villages . . . the birds, animals, vegetation, and seasons of the Holy Land."<sup>13</sup> His confidence in the fidelity of his description helps to explain Wallace's audacity in actually inserting Judah into one of the most important scenes of the gospels. The Gospel of Mark tells us that a young follower of Jesus ran away from the Garden of Gethsemane naked when the unfriendly mob trying to catch Jesus's

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<sup>12</sup>In 1893 Wallace published an essay explaining how he wrote the novel, which he then reprinted in his autobiography. Lew Wallace, "How I Came to Write Ben-Hur," *The Youth's Companion*, February 2, 1893; reprinted in Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography* (2 vols., New York, 1969), 2: 926-37.

<sup>13</sup>Wallace, *Lew Wallace*, 2: 932.



followers snatched away his clothes. In *Ben-Hur*, that young man is Judah. Wallace's skill in creating a scene gave his novel its persuasive power. For millions of Americans, Judah became a living being—and if the charioteer lived, so too must have the Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Wallace's novel, with its theme of conversion, became itself an instrument of conversion. Ministers who might otherwise preach against the power of the novel to tempt and corrupt made an exception for Wallace's "Tale of the Christ" and recommended that it be read both at home and in Sunday Schools. And many wrote to the general to tell him that they had been converted to belief by reading his work. One such convert was George R. Parrish, a young resident of the Kewanee, Illinois, YMCA. Writing on New Year's Day, 1887, he confessed to Wallace that he had been "a drunkard, given up by every one as bound to come to a bad end." He "had no future to hope for, no past but of which I was ashamed." Although his mother and the girl he loved were praying for him, he "had no faith in prayer." And then a copy of *Ben-Hur* had come into his hands. It "seemed to bring Christ home to me as nothing else could—he became mine, and before the week ended, resting on his strength, I stood up again in this community and was a man." He had now, he told Wallace, dedicated himself to Jesus's service.<sup>15</sup> Others were inspired by reading the novel to become foreign missionaries, and some of those were among the first to translate *Ben-Hur* into other languages.<sup>16</sup>

Through the first forty years of its existence, Wallace's novel took up a unique position between the sacred and the secular. Even as pastors recommended *Ben-Hur* as family reading and used its lessons as a conversion tool, playwrights and stage producers urged the general to authorize a stage production. Despite the liberties that he himself had taken in describing Jesus in the novel, Wallace insisted that a mere mor-

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<sup>14</sup>One can see Wallace's delight with his idea in his annotations of his personal copy of Cunningham Geike's *The Life and Words of Christ* (2 vols., New York, 1877), 2: 513. For elaborations on the authenticating power of Wallace's novel see Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford, Calif., 1999), 166-173; and Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), 46-78. Both of these works culminate in 1880, in part because of the publication of *Ben-Hur*.

<sup>15</sup>George R. Parrish to Lew Wallace, January 1, 1887, Wallace MSS II, box 2, (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington).

<sup>16</sup>Morsberger and Morsberger, *Lew Wallace*, 447-52.

tal could not represent the Savior on the stage. Leading Broadway impresarios Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger hit upon the idea of having Jesus appear only once at the end of the play—as a dazzling phosphorescent light behind a scrim. Their engineers also solved the problem of staging the chariot race, devising a treadmill on which horses ran in place, while a scrolling diorama of the Great Circus at Antioch gave the impression of forward motion.<sup>17</sup> Subsequent production tours added more and more chariots to the spectacle, until ultimately five chariots raced with Messala and Judah.<sup>18</sup>

But neither the charioteer nor the Christ was central to the stage version of *Ben-Hur*. The race takes up only a few moments of the plot and the concluding miracle, the only appearance of the phosphorescent Jesus, consumes even less time. Instead, the focus was on the mystery of Judah's true identity—how does the young man emerge from slavery a rich and powerful Roman citizen? Probably more attractive than the character of either the charioteer or the Christ were the innovative and spectacular engineering and lighting techniques used to bring both to the stage. While there was much that was “spectacular” about the novel, particularly Wallace's extended description of the great sea battle and, of course, the chariot race itself, the dynamics of spectacle became ever more powerful components of the story as it passed, first, to the stage and eventually to the screen.

