Getting It Right the Second Time: Adapting Ben-Hur for the Screen

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Gordon Thomas

This is an updated and revised version of an article first posted in *Bright Lights* in May 2006.

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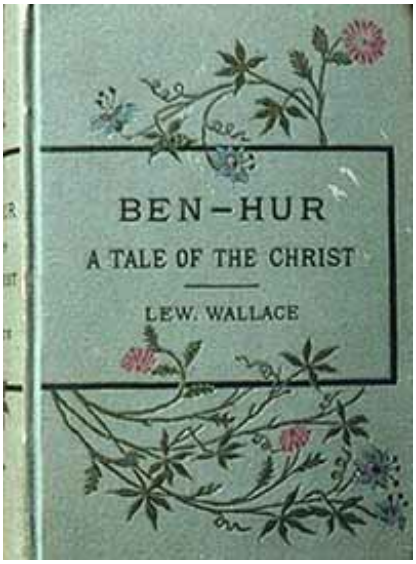
Bigger is better this time — though Wyler and Rozsa helped

Say it isn't so, some of us may groan, but last April (2014), *Variety* (and other media mouthpieces) announced that a new production of *Ben-Hur*, which has floated about as something of a rumor since last year, has accumulated a screenplay, a director, and a release date of February 26, 2016. Sitting in the chair from which William Wyler directed a similarly entitled film in 1959 will be Timur Bekmambetov, late of the less than esteemed 2012 release *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*.

Bible stories are resurgent in the movies. Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) has already launched, and Brad Pitt is reportedly on board to play the title role in a film called *Pontius Pilate.* If Steven Spielberg and Ridley Scott both hanker to take on Moses, even without Charlton Heston's participation, is there any cause to wonder at a reboot of the deliriously successful biblical fable *Ben-Hur*?

But whatever talent, or lack thereof, the producers, partnering with MGM, manage to assemble for this project, the tale of Ben-Hur may prove a tough old corpse to reanimate. MGM no longer owns the 1959 film — the studio sold it to Ted Turner back in the '80s — but the filmmakers promise to deliver, not a remake of Wyler's film, but a brand new adaptive angle on Lew Wallace's 1880 novel, now firmly in the public domain. Well, good luck to 'em. It was only by dint of craft and an unrelenting drive for excellence that Wyler, screenwriters, crew, and cast managed to fashion a very good movie out of this very old, and by the Eisenhower years, largely unread Victorian novel.



The home video rights to Wyler's *Ben-Hur* are in the hands of Warner Bros., and they've done a fine job with their releases of it over the years. Most recently, in 2011 and a couple years too late, the studio released a 50th anniversary edition offering a transfer from an all new, frame-by-frame 4K digital restoration. The results on Blu-ray appeared definitive, with tight resolution, corrected, balanced color, and a spot-on resurrection of the original aspect ratio. Among the neuronal delights and new special features (including a reduced facsimile of Heston's diary from the filming) was the retention, from an earlier DVD edition, of the 1925 *Ben-Hur* directed by Fred Niblo. Warners didn't stoop to give the silent film an HD transfer as well, but the opportunity to watch both films in tandem, along with TCM's making-of documentary (it too held over from earlier DVD editions), allows a deep glimpse into the origins of the 1959 phenomenon.

I. Tale of the Christ

If Warners had wanted the buyers of the 50th anniversary edition to touch the bottom of this tale of corporate woe, naïve religiosity, and raging screenplays, they should have included a copy of Lew Wallace's 1880 novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. Wallace, a former general for the Union in the Civil War, had already begun one novel when, ecstatically under the spell of a newly awakened Christian faith, he embarked on a second, *Ben-Hur.* Unexpectedly for Wallace, the novel eventually became an international bestseller. In America, its sales would not be eclipsed until Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* arrived in 1936.

Wallace's novel stuck in the craw of American consciousness. Throughout much of the 1890s, two savvy theater managers pleaded with Wallace for permission to adapt the novel for the stage. The sticking point: the presence of Christ midst the roar of the greasepaint — Wallace couldn't allow such blasphemy. The solution was to have the Man of Peace portrayed not by an actor, but by a shaft of blue light. *Ben-Hur,* the stage play, opened in 1899 and ran for over twenty years.

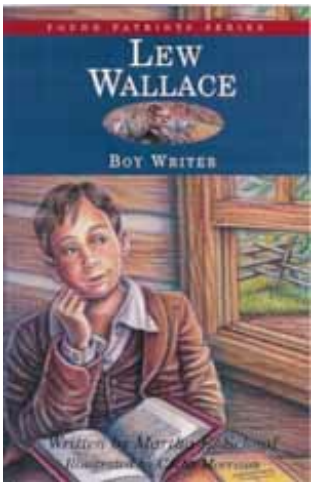
In 1907, after the General had been dead for two years, came the first movie, a ten-minute, one-reel quickie that I assume provided little competition for the stage play or balm for Wallace's uneasy spirit. The next true contender came with the 1925 premiere of MGM's film of *Ben-Hur*. Henceforth — and especially after MGM did it again in 1959 — *Ben-Hur* belonged, in perpetuity, to the movies. But first Hollywood got a lesson in jurisprudence.

To film *Ben-Hur* in the mid-twenties, the Goldwyn company (soon to become MGM) had to pay real money for the rights to Wallace's book because of a precedent set back in 1907. Wallace's estate had sued the makers of that first *Ben-Hur* movie — the filmmakers lost and paid dearly. The whole affair went to formalize the rights of authors when their material is propositioned for the screen. Turns out, MGM brokered a very good deal: thirty years apart, they made two immodest, expensive movies out of Wallace's stolid prose. Both were unqualified successes, and both, as cash cows, engineered the survival of the studio — first during the tender years after the merger, and then, in 1959, when the aging MGM was to dip perilously close to bankruptcy. Wallace's book may well be the most lucrative

piece of property ever optioned from an author (or an estate) in the 20th century (okay, except maybe for the novel written by that Mitchell woman).

Working on *Ben-Hur* in the 1870s, Lew Wallace, unlike any novelist working today, gave no thought whatsoever to stage or movie rights. A gifted amateur turned professional, Wallace was on fire writing *Ben-Hur,* and much of the heat was stoked by religion, a fuel made all the more powerful for its being deeply personal. According to the making-of documentary included in the package, Wallace had re-investigated the validity of a divine Jesus Christ — and thoroughly renewed his faith — after having a discussion on a train trip with famed agnostic intellectual and politician Robert Ingersoll.