But the Christ narrative was not without power in the staged version of *Ben-Hur*. Ministers encouraged their congregants to view the play—just as they had urged them to read the novel—setting aside any reservations they might have about the morality of attending the theater. Reviews of the staged version of *Ben-Hur* regularly reported on the number of people in the audiences who appeared not to be regular theatergoers—one review called the audience the “assembled worshippers.”<sup>19</sup> For John M. Handley, a New York City minister who attended a performance, the audience became “a worshipful congregation under the

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<sup>17</sup>See Richard L. Arnold, “The Great Race,” *Theatre Design and Technology*, 23 (December 1970), 13-15.

<sup>18</sup>Most of the manuscript material available for the stage play is in the Klaw and Erlanger Collection of the Schubert Archive in New York City and in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. William Young's script for the stage play is in David Mayer, ed., *Playing Out the Empire: “Ben-Hur” and Other Toga Plays and Films, 1883-1908: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, U.K., 1994), 189-290.

<sup>19</sup>*Indianapolis Star*, October 24, 1909. For a similar review, see *Toledo Blade*, December 10, 1907.

influence of Christ's story." Handley praised Wallace for the "immense missionary work 'Ben-Hur' has done" and hoped that "the author will receive the blessing of the Master of the Harvest for the countless souls his labor has garnered."<sup>20</sup> A recent study of urban Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has noted the ways in which "church became theater," as both sanctuaries and preaching styles began to be influenced by theatrical productions.<sup>21</sup> But it is also clear that, in the case of the staged version of *Ben-Hur*, the theater could, occasionally, become church.

Lew Wallace had resisted the pressure to allow a staged version of *Ben-Hur* for almost twenty years. He, and then his son Henry, refused for an even longer time to approve a filmed adaptation of the novel. Ever mindful of his late father's concern that anything having to do with *Ben-Hur* be of the most elevated quality, Henry probably simply waited for the industry to mature, both technically and aesthetically. By the early 1920s, when Henry finally became serious about approving a film version, the film industry was seeking ways to escape its early association with inexpensive lower-class entertainment while still attracting as many viewers as possible. The combined stories of the charioteer and the Christ seemed ideal for the industry's purposes, and in 1924 the Wallace estate sold the film rights to *Ben-Hur* for \$600,000 to a corporation created solely for the purpose of purchasing those rights.<sup>22</sup> The silent *Ben-Hur* was an epic undertaking. It was the first production of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, a new company that gambled an unprecedented four million dollars that Wallace's story would establish its reputation for artistic integrity and attract viewers by the millions.<sup>23</sup> Both gambles paid off.

In contrast to the work of a growing number of writers who, perhaps following Wallace's example, had begun to probe Jesus's psychological makeup, the silent *Ben-Hur* presented Jesus only in six scenes, all of

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<sup>20</sup>John M. Handley to Lew Wallace, January 13, 1900, Wallace MSS II, box 2.

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, U.K., 2002).

<sup>22</sup>For the sake of comparison, the rights to the wildly popular *Gone With the Wind* were sold in the late 1930s for a mere \$50,000. The price paid for *Ben-Hur* is equivalent to \$10 million today.

<sup>23</sup>The best discussion of the making of the silent film remains Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By...* (Berkeley, Calif., 1968), 385-414.

them, in effect, throwbacks to the late nineteenth-century tradition of the tableau vivant.<sup>24</sup> We see only parts of his body—usually a hand, never his face. When the Roman prisoner caravan stops at the Nazareth well for water, Jesus's hand and arm first saws wood and then extends water to the exhausted Judah. Only at the triumphal entry to Jerusalem and on the Via Dolorosa does the film provide something approaching a full view of Jesus, and both of those scenes are distance shots that preclude a distinct view of the Savior's face.<sup>25</sup>