Ben-Hur's subtitle, *A Tale of the Christ,* is no second thought; the novel is fundamentally a vehicle for inspirational Christian doctrine. The picaresque romance of *Ben-Hur* provides the engine driving its final homily to conclusion; in one sense the novel is nothing more than a Sunday school pamphlet, a newly concocted Bible story, writ large. Wallace, a skilled but far from great writer, bookends his compelling storyline with sickly-sweet, Victorian Protestant versions of Christ's birth and then His Passion and Death. These retellings, written with strong conviction, have a strange, naïve integrity even when read today.



Wallace so clearly wants to get The Good News out that you can't really call *Ben-Hur* a potboiler. But it does simmer a bit. In the novel there's surprisingly more sex than in either the '25 or '59 film. And Judah Ben-Hur's drive for vengeance is more implacable than as written for either film. He kills a couple of Romans, mano a mano, without giving a second thought to justification. In the chariot race, it's Ben-Hur who contrives and uses the spoke-shattering, wheel-destroying trick, although his gambit lacks the blade-fronted mag-wheels featured on Messala's '59 chariot. This Ben-Hur is deliberately out to get Messala — kill him, if possible — not just to win the race for "his people."

Ancient Jewish law, Wallace explains gamely, justifies Judah's violence. Apparently, anything goes when one seeks vengeance over a clearly defined wrong, such as, for example, a former friend turned Roman thug abusing his position of power by thoroughly destroying your family. As much as I'd like to check with a rabbi over the legality of this carte blanche, it is central to what the novel's driving at. Wallace presents the Jews, at the time of Christ's birth, as the only moral people living in an immoral universe, a stature given to them by God and by their adherence to God's law. The arc of Wallace's story — and the message dovetailed within it — demands that God's law, given solely to the Jews, be completed by God's love, arriving first in the form of the Messiah and then radiating throughout the world as Christianity. Up to and through the chariot race, Judah operates in accordance with laws established by the God of Vengeance. In the final chapters, the God of Love instantly transforms Judah; he drops his sword. The Old Testament meets the New. Conveniently, for the sake of entertainment value, the Old allows for displays of decadence, lust, and killing; the New punishes, saves, redeems, and stamps The End on the final page.

Yet, prior to his redemption, Ben-Hur has sought more than vengeance; he wants to end Rome's oppression of the Judeans. Living in Rome as the fabulously wealthy adopted son of Arrius, he finds military training in "the fields of Mars." This involves mostly, I think, working out with a bunch of gladiators who give him tips on sword thrusts and feints. What Judah is up to — and this is one of the more interesting aspects of the book to a modern, post-9/11 reader — is training to become an insurgent, i.e., getting to know the oppressors, so he can tromp them into their own dirt. But Judah must be content, in the short term, with winning a lot of chariot races.

Returning to his homeland, Judah hears the call to action. The birth of the Messiah, in the person of a certain Nazarene, is no longer a prophecy but a reality. In a spasm of militant certainty, Ben-Hur hurls himself into organizing the Resistance, so that, when the Messiah, the new King, is ready, He can re-

establish the Jewish people as a pre-eminent power. Ben-Hur secretly assembles two legions of freedom fighters out in the Judean desert. Judah is going to pay for the whole thing, too — after all, he's possibly the richest man in the world. (A rich prince financing a near global insurgency against a massive, oppressive world power — that sounds familiar.) Feverish with excitement, Judah envisions the new King creating a worldwide theocratic dominion, an earthly Kingdom of God built over the still smoldering ruins of Rome. Our hero miscalculates, of course.

In no way is Wallace's story character-driven; Judah Ben-Hur barely registers throughout as a person with any kind of inner life. Messala is even more shadowy and rarely appears, except to spit in Judah's face and eat dust at the Circus. At their first meeting and after the briefest argument with Judah concerning the supremacy of Rome, the two friends split, and Messala's motives for wreaking havoc on the Hur family remain unclear — his actions certainly don't feel personal.

Esther, that nice Jewish girl, is here, of course, but in addition we have bad girl Iras, daughter of Balthasar. A fine, early example of the Betty/Veronica dialectic, Esther and Iras compete for Judah's body and soul across a good two hundred pages. Wyler's writers eliminate Iras altogether; in the 1925 version she is no longer Balthasar's daughter but a whore plain and simple, a known consort of Messala, who uses "The Egyptian" to spy on Ben-Hur and possibly, by way of seduction, to sap his manly essence on the eve of the race.

It all gets a little silly, this vampy Egyptian business in the '25 picture, and Wyler was wise to drop it, but Iras, in the novel, gives the story a real shot in the arm. Final events may reveal her to be a crass opportunist — and Messala's girlfriend — but Iras remains the most interesting character in the book. In sly rebellion against her aging wise man father, she presents a demure front to the world as she privately strives for everything the old man is against, i.e., worldly wealth and power. Alone with Judah, she acts surprisingly modern: forthright, witty, and demonstrative with her sexuality. She actually asks *him* out, and, with a pretty little lake in the Orchard of Palms providing an excuse for a boat ride under the stars, mans the rudder. Ben-Hur, sensing something amiss in the gender politic, comes off as simply inadequate, not morally superior to, this smart, powerful woman. In the epilogue-like last chapter, when the unredeemed Iras appears bedraggled and diseased in front of the smiley-faced, Christianized Hurs, the reader might feel like bitch-slapping Wallace.

Meaningfully, Judah first meets up with Iras in Antioch's mysterious Grove of Daphne, a vast pleasure park that enables men of gumption to wander amongst Arcadian landscapes and mystic waterfalls as they go about their whoring. Daphne is the Greek nymph who turned herself into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's amorous advances, but at the Grove nobody has to chase anything — you just take what you want after consulting the bearded oracle. Wallace makes hay with descriptions of glistening white temples and pretty shepherdesses all ensconced in exotic greenery — an intriguing mixture of religion and free sex. Judah's visit to this Satyriconian fleshpot — where one of those shepherdesses tries to lure him into the bushes — is a lively, standout chapter. Unfortunately, it didn't make it into either picture.

Of course it didn't. The Grove of Daphne is just one of the nooks and crannies running through this novel's uneven terrain, and Hollywood's need for sleek, no-nonsense melodrama has no time for such distractions. Like most writers of historical fiction, Wallace is in love with his research and wants nothing to go to waste, so he pours on the description, sometimes at great eccentric length — but often it's in these passages that *Ben-Hur* becomes a "good read." In his fleshing out of the Christmas story, for example, Wallace details with archaeological precision the khan, or inn, where Mary and Joseph stop for the night; when they finally settle down it's in a cave carved out of a limestone bluff overlooking the khan. Away in the Manger is actually deep within King David's old cave, and when Mary says in a hush, *"This place is sanctified,"* the mood is so dark and spooky that you nod in agreement. Later

Wallace gets in some gritty descriptions of the shepherds guarding their flocks — but then the Christmas zeitgeist comes swooping in as a radiantly robed angel with snowy white wings — the big seraph even tells the rugged peasants in a loud voice to fear not, that he brings tidings of great joy, just like the Heralds have done on Christmas cards for centuries. To be fair, Wallace doesn't truly get into his own with his religious settings until the Passion begins. Some of the book's best writing comes here, with Wallace's dovetailing of Judah's personal anguish with the Passion.

Wallace's Christ is a wispy, emotionally delicate creature who weeps inconsolably on his donkey as he enters Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. Being mankind's ultimate caregiver, this Jesus is not an angry, active Christ throwing moneylenders around, but a passive, womanly savior. "Womanly" is Wallace's adjective. The old soldier saw a cosmic gender divide here, with the thoroughly male Judah impulsively taking up arms only to encounter a womanish Man of Peace arriving just in time to disarm him. So much for the insurgency, a bad idea, apparently, caused by too much testosterone. Perhaps the General had seen his fill of what men could do to each other in battle and therefore proposed that armed struggle was not the Answer.

The Answer induces its share of longueurs, but patience rewards the reader with any number of contortionist plot twists, some of which involve Ben-Hur's ever-loyal bond slave Simonides, whose substantive, Dickens-style role in the novel ends up reduced in 1959 to a near cameo-sized part for the memorable Sam Jafee. If you read the book, you're going to miss, in both films, Simonides' strange little house built under a bridge in Antioch. And so it goes. The old truism that says movies are best adapted from second- and even third-rate literature certainly applies here, but, as MGM adapts Wallace's pop-lit off and on over three decades, a lot of it has to go, especially the very eccentricities that make the novel unique, even entertaining.

II. Toga Novel

But nobody throws the baby out with the bathwater — the baby in this case being Jesus, of course, both as infant and dead god; He's got to be in there. By the time we get to Wyler's film, Christ will not be the rather strange "personal Jesus" of Wallace's invention, but a blank, faceless Christ with an astonishingly good hair rinse. In the '25 picture, He is most often nothing more than a beneficent hand reaching into the frame, an upgrade, I guess, from that blue shaft of light. Oddly, in comparison with the intensity with which Wallace (*right*) depicts the events of the Passion, the two mythic set-pieces of the films, the sea battle and chariot race, seem underwritten in the novel. The author is clearly very fond of horses and naval skirmishes, but doesn't seem to have the chops or even the inclination to write a great action sequence. Wallace's and Ben-Hur's minds are elsewhere . . . with Jesus, I think.

Lew Wallace appears to have been one of those great American eccentrics, a loner interested more in proselytizing than in cranking out mainstream product, but who knew his fat sermon would sprout such legs? The *Ben-Hur* films could be seen as archetype for the whole sword-and-sandal genre that survives in Hollywood to this day — the revenge-motivated story arc serving projects like *Braveheart* and *Gladiator* surely originated with *Ben-Hur* — yet, when it was published in 1880, Wallace's novel nearly sank without a trace. It was only several years later that sales really took off; unintentionally, perhaps, the General's narrative fit quite neatly into a mainstream publishing craze, which Victorian literati disparagingly labeled the toga novel. (Wallace, ix–x)

There are several 19th-century toga-lit titles familiar to moviegoers: *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1835), *The Sign of the Cross* (1895), and *Quo Vadis* (1896). The first two titles became phenomenal stage successes in Britain before becoming both silent and talking films (Wallace, x). While three silent films (all European) were made from the best written and most exciting novel of the batch, Herman Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis,* Hollywood waited until 1951 to turn it into a rather turgid spectacle featuring a wooden Robert Taylor and some really nice art direction. MGM's massive success with this picture led

to a decade full of biblical costumers and ultimately to Wyler's *Ben-Hur*, truly the last of its kind.

But plenty of biblical spectacles had been made all the way up from the teens and twenties into the thirties. In fifties America, with TV seriously cutting into box office revenue, the major studios needed to give the public something the little box couldn't deliver: largeness, sweep, a colorful spectacle. Renewing the biblical epic, for which colorful spectacle is as butter to bread, must have looked mighty attractive, especially as the McCarthy terror roiled the country and all kinds of subject matter could be seen as, well, suspicious. Give 'em the old bible stories, said the corporate muscle, nobody's going to question that. Nobody did, and for a while, the bible stories made money. Then, just as easily, they lost money.

From the earliest days, a Faustian bargain seems to have made — Hollywood could present a modicum of violence and sex (even a little nudity in the pre-Code days) as long as the hero pledges to Christ near the end. Most of these films featured rather dull leading men, often sporting Roman armor, who eventually convert to Christianity because their girlfriends ask them to. This basic formula remained the same as copycats and variations abounded. And it's the selling of the doctrine, the desultory, required conversion pinning the ribbon of approval upon the picture, that ultimately does the picture in. None of the fluted columns, tufted Roman helmets, slave girls, bared midriffs and oiled biceps, scenes of hate and lust, reels of spear-chucking, blood-soaked pagan death could save these films from the curse of dullness. In the seats of half-empty theaters, kidneys ached.

Unfelt piety murders entertainment; that's hardly a revelation, and yet could all this conglomerate Judeo-Christian religiosity be the biggest *point d'assassin* ever to inflict Hollywood films? Redemption by the blood of Jesus or the hand of God worked just fine for many a Victorian novelist — I'm sure the reader's eyes moistened as hero and heroine were led to *Quo Vadis*' lions with Christ's spiritual surety ennobling their steps — but by 1959 it was a tired device, gone limp through formulaic repetition. After all, the movies had long ago stopped tying the girl to the railroad tracks. But late in the day, as the complex political/cultural zeitgeist of the sixties gathered on the horizon, Wyler attempted to prod the old beast into life one more time. *Ben-Hur* may have won its eleven Academy Awards just in time.