But of course a character need not appear constantly to be central to a film, and the life and ministry of Jesus do, in fact, figure prominently in the silent epic. Indeed, the film, while not the conversion tool that the novel had been, still recentralizes Jesus. The Nativity and Passion sections that begin and conclude the film are lengthy and powerful. Between those sections, while the story of the house of Hur unfolds, characters debate the nature of Jesus and his ministry. Still, the moguls of MGM steered clear of any potential controversy. They avoided altogether the freighted question of who killed Jesus—originally an important part of the novel. They also tried to avoid antagonizing the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, which by the mid-1920s already led the effort to rein in the freewheeling new film industry. The Nativity scenes are dominated by Betty Bronson's portrayal of the Virgin. Her face and smile (in conspicuous contrast to the elusive Jesus) here seem to possess extraordinary powers over others. As in the novel, Mary appears to have an extraordinary connection to God. She hears a voice from afar that guides her to the cave where the Savior will be born. Finally, in the tradition of the passion plays of the medieval Roman Catholic Church, the silent film ends not with the Resurrection, but with the empty cross.

Nevertheless, the Christ narrative of the film did avoid identifying Jesus and his mission with any specific religious tradition, stressing the importance of the act of believing itself, not the specifics of any belief system. At the Nazareth well, Judah is not "converted" by Jesus's kind-

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<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of the emerging interest in Jesus's psychology, see "Manly Redeemer," in Prothero, *American Jesus*, 86-123; and G. Stanley Hall, *Jesus the Christ in the Light of Psychology* (New York, 1924).

<sup>25</sup>For a sense of the care taken in composing the sequences in which Jesus is more "suggested" than depicted see Katharine Hilliker and H. H. Caldwell, "Suggested Bible Sequences," October 6, 1925, MGM Collection, folder 13 (Cinema-TV Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles).

ness; he is, instead, “strengthened” to fight “for the King.” On the Via Dolorosa Judah hears the voice of the condemned man tell him to put away his sword. There is here no mention of saving men’s souls, and no reference to repentance from sin. Those who would be healed have only to believe that Jesus *can* heal them, not understand *why* he can work such miracles. In the final scene Judah stands with his healed mother and sister on their rooftop and looks out over the city to Calvary, with its three empty crosses. He assures the women simply that “He is not dead. He will live forever in the hearts of men”—far from the orthodox understanding of the meaning of that empty cross.

The figure of the charioteer is similarly undeveloped in the film, and is problematically portrayed by Mexican actor Ramon Novarro—a limited actor, physically unsuited for the role of the heroic charioteer. Slightly built, lightly muscled, and too young in appearance, he never quite looks the part of “the greatest athlete of his day,” as one of the intertitles proclaims him at one point. As one fan, writing to *Photoplay* shortly after the film’s casting became public, pointedly complained: “It will be a crime against filmdom and the memory of general Lew Wallace if Ramon Novarro is allowed to play Ben-Hur. Believe me, I cannot visualize Novarro struggling to fit his small feet into the huge sandals of Ben-Hur.”<sup>26</sup>

Whatever Novarro’s shortcomings in the title role, the silent *Ben-Hur* ultimately fails to adequately develop and bring together the stories of the charioteer and the Christ with the purpose and the power that had contributed so mightily to the success of Wallace’s novel. How to account, then, for the film’s undeniable box-office success? The answer lies in its successful development of the technical innovations and epic scale that had already become part of the *Ben-Hur* tradition.

Individually colorized scenes, such as the tableau vivant of the Madonna and the Christ child at the manger, enhanced the visual impact of the film. The brilliant star that explodes spectacularly over Bethlehem drew on cinematic artistry to, in effect, update of the shaft of light that had represented Jesus in the stage version of the novel. We see the miraculous healing of the lepers through a camera from which the

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<sup>26</sup>*Photoplay*, January 25, 1925. Novarro was also well-known as a not-so-closeted homosexual. See especially “Rebellion in Italy (1924-1925),” in Alan R. Ellenberger, *Ramon Novarro* (Jefferson, N.C., 1999), 51-64.