Decades apart, Niblo and Wyler struggle mightily constructing their grand *Ben-Hur* entertainments within the certain "givens" of Wallace's mythic story. With less trouble the filmmakers could have dusted off the even older chestnut, *The Count of Monte Cristo,* a clear inspiration for *Ben-Hur* and of course a much finer book. The mechanics of *Ben-Hur*'s revenge plot — escaping from captivity, becoming fabulously wealthy, putting on the cloak of a mysterious new identity to confront an old nemesis — are right out of Dumas. Peddling no dogma of any kind and expertly paced, the French thriller yields pure reader gratification — it begins and ends as a revenge fantasy, with the Count picking off his old enemies one by one. Dumas' novel, too, became one of the biggest stage hits of all time, probably eclipsed only by . . . *Ben-Hur* (*above*). Although the Dumas tale, with one of the most satisfying plots ever devised, seems much better script material than Wallace's bible story, no one, to date, has ever been able to fashion a good movie out of it.

III. Faith, Hope, and Chariot

If you can't somehow surgically remove Wallace's pulsating melodrama from the dramatically inert, doctrinaire tissue surrounding it, what *can* you do? In the early twenties, with the stage play of *Ben-Hur* still vivid in the mind of America, Niblo and his writers take their cues from this huge theatrical success. Opening in New York in 1899, the stage play put most of its eggs in the basket of massive spectacle, exploiting state-of-the-art stagecraft for the major set-pieces like the sea battle and the chariot race. In the race, as many as five chariots pulled by real horses galloped upon a giant treadmill that, to

complete the illusion, was backed by a massive, revolving scenic backdrop. To gorge on the spectacle, theatergoers swarmed to this blockbuster much as they do to its current descendants, mega-theatrical events like *Les Miz* and *Phantom of the Opera.* As the century turned, *Ben-Hur*'s mixture of adventure, revenge, and Jesus was candy to the tooth of white Anglo-Christian America.

Anybody in 1900 with a ticket to the stage version of *Ben-Hur* would have been eager for the special effects, for sure, but they also would have had high expectations for the play's fidelity to the novel. By accounts, the play delivered a well-studied equivalent, albeit in a near tableau-like presentation with characters often enacting the book's major events in long stretches of pantomime (accompanied by a full orchestra and chorus in the orchestra pit). Judging from vintage photographs, the play's staging of the religious episodes must have resembled hyper-visualized versions of the kinds of amateur Christmas pageants and passion plays many in the audience had taken part in as children.

Even as an extravaganza, a *Ben-Hur* event on the boards was a symbolic one, but what about a *Ben-Hur motion picture*? From their beginnings movies have effected a constant ratcheting-up of illusion, that what you see is not a theatrical equivalent but somehow *real.* Any movie made of *Ben-Hur,* even in 1925, had better throw a chariot race that looks real enough to kill one or two of the charioteers. No treadmills, please; no rotating backdrops. You might even want to plant a rumor in the press that a stunt man or two actually *were* killed in the chariot race.

When possible, the scale of the spectacle in the *Ben-Hur* of 1925 is close to 1:1. They make humongous sets (with some help from miniatures and traveling mattes). For the sea battle, they build and destroy — at enormous cost and risk to human life — actual life-size Roman battleships. The visual impact of ’25′s sea battle is a good example of what this movie does right within the era's concept of gigantic literalism. Hollywood's early penchant for massive set building began with Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916); D. W. caught the fever from seeing the pioneering Italian epic *Cabiria* (1914). The twenties continued the trend — witness the castles and palaces in the Douglas Fairbanks extravaganzas *Robin Hood* (1922) and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924). The producers of ’25′s *Ben-Hur* do not want to disappoint.

Near the beginning of principal photography, the production shoots in Italy, somewhere around Rome. More than one life-size galley has been built — on the screen it looks like a whole damn fleet of them, sails billowing proudly on the actual Mediterranean. Miniatures will be used sparingly. The pirates' ramming of Arrius' flagship takes place, not within a studio hangar in a big tank, but outside on the sea in the hot sun. When photographed in a long shot, the disaster has a near documentary quality, made even more vivid because it *is* a real disaster. Unplanned, one of the ships has caught fire and burns uncontrollably; the wind sends it to the other, rammed ship, and flames and black smoke are everywhere. Dozens of people jump from the ship into the choppy sea, not because some assistant director tells them to, but because the flames are licking at their pirate costumes. The rumor goes out that many of these Italian extras couldn't swim and a few are missing. As excellent as this might prove for early publicity, the liabilities and expenses of the shoot shut the picture down for a time, never again to resume in Italy. MGM moves the entire project to its studios and lots in California. But it's a great sequence, putting Wyler's miniature and blue-screen work to shame.

The move to California does not constrict the scale of the spectacle. While Jerusalem's Joppa gate looks like a race of Cyclops built it, the Circus Maximus becomes a swollen multi-tiered football stadium seemingly designed by Albert Speer. Remarkably tall columns topped by Roman eagle medallions festoon the front end of the arena. Just replace the eagles with swastikas and it starts looking like a nice site for a Nazi rally. The *spina,* the island in the midst of the track book-ended with muscular colossi, is truly the prototype for the better-designed and more elegant 1959 circus.

As spectacle, the chariot race from 1925, like the sea battle, needs no apologies. In spite of all the undercranking that makes it a bit jittery to modern eyes, it's every second as exciting as Wyler's. In fact, seeing this race after decades of viewing the 1959 version, I feel there's something fresher and fundamentally more visceral in the 1925 shoot. Here's a case where the advancement of technologies causes hindrance and stricture rather than greater ease and a ratcheting up of effect.

In either decade, it was a massive challenge to achieve maximum realism in the chariot race, but in the late '50s, Wyler – and his second-unit director, Andrew Marton – had to face down two major technical issues that came with the job: color photography and the limitations of shooting in 65mm anamorphic (also known as Ultra Panavision 70, or MGM Camera 65). The problems with this widest of all formats are legendary, especially with regard to the race sequence. Each of the three huge cameras – there were only six in existence – had to be mounted on cranes and, because of focal length demands, placed very close to the action, a dangerous proposition for the crew that afforded a limited range of choices for the cinematographer..

The panoramic framing of the 65mm format is used to stunning effect throughout Wyler's picture, as for example when it contains a legion of Roman soldiers marching through a sunlit Judean landscape, and it's certainly no slouch at capturing nine chariots, pulled by four horses each, careening along a wide sandy track. But the inability to compose vertically and in depth, which is a problem for interior shots and close, intimate scenes as well (Anderegg, 200), reduces the ability to push and pull the tension of this action sequence. The 65mm space is always the same, with the eye occupied in going from side to side as it takes in the flat, "landscape" presentation. During the race, the intimate personal battle between Judah and Messala is better felt through a three-dimensional space as their chariots approach each other and the men do violence to one another, fall back, then swing near again to tussle until the final crash. Marton troubleshoots format and focal length with tremendous success to achieve what comes much more naturally to 35mm — that is, allowing the eyes to focus on action in deep space.

Not that Niblo had an easier time of it in 1925. He used a total of 42 cameras and any number of assistant directors (one of whom was Wyler) to photograph the race. The many close-ups of stars Francis X. Bushman (Messala) and Ramon Novarro (Ben-Hur) were shot with extreme, long-focus lenses, yielding a very shallow depth of field. This lack of a depth of focus in these close-ups allows for terrific three-dimensional effect, with good guy or bad approaching or falling back as a blur behind. You feel in the midst of dust and hooves and the vertiginous danger of it all. Niblo gets in some jagged, angled shots; Messala's final crash looks like somebody did a lot of camera shaking, followed up by some creative editing in the cutting room. Just the sheer funky spontaneity of '25′s photography gives it the edge on realism. With a sense of immaculate overall sharpness and remarkable smoothness in movement, it's hard for Camera 65 to get down and dirty.

As for shooting in color, there was never any question of that for the 1959 film, and the results are glorious. Yet color, too, offers obstacles to presenting a credible and heart-pounding race, especially if

you don't want it to look like a tightly controlled broadcast on *ABC's Wide World of Sports.* And there's nothing banal about the 1959 *Ben-Hur*'s color cinematography.[1] The art direction, the sets, the matte paintings are so impeccably conceived, you need them in color, which is bold, bright Technicolor exposed to within an inch of its saturated life. During the race, who would want to miss the red stone tint of the Circus Maximus, or the hot, yellow-tinged, late afternoon sunlight of the race, with chariots and horses throwing blue shadows onto the track? None of this gorgeousness distracts from the excitement of the contest, and yet, watching its 1925 predecessor, you don't miss the Technicolor. Black-and-white carries an inherent integrity, balance, and predisposition to period authenticity.

The filmmakers carefully scripted both races, and it's interesting to see how closely the '59 scenario follows on the hooves of '25. Wyler's race is hardly a replication of Niblo's, if only because of Camera 65, but all of the events of the earlier are there in a somewhat shifted order. Even as the chariots line up at the starting line, Wyler's unruly horses act much the same, with, in each, the wheel of one chariot grinding over another. The spectacular stunt in 1959, where a stunt double leads his team over a wrecked chariot, is a pumped-up recreation of a '25 event.

But there are also minor and major differences. Wyler's Judah, Charlton Heston, discards his helmet while '25's Ramon Novarro wears a skull-fitting leather one. In 1959, Stephen Boyd's Messala mans the supercool chariot with a twin set of spinning blade hubcaps, infernal devices that streamline the violence and make chariot racing forever cool in the mind of any ten-year-old boy in the reserved- seat audience.

More importantly, Wyler manages to highlight the psychological drama of the race. Minus Bushman's snarling and furious eye manipulations, Messala's unsportsmanlike-like whipping of Ben-Hur returns in '59, but Wyler saves it for the climax of the race where, rather than being mere dastardly, villainous behavior, it reveals Messala's fatal flaw, his soul-pervading obsession with Judah. Here Boyd loses his cool and, in a kind of savage regression, begins beating at Heston like a frustrated child. Another nuance further points up '59's divergent dramatic intent: as he rides in to victory and catches sight of his old buddy ripped and bleeding on the track, Heston's face darkens with regret. At the same point in his movie, Novarro looks like he's just won the homecoming game.

There should be no surprise at the synchronicity of the races' choreography or even of their run times, which, between flags, last between eight and nine minutes for each film, with a scant twelve-second difference. And it's hardly a coincidence that one '25 shot has been lovingly duplicated in 1959. Curiously *both* shots are in black-and-white, conceptually, that is: the stunning, sidewise framing of Ben-Hur's team of white stallions steadily advancing on Messala's blacks.

IV. The 1925 Ben-Hur*: Not a Clear Winner*

With two unsurpassed action sequences, the 1925 *Ben-Hur* proves itself such a champion at spending money and risking human and animal life that it's a shame the rest of the film never lifts, at best, from the level of the well made and tasteful. Occasionally it descends below it and stumbles into ludicrousness. The show's structure is deft and mostly seamless, though, and the photography is pellucid and often shimmers in a pictorialist glory, possibly because Karl Struss, a pioneering lensman with roots in the Steiglitz-led Photo-Secessionist movement of the early 20th century, had his hand in it.

The core of the problem is with the writing and the casting, both of which seem strangely intertwined. Whenever possible, the adaptation has hewn closely to the book — and its extension the stage play — with severe consequences to credibility and depth, both in terms of the drama and its characterizations. And the filmmakers have chosen pretty boy Ramon Novarro for their Ben-Hur. When we first see him, he's wandering the streets of Jerusalem appearing round-shouldered and uncomfortable in a dark jacket a couple sizes too small for him. Turns out, Novarro is playing *young*; consistent with the novel, Judah/Novarro enters the story as a boy — the novel dictates seventeen. He's searching for his old childhood friend, Messala, who quickly appears in the form of Francis X. Bushman looking like a

college linebacker dressed up for a halftime pageant. Bushman doesn't even try to act the age the novel provides for him (nineteen), and he has a massive, thick-necked presence in his Roman armor — the glittering tufted helmet allows him to tower over Novarro. Easily, he could pick the little guy up, twirl him once around, and toss him like a stuffed animal into the nearest wine merchant's tent. Instead he reluctantly follows the meek, boyish Judah to the Hur household where the bosom buddies need to argue and then break irrevocably with each other.