Ramon Novarro as Judah Ben-Hur, 1925  
Novarro portrayed Ben-Hur in the first silent version  
of Wallace's novel. His "too young, effeminate" looks  
disappointed some viewers.

Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington

director removes one lens after another, simulating the erasure of the  
scars of leprosy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>This technique was used, in reverse, to film *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, dir. Rouben Mamoulian (Paramount, 1931). See also David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York, 1993), 142.

The most effective dramatic innovations in the silent *Ben-Hur* involved sheer size and spectacle. The Jerusalem sets were enormous, as were the crowds that ebbed and flowed through and around them. Those crowds reappeared throughout the film, reflecting Niblo's skill (second only to D.W. Griffith) at moving masses of people effectively in front of cameras. Thousands of extras appeared in the chariot race scene, which Niblo filmed in a studio constructed as a colossal mock-up of the Great Circus at Antioch. Set designers created models of additional tiers of seats filled with model figures that could be moved to simulate cheering; consequently, the tumultuous throng appeared to number in the tens of thousands. Niblo used an unprecedented forty-two cameras and placed them over and under the track. The effect is a nine-minute race of breathtaking speed, intensity, danger, and excitement that may be the most effective rendering of the great contest in the entire *Ben-Hur* tradition.

Although the film subtly centralized Jesus in the plot of *Ben-Hur*, marketers and audiences focused on Judah. In a decade in which film actors and actresses began to be known as "stars," and were increasingly idealized—and idolized—by "fans," much advertising focused not on the story of Wallace's novel, but on the man who played the charioteer. In "celebrity product endorsement" campaigns that mark an important development in the advertising industry in the 'teens and 'twenties, Novarro—sometimes in *Ben-Hur* costume—repeatedly praised the virtues of a variety of products. The Andrew Jergens Company of Cincinnati, for one, developed a *Ben-Hur* line of toiletries. In one 1926 ad, Novarro, dressed as Judah, urges American females to try *Ben-Hur* perfume. "Perfume is not for men," says the young man, "but we must admit its seductive sway when combined with the beauty of women." Carmel Myers (Iras) and May McAvoy (Esther) join Novarro in the ad to extol the "delicate," "exquisite," and "distinctive," qualities of *Ben-Hur* perfume.<sup>28</sup>

Even as it was being sold in the marketplace, the silent *Ben-Hur* continued the process, begun by the stage play, whereby Wallace's archaic tale of the first century ironically enabled Christian Americans to embrace yet another form of popular entertainment that many of them had originally resisted, secure in the assurance that the entertainment

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<sup>28</sup>*Photoplay*, April 11, 1926.

was all in the name of a higher cause. Although the film is limited in its handling of Wallace's Christ narrative, its reverential tone and high artistic standards caused virtually all religious leaders to endorse it. Reviews noted that the film "preaches a powerful Lenten sermon," and that it was "written with a purpose but without doubt in service of a higher purpose."<sup>29</sup> In 1927, two years after the silent *Ben-Hur* brought Wallace's novel to the screen, Cecil B. De Mille made *The King of Kings*, the first full-scale cinematic treatment of the life of Christ. Perhaps encouraged by the *Ben-Hur* legacy, De Mille felt comfortable in introducing that film with an explicitly evangelical prologue that forthrightly dedicated it to spreading the Christian gospel.<sup>30</sup>

It would be another generation before this type of filmmaking occurred again. In the 1950s, with television increasing in popularity, and Congress investigating American loyalty, studios responded with a succession of biblical epics that not only seemed safe in a dangerous time but also capitalized on the revival of evangelical religion that accompanied the Red Scare and the Cold War. In 1953 Twentieth Century Fox introduced *The Robe*, a movie based on a popular novel that also told "the tale of the Christ" in tandem with the story of men and women dramatically affected by the life and ministry of Jesus. In the same year, the men at MGM dusted off *Ben-Hur*.<sup>31</sup>

Director William Wyler's artistic incarnation of the novel developed and combined the charioteer and Christ narratives of *Ben-Hur* as purposefully and powerfully as had Lew Wallace.<sup>32</sup> Wyler cast as the charioteer Charlton Heston, a man already identified as an epic hero from his performance as Moses in De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>*Boston Telegram*, February 23 and 20, 1926; and "Theatrical Scrapbooks, 1899-1926," box T-Vim 2002-001, Billy Rose Theatre Collection (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York).