The fateful rupture occurs before Bushman even has the time to take off his helmet. At this most important juncture, it doesn't seem likely these two were ever friends, and the few testy words flung about hardly justify what Messala does minutes later. As in the novel, there's nothing personal in Messala's destruction of the Hur family — his actions are those of a mindless Roman goon — a fair enough concept, I guess, but one that allows for little more than a penny dreadful's sense of dramatic urgency. Certainly nothing but stock villainy is ever drawn from Bushman's beady eyes, but, still, you can't deny he fills the frame. Nobody else in the cast makes much of an impression. Esther is played by a bland, golden-tressed May McAvoy, who, at four foot something, is even tinier than Novarro and seems better suited to working the perfume counter at Gimbel's. You never see these characters think, much less feel, and when the big dramatic events arrive, the hand wringing and overwrought emoting is ten years out of date for 1925. But Novarro, with severely limited acting chops and a stunted physical presence, is the worst of them. He's got to carry the whole movie, and can't.

Novarro's lamest stretch occurs when Ben-Hur enters his militarist phase upon returning to Judea. Apparently thinking they need a costume signifier, the filmmakers dress Novarro in an odd, medieval-looking warrior outfit, complete with an anachronistic chain-mail tunic and a helmet that might well have been recycled from the head of an unspent WWI Howitzer shell. The ensemble makes the undersized actor look ridiculous and foolishly young, like a trick-or-treater waving his sword around in a neighbor's backyard and shouting "Let's go, men!" Retaining Judah's organized resistance to Rome may have proved interesting in either film, but here's just another case of the '25 film's half-hearted inclusion of one of Wallace's key ideas, one that Wyler's writer-surgeons will have the good sense to emphasize sparingly.

Novarro spends the last quarter of the film sprinting about in his little soldier outfit, yet, unexpectedly, his wardrobe helps make memorable one of the film's few emotion-packed scenes. Here, for whatever reason, Niblo slows down the event-filled pace and allows his movie to do what silent film does best through image-making and pantomime.

It's a brief sequence full of mother love. Judah, sporting a long cloak along with his chain mail and helmet, returns for the first time to his old home in Jerusalem, but it's the dead of night and the door is barred. Deciding to wait until morning to wake the household (if, indeed, there *is* one), he curls up on a stone outcropping adjacent to the door, using his cloak as a blanket. He keeps the helmet on and it's a pretty odd sight. But something happens when the camera lingers on this disjointed, out-of-time, tableau-like image of Ben-Hur asleep. Instead of remaining merely silly, the image takes on a numinous mythic air, as if it's referencing an old painting, e.g., *The Knight's Dream* by Raphael (*below*). The *mysterioso* aspect of the film's image — as opposed to its ridiculous one — is aided greatly by the gentle, soft-focused pictorialism of the photography.

While the knight sleeps, the wraith-like forms of Judah's mother and sister appear. Just released from prison, afflicted with leprosy and only half-alive, they too find the door locked. In the midst of their despair, the mother notices her sleeping son. Knowing she could spread the contagion to him, yet struggling with the desire to touch him, she hovers painfully above Judah (who looks more like a boy than ever) and lets him sleep; upon parting, she leaves a single tear in the dust under the slumbering form. Just as mother and sister disappear in the darkness, Ben-Hur awakens and leaps up; one sandaled foot nearly covers the moistened dust (close-up) before he runs off. The setup here may be unabashedly sentimental, but the follow-through is pointedly focused in detail and intent; the scene has a Griffith-like emotive punch found nowhere else in the film. The spell is broken easily enough.

It being the morning of the Passion, Ben-Hur thinks he must gather his warriors around him to defend the King. Ben-Hur, of course, drops his sword on the Via Dolorosa. But this gives the scenarists pause. *With Christ's mercy and love eliminating the need for armed resistance, what about those two legions of troops out in the desert?* In the novel, Wallace just lets Judah's army disperse as Christ makes his way to Golgotha, but the filmmakers seek better closure. They send poor old Balthasar out there to make an announcement. In a brief scene that has Mel Brooksian potential, the decrepit wise man gets up on a rock and tells everybody to drop their weapons. "There's not going to be any war," he says. "The new King — Who is dead, by the way — was the Son of God, a Man of Peace, His Kingdom is in your hearts." And so forth. It's a silent picture, so you don't hear the grumbling out there in the rows and rows of formerly eager freedom fighters.

From there on, the Passion and the Crucifixion proceed like a slide show and before you know it, the whole thing is over. The Hurs are redeemed.

V. Mr. Wyler Demands a Rewrite

If, after years of badgering from producer Sam Zimbalist Jr., William Wyler finally agreed to take on *Ben-Hur*, it was only because MGM had finally thrown enough money at him (Herman, 393). Like a career criminal weary of risk and uncertainty (that's showbiz), Wyler looked forward to that last big job, and as it turned out, with 3 to 8 percent of gross revenues attached to a $350,000 paycheck (Herman, *Ibid.*), *Ben-Hur* guaranteed him a comfortable retirement. When reminiscing about the film, though, the director would often focus on more ennobling, even aesthetic incentives. For one, he found Wallace's story, with its depiction of Judea's ancient struggle for freedom, stirring to him as a Jew; the creation of the state of Israel was quite recent (Madsen, 339). Other times he might tell an interviewer that he'd

viewed *Ben-Hur* as a challenge; he had wondered if he could bring the thing off. There's room for all these motives, but Wyler's acceptance of the latter challenge — that of forging a meaningful drama out of Wallace's antique melodrama — is clear from any close viewing of the film, which bristles with intent.

In Wyler's film we first see Judah Ben-Hur, in the form of Charlton Heston, from the vantage of his friend Messala. The director frames Heston in a doorway down a long corridor, where, upon seeing Messala, Ben-Hur first pauses, then walks briskly the distance of the corridor to greet him. It's an important, highly charged moment, and right away, in purely visual terms, Wyler is up to something.

More than a couple of hours later in the film, with the chariot race lost, the fatally wounded Messala desperately holds on to consciousness because he wants to see Judah one more time. "He'll come," he says, "I know he'll come." And when he does, Wyler again frames Heston in a doorway, where once again he pauses and then walks, slower this time, to confront Messala in his death struggle.