<sup>30</sup>De Mille even published a brief essay defending the use of film as an instrument of Christian evangelism. Cecil B. De Mille, "The Screen as a Religious Teacher: How the Much-Discussed Filming of *The King of Kings*, the New Religious Drama, Was Produced with Reverence and Accuracy," *Theatre*, June 1927, 45-76.

<sup>31</sup>For a creative essay on the cultural context of the 1959 film see Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001), 18-20, 61-67.

<sup>32</sup>The standard biography of Wyler remains Axel Madsen, *William Wyler* (New York, 1973).

<sup>33</sup>See Charlton Heston, *In the Arena: An Autobiography* (New York, 1995); and Heston, *The Actor's Life: Journals 1956-1976* (New York, 1976).



At thirty-five and well over six feet tall, Heston brought to the role none of the unformed boyishness of Wallace's seventeen-year-old hero. By selecting the muscular, athletic Heston to play Judah Ben-Hur, Wyler was able to make the tale of the charioteer much more than the coming-of-age saga of the novel. Heston plays Judah as the epitome of mature, solid, unambiguous masculinity, besting Messala in a friendly javelin-throwing contest before the betrayal and beating the Tribune Quintus Arrius in a physical contest of wills at sea. And, of course, all of that physical strength, athletic prowess, and absolute resolve is on full display in the chariot race.

Wyler does not show Jesus's face in the film, but uses characters around him as evangelists to bring the charioteer to belief. He reveals the faces of *others* as they react to seeing Jesus: Esther as she absorbs the message of the Prince of Peace; Balthasar as the Magus becomes convinced that Jesus is the Son of God; the Roman decurion at the well in Nazareth transformed by his confrontation with the carpenter's son; and, in three crucial encounters, the face of Judah himself. Throughout, Jesus's presence is signified by the swelling "Jesus theme" of Miklos Rozsa's magnificent score, as well as by recurrent images of water—as falling rain, drawn from a well, flowing in a stream.<sup>34</sup>

In the final scenes of the film, Wyler brings together the stories of the charioteer and the Christ with an effectiveness and power that perhaps even surpasses Wallace's achievement in the novel. Those scenes show Judah finally being convinced by the witness of Balthasar and Esther, going to the lepers' caves, rescuing his leprous mother and sister, and taking them to Jesus, who has by now been condemned to death. As they watch Jesus bear his cross up the Via Dolorosa, the women, forgetting their own misery, call out for others to come to the aid of the Nazarene. Judah, recognizing Jesus as the man who gave him water at the well at Nazareth, rushes to do the same for the condemned man. The women, now cured of their fears of death, seek refuge with Esther in a cave from the storm occasioned by Jesus's execution. There, through an astounding series of quick camera cuts, we see them writhe in physical pain as flashes of lightning reveal both their agony and the ghostly body of the dead Jesus on the cross. By the light of those flashes, Esther looks

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<sup>34</sup>See Miklos Rozsa, *Double Life* (New York, 1982), 161-95; and "Miklos Rozsa," in *American Film Music*, eds. William Darby and Jack Du Bois (Jefferson, N.C., 1990), 307-344.

at Miriam's hands and discovers that they are free of disease. As the amazed women hold up their restored hands and flex their fingers, a final flash illuminates the fingers of Jesus's impaled hand stretching towards the heavens. This remarkable scene is perhaps the most effective in the entire *Ben-Hur* tradition in bringing together the charioteer and Christ narratives.

Wyler was able to tell Wallace's tale of Judah and Jesus without having the chariot race overwhelm all other aspects of the story. But the great race, as realized by Andrew Marton's second unit and Yakima Canutt's stunts, was, nevertheless, a stunning cinematic incarnation of Wallace's thrilling chapters.<sup>35</sup> Many consider it, even in the age of computer imaging, the greatest action sequence in film history.<sup>36</sup> It also became the focus of the studio's massive advertising and public relations campaign for the film—a conscious effort to reach a wide audience and to minimize any tension between the charioteer and the Christ narratives in the *Ben-Hur* tradition.

MGM set up an international press office in New York City; for more than a year before the film's premiere on November 14, 1959, the studio issued hundreds of releases, intended to create and sustain interest in the film. The office's releases were full of facts, legends, and human interest anecdotes surrounding what could, by 1959, be called a *Ben-Hur* tradition. The studio repeatedly assured the public that the mighty epic was intended for everybody; its *Exhibitor's Promotion Portfolio* included "instructions for the proper presentation" of *Ben-Hur* to the widest audience possible: students of all ages from both public and private schools, the YMCA and the YWCA, Boy and Girl Scouts, service and fraternal organizations, and religious groups. In the exhibitor's guide MGM presented its *Ben-Hur* not simply, not even primarily, as an action picture. It was at once a love story and the story of the struggle for freedom. And, most important, it was the story of people of different faiths working together to give birth to a new faith: Jews and Arabs united to fight the oppression of Rome at the time of the birth of Christianity. The guide's

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<sup>35</sup>When Heston was interviewed by Michael Moore in 2002 for *Bowling for Columbine*, the charioteer chose to sit just in front of a large painting of him as Judah, dressed for the great race.

<sup>36</sup>For an excellent introduction to the ancient context of the *Ben-Hur* chariot race tradition, see Marcus Junkelmann, "On the Starting Line with Ben-Hur: Chariot-Racing in the Circus Maximus," in Eckart Koehnne and Cornelia Ewigleben, eds., *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 86-102.

message was unrelentingly ecumenical—even its front cover, where the subtitle of Wallace’s novel has been slightly, but significantly, altered from “Tale of the Christ” to “A Tale of the People and the Times of the Christ.”<sup>37</sup> There are no guilty Jews—or Romans—here, simply the working out of God’s plan for the redemption of mankind. But the specific, and potentially divisive, elements of that plan are absent. Balthasar and Esther preach an amorphous gospel, according to which Jesus is sent by the One True God to replace hate with love in the hearts of men. Judah begins the film as a model Jew; he leaves it a convert to Christianity, “the tradition that was to be known as brotherly love.”<sup>38</sup>

Having devised innovative ways to market *Ben-Hur* itself, MGM’s marketing division then pioneered the kind of product tie-in campaigns that accompany the marketing of today’s blockbuster action films. The studio licensed hundreds of companies to manufacture products “for every room in the house and every member of the family,” and for all faiths, that would bear the *Ben-Hur* name and that would replicate significant moments in the film, most especially the great chariot race. They included “oriental” designs for clothing, household goods and jewelry, food products, “paint-by-number” art sets, and an amazing array of charioteer action figures.<sup>39</sup> In late 1959 and throughout 1960, as millions of Americans saw *Ben-Hur*, this product tie-in campaign and the promotional blitz that attended it helped to create something altogether different from any effort that preceded it: a film that combined unprecedented spectacle and action with deep spirituality, the whole of which was then skillfully sold in the marketplace to a wide general audience.

This, then, is the fully formed *Ben-Hur* tradition—a negotiation among sacred and secular themes, calculated to reach the largest number of potential viewers. From the novel’s 1880 publication, through its

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<sup>37</sup>*Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Exhibitor’s Promotion Portfolio* (Los Angeles, 1959), in author’s collection.

<sup>38</sup>Joseph Mersand and Jeanne Smith, “A Guide to the Discussion and Appreciation of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Production of *Ben-Hur*, Directed by William Wyler,” *Photoplay Studies*, 24 (November 1959), 6. Mersand was the president of the National Council of Teachers of English. See also “Schools to Utilize *Ben-Hur* for Study Predicts President of National Council of Teachers of English,” n.d., *Ben-Hur* Press Clippings Collection (Film and Media Library, Museum of Modern Art, New York).