Heston's backlit form as he pauses in the doorway, seen again from Messala's POV, is an echo of the earlier meeting, before hate and vengeance kicked in. Effectively bracketing the long arc of the Ben-Hur/Messala melodrama, the images vibrate sympathetically like a haunted memory in Messala's pain-racked brain. Messala's need to see Judah before the lights go out recalls any number of deathbed scenes between old lovers, fathers and sons, husbands and wives — old grievances and hurts needing resolution — but this time the convention is played with a twist. Messala doesn't want resolution, or absolution, of or from old hurts; he wants the old hurt to continue. He wants to die winning, never letting go of the obsessive darkness lying at the bottom of this test of wills. It's a lover's quarrel pushed to the edge of myth.

These scenes are at the core of what Wyler and his scenarists have accomplished in their adaptation: they've allowed these two male characters to *have feelings for each other.* As we've seen, Wallace's novel was astonishingly weak in this department, yet in the early quarrel scene, the author lets drop a classical allusion in his dialogue — Messala remembers calling Judah "my little Ganymede"[2] — that may have led Wyler's writers (Gore Vidal, perhaps) to the homoerotic threshold through which Heston strides a little cautiously. Vidal never tires of telling his story — how he virtually resurrected an incoherent script by pitching the idea that, as boys, the two men had been lovers. As the film begins,

one wants to resume the affair and the other does not. Spurned, the one wreaks vengeance on the other, who in time exacts his own revenge. *Motivation,* you've got to have motivation.

This time we might want to believe Gore Vidal — up to a point. When production began, there was a shooting script that had been worked over by various writers for at least a decade; everyone, especially Wyler, agreed it was inadequate.[3] Vidal was brought onboard early, and he claims authorship of the revision up to the chariot race, after which, he says, playwright Christopher Fry replaced him. Others counter that the revision as a whole is mostly Fry's work, with little of Vidal's contributions making it to the screen. As for the crucial reunion scene, Charlton Heston recalls rehearsing Vidal's rewriting of it — and immediately feeling the improvement — but is adamant that Vidal's version was never shot (Heston, 48–49).

Attribution is beside the point.[4] What occurs in this scene and the several that follow (before the Accident with the Tile) brilliantly anchors the film. There's an undeniable emotional bond between the two men — it's right up there on the screen — and there's no reason why this should not have been Vidal's idea, but the gay vibe relies more on Wyler's direction than the writing. The dialogue in the reunion scene could have been played a number of ways, but the game is up the minute that Boyd, running his eyes over Heston's strapping form, giggles like a schoolgirl. It's been pointed out that, in these early scenes, both actors, especially Boyd (*below*), outdid anything they accomplished in the rest of their careers. In the end I have to believe this is Wyler's doing.

As the two clutch at each other, even Heston's eyes are moist, but it's Boyd who carries the freight of Vidal's carnal scenario, which, as filmed, seems modified to the extent that it's now a one-sided crush, one that Judah is not aware of — Heston indeed appears to be playing it "straight." It's been suggested — and I swear I've seen Stephen Boyd on camera attesting to this — that the actor portrayed a Judah-smitten Messala in collusion with the director but without Heston's knowledge, a little joke on the earnest but often clueless Chuck. Neither Charlton Heston nor, interestingly, Wyler, has ever acknowledged this interpretation of the Ben-Hur/Messala relationship. Regardless, Boyd doesn't overdo the infatuation business, and the heated interaction is brief enough to allow a moviegoer to simply miss it if he spills the popcorn, or overlook it if he doesn't *want* to see it. I'm sure the gay undercurrent is not emphasized in the Bible study guide included in a special edition of the 2006 Warner DVD set underwritten by Dr. Robert Schuller & Son of Crystal Cathedral Ministries.[5]

But Boyd's Messala is more than a jilted lover; he's a ruthless political opportunist with a pragmatic agenda, and destroying the family of a known friend sends a clear message to potential insurgents, one of whom, Messala realizes, could be his old buddy. Only by making Ben-Hur a mature man, as opposed to the teenager of the novel and first film, can Wyler position Judah as a credible threat to Roman rule. Rich, principled, well liked — something like the pillar of the community — Ben-Hur clearly alarms Messala when he states his sympathy with Judean "patriots." Boyd's reaction here is subtle; he's no thickheaded Roman thug but a complex grownup who's succumbed to ambition and, now, spite. At this painful junction, a cynical self-awareness allows Messala to realize that acting on his own hurt feelings might also prove a smart career move.

Boyd is so good that you wonder: whatever could have happened to him? Starring a few years after *Ben-Hur* in Anthony Mann's *Fall of the Roman Empire*, he failed to project much of anything next to Sophia Loren's numb presence and thereafter nearly sank from sight. By the early seventies, he was appearing in promotional films for the Church of Scientology (he died in 1977). Heston, of course, is something else again.

VI. The Inevitability of Charlton Heston

It seems nowadays that Charlton Heston has always existed, and, if he hadn't, it would have been necessary to invent him. Initially, the pool of contemporary male talent considered for *Ben-Hur* '59 didn't include him — instead, eyes were on Paul Newman, Burt Lancaster, and, provocatively, Marlon Brando. Newman, for one, demurred immediately, claiming unpleasant associations with togas from his *Silver Chalice* experience (1954). Tested as a leading man in two DeMille spectaculars — *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956) — Heston proved himself inevitable in *Ben-Hur*, and, although the hardest working of actors, was never quite as good in anything else, with the possible exception of *El Cid* (1961).

Charlton Heston is 32 when photography begins on *Ben-Hur* and in prime physical shape. Toned like an athlete, large in the chest, narrow in the waist, he somehow avoids beefcake status or Mr. Universe muscularity. In the early prison sequence, when Ben-Hur momentarily escapes his jailers to confront Messala, Heston is as agile and fleet as a dancer.

His features are too angular and tensed for a romantic idol, and the shape of Heston's skull is unusual — with close-cropped hair and a high hairline, his profile can resemble more a hatchet's than a lover boy's. Hissed through clenched teeth as, held by guards, he leans forward nearly horizontal into Boyd's face, his oath of vengeance is believable partly because of Heston's innate physicality. The actor carries his body with grace and unaffected self-confidence, and with exceptional direction like Wyler's, he's a good enough actor to project the conflicted mind of an ethically yet emotionally motivated man.