<sup>39</sup>“*Ben-Hur* Commercial Tie-Ins,” n.d.; “Eleven Theatres to Open *Ben-Hur* by Christmas With Ten Others Soon After. Promotion Plans Rolling,” October 14, 1959, *Ben-Hur* Press Clippings Collection.

stage adaptation, to the silent and sound film productions of 1925 and 1959, the tradition took shape around evolving interpretations of the relationship of the charioteer and the Christ. But the *Ben-Hur* tradition has not remained static. Wallace's interwoven narratives of Judah and Jesus have resonated in subsequent films, some of them still directed at a mass market now increasingly dominated by young males, and others aimed a new niche market of conservative evangelical Christians, who are increasingly focused on Jesus Christ.

The charioteer's story—and more specifically, the race itself—has figured prominently in several mass-market films aimed at young male viewers. Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday* (1999), a tribute to NFL football, uses scenes from the 1959 version of *Ben-Hur* to drive home the gladiatorial image of professional football players. Coach Tony D'Amato meets with a prospective player in his home, while a television in the background plays the famous chariot race. Referring to the film scene behind them, the coach and player discuss football players as the new gladiators and debate the meaning of this latter-day gladiatorial combat. For director Stone, *Ben-Hur's* legacy belongs exclusively to the charioteer and to the competitive, aggressive male values he exemplifies.

In the same year that Stone included the chariot race in his cinematic homage to professional football, George Lucas used the first of his *Star Wars* prequels to honor the race. On several occasions Lucas has said that the pod race in *The Phantom Menace* was intended to honor the impact that the chariot race had on him as a boy. Lucas's film combines explicit and intentional references to the 1959 version with other, perhaps less intentional, references to the messianic images associated with the Christ. His charioteer, Anakin Skywalker, is a precocious enslaved boy of nine who is a whiz with all things mechanical and is the only human in the Outer Territory capable of competing with galactic life forms in the dangerous sport of pod racing. He defeats those competitors in a computer-generated pod race that echoes the great race from the 1959 *Ben-Hur*. But Anakin also functions in the film as something of a Christ figure. Both his mother and the Jedi knight who discovers him sense that he may be the prophesied "Chosen One," who will "return the balance to the Force."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>*The Phantom Menace*, dir. George Lucas (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999).

One year later, in 2000, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* not only provided a similar sacred-secular combination, but also echoed much of the plot and the themes of the 1959 film. *Gladiator*, like *Ben-Hur*, is a story of friendship, betrayal, revenge, and redemption. Like Lucas, Scott had been dazzled as a boy by the chariot-race scene from the 1959 *Ben-Hur*; as an adult he had been equally impressed by the race segment from the silent version of the novel.<sup>41</sup> He hoped to make a film that would live up to what he calls the "challenge" of the *Ben-Hur* cinematic tradition: the epic dimensions of the 1959 film but also the sensitive ways in which Wyler and his technical crew were able to do justice to the intimate aspects of the film and thereby prevent the epic from overwhelming the human.

In his physical stature and in his acceptance of brutality, Scott's gladiator is a variant of Wallace's charioteer, but he also functions as a Christ figure. In the arena with the Emperor Commodus, the gladiator becomes one who redeems by conquering evil and by dying for "the glory that once was Rome." To that extent, in Scott's film the charioteer becomes the Christ.<sup>42</sup>

As some of the best film directors at the turn of the twenty-first century found ways to celebrate the charioteer narrative of *Ben-Hur* in action films intended for a mass market, a new market of evangelical Christians eagerly adopted the Christ narrative of *Ben-Hur* as its own. In *Ben-Hur*'s Christ narrative they found affirmation and identity in a culture from which they felt increasingly alienated. The first evidence of this development appeared in 2000, when James Dobson's powerful Christian organization, Focus on the Family, produced a radio dramatization of *Ben-Hur* that was released on CD and marketed through the group's extensive mailing lists and to the exploding number of bookstores that served the nation's expanding evangelical Christian culture.

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<sup>41</sup>In the documentary made for the 2005 DVD Scott relates how Andrew Marton, the second unit director of the epic, came to the University of Southern California and dissected the race for Marton's film class. *Gladiator*, dir. Ridley Scott (Dreamworks, 2005).

<sup>42</sup>In the "expanded" version of *Gladiator*, Christianity actually makes an appearance. In an ultimately deleted scene, Maximus, while being taken from one point in Proximos's camp to another, briefly glimpses a man with long hair and a beard, holding in his hand a small cross, with a fish sign on his tunic. The man, a dead ringer for Warner Sallman's iconic portrait of Jesus, is obviously an early Christian, and is either preaching to, or praying with, a small group of followers. Maximus gazes intently at the man and then is forced to hurry on by his guards. *Ibid.*

The Focus on the Family dramatization clearly was not intended for a mass audience but explicitly targeted the growing market of evangelical teens.

At about the same time, Charlton Heston also produced an animated version of *Ben-Hur* in which he both narrates and performs the title role. By that time, this definitive charioteer had become one of the nation's leading Christian entertainment entrepreneurs and a spokesman for conservative Christians in the culture wars of the late twentieth century. Like the Focus on the Family radio dramatization that preceded it, Heston intended his animated *Ben-Hur* for an evangelical Christian audience in general and for young people in particular. It sanitizes the story by taking more liberties with the plot than any other adaptation of the novel: Judah kills no one; the chariot race is not very violent—there are no crashes, and Messala is not dragged behind his horses. And even more so than in the Focus on the Family version, Heston's adaptation is quite explicit and unapologetic about its evangelical mission.

In 2003, the year in which the Heston animated version of *Ben-Hur* appeared, Penguin Putnam introduced a new edition of Wallace's novel that was also intended for the evangelical niche market. Timothy LaHaye, chosen to write the introduction to the new edition, approaches it almost as a confession: *Ben-Hur* "made me realize that fiction could be used to send a message that is even more important than the story"—that it could attract not just the niche market of evangelical Christians but also bear evangelical witness to American mass culture.<sup>43</sup>

Even as LaHaye wrote, Mel Gibson was completing *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Gibson's enormously profitable film did exactly what LaHaye urged: it took the message of the conservative evangelical culture to the mass culture. Here is Christ as Braveheart—as interpreted by Mel Gibson. Both of Gibson's heroes—William Wallace and Jesus—exhibit stoic strength in the face of torture. When molded in the image of Gibson and his own cinematic persona, the Christ begins to resemble the charioteer.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Lew Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, introduction by Tim LaHaye (New York, 2003), xi. LaHaye is the co-author of the best selling *Left Behind* novels, a series about the events surrounding the Rapture that captures the sense of persecution in much of the conservative Christian counter culture.

<sup>44</sup>For a slightly different perspective on Gibson's Jesus, see "The Passion of the Christ: Jesus as Action Figure," in Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, *Cinematic Savior: Hollywood's Making of the American Christ* (Westport, Conn., 2006), 117-32.

Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* successfully negotiated the divide between the sacred and the secular as few cultural phenomena in American history have: it appealed at once to a mass secular audience and to a new niche market of evangelical Christians. There is no evidence that Gibson was directly influenced by *Ben-Hur*, but Lew Wallace's novel, and the subsequent adaptations of it, played a major role in shaping the culture in which *The Passion of the Christ* proved to be so powerful. Wallace's "tale of the Christ," by weaving Jesus's story through the lives of sympathetic mortals, made the life of the Savior a legitimate subject for literary treatment. The stage and screen adaptations of the novel that followed over the next century-and-a-quarter proved to be important vehicles by which Americans became accustomed to the appearance of Jesus, and other Christian iconography, in secular markets, even when that marketplace, in our own time, began to divide into sometimes competitive niches. The necessary negotiations between the sacred and the secular that attended that process can tell us much about the ways in which the American republic became modern without rejecting religion.