Heston's commentary on Warners' discs, recorded for its earlier DVD edition, plays it safe and reverential, but the stentorian track delivers at least one insight: to get the performance he wanted from the actor, Wyler had to push Heston *hard.* "Chuck," the director said early in production, "you've got to be better in this." The forthright actor, referring back to his diary entries made during the shoot, reports the ego-crunching effects of Wyler's comments. But the work shows on the screen. Heston is terrific.

In and out of his career, Heston was often one of the biggest hams in the business, a tendency that truly ripened in his nutsoid, late-in-the-day NRA speech, in which he warned of the dangers of liberalism in the context of defending "our teenaged daughters." Yes, we needed him to stay in the movies, but even there he often had an odd, affected way with line-readings where it seems like he was offering us an *idea* of acting rather than the thing itself. Bluntly put, it was just bad acting, but in this realm Heston was unique, chewing on chunks of banal dialogue with the studied deliberation of a half-baked Maurice Evans. At the same time, there's credit due him for a number of unheralded roles, including a bravura performance as a cavalry martinet in Sam Peckinpah's *Major Dundee* (1965), an understated character study as a weary cowboy in *Will Penny* (1967), and even a miniature turn as the

old player in Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996).

Watching *Ben-Hur* again, I was struck by a small but nuanced moment from Heston in his love scene with Esther (Haya Harareet). Filmed on one of the production's most beautiful interior sets (featuring a luxuriously appointed room in the Hur domicile lined with unusually patterned shutters opened and closed against an evening sky), the two of them nuzzle convincingly, but it's in a more sober context that Heston shines. Esther recalls Ben-Hur as a boy and that he had a friend; what was his name? "Messala," says Judah. Dryly uttered, the three-syllable reply is hollow and filled with regret — the actor is right on pitch. Heston's eyes, drained of light, reflect his character's emotional predicament. At this point in Wyler's film, the two friends have just had their cataclysmic argument.

This exchange effectively ends the love scene and the opportunity, over the course of the film, for Harareet to play anything more than a moral backboard at which Judah can lob his spiritual uncertainties. Stacked up against Ben-Hur's male-to-male pairings in this film — with Messala, Simonides, Arrius, Balthasar, Sheik Iderim, and Jesus — poor Esther, played with a sensual forbearance by the stunning Israeli actress, doesn't stand a chance. All of the men listed above, excluding Messala and Jesus, operate as father figures for the seemingly orphaned Judah, who finds wisdom (Balthasar), guidance (Simonides), or just plain tenderness (Arrius) from each of them. Wyler's casting call fills each of these parts with solid character actors. Jack Hawkins makes for a saturnine Arrius who finds his second lease on life by adopting Judah.[6]

Esther's man is a Seeker, and the guys have all the secrets and answers, spiritually and otherwise. We realize that Heston, by the time the race is over, looks and acts his best when he's pissed off, but Esther wants Ben-Hur to drop the hate-fueled agenda and maybe check out the teachings of a certain Nazarene.

Wyler's writer — shall we just say Christopher Fry? — works his hardest at this aspect of the adaptation, which brings Fry straight to the non-reducible exigencies of Wallace's *Tale of the Christ.* First, the script loosens, somewhat, the strictures of Wallace's dogmatic Christianity. The lengthy Christmas prologue and Golgotha climax must remain in place, but Judah's own spiritual quest becomes something less suffocatingly tied to the idea of Christ as the one true Redeemer. Where Wallace clearly meant his character Ben-Hur as a stand-in for all humanity, which in its suffering yields to God's love, Fry ups the ante by making Judah, from the beginning, a mature, compassionate man — a man who also thinks and wonders about things. By comparison, Wallace's hero is a stick figure and Novarro an empty-headed glamour-puss.

A devout, practicing Jew, Heston's Ben-Hur gives Esther her freedom at the very start of the picture, as opposed to the late event in the novel when Wallace's hero realizes he's found a nifty wife in dewy-eyed bondage to him. Indeed, on the eve of his own entry into slavery, Wyler's Judah, who has already freed her father as well, offers himself in spiritual bondage to Esther by slipping her ring (that signifies his former ownership of her) onto his own finger. Heroic restraint, I would say, in the face of full-blown mutual attraction. But it's key that Judah treat Esther as an independent woman fully equal to himself.

The ’25 *Ben-Hur* follows the novel’s path for Esther and Simonides, but allows for a titillating implication when, right before the race, father and daughter must decide whether to disclose to Judah that they are in fact property of the Hur family. Simonides leaves it all up to Esther, who must realize that such bondage could also spell sexual enslavement. Esther opts for disclosure, and of course Judah does the right thing and frees them on the spot, but some in the audience might have certain thoughts when little May McAvoy bows her curly head in obeisance to Novarro, who doesn’t seem to notice McAvoy’s skimpy slave tunic. Wyler’s treatment has removed this vestige of Victorian-era prurience.

With Esther, Heston’s Judah begins to show his mettle, the idea being that Ben-Hur is, as yet, “a man untried and uncommitted” (Heston, 48). Throughout his tour of suffering and then on his journey towards vengeance, Heston is shown thinking and questioning every step of the way, not only surviving with his faculties and compassion intact, but in fact superseding who he was as he faces even larger moral roadblocks. Wyler’s hero wrestles with inner demons, not just with external ones like Messala.

Before the violence of the chariot race, Judah offers up a prayer; in its deadly wake, he is clearly emotionally devastated. He views Messala not as an unmitigated villain (he tells his dying friend that he “sees no enemy”), but as a victim of Rome’s power to control hearts and minds.[7] Judah’s victory in the arena only increases his bitterness; dropping his victory wreath at the doorway of Messala’s death chamber, he forgets to retrieve it when he leaves.[8]> In contrast to Wallace’s impulsive youth, who feels vindicated by his triumph and becomes transformed by Christ with no inner struggle whatsoever, Heston is not so sure of himself. It’s an unusual stance for a hero of a biblical epic and miles away from the vagaries of Novarro’s performance in 1925.

Messala’s deathbed declaration to Heston’s Ben-Hur — “It’s not over! Look for your mother and sister in the Valley of the Lepers” — provides a vivid thrust into the film’s third act, which gets off to a fine start with Judah’s anguished search for his disfigured and dying family. Visually, the Valley of the Lepers sequences are compelling; they were shot in and around caves lying outside Rome where many of its homeless take shelter.[9] When the Camera 65 shoots inside the low-roofed caves, with Charlton Heston bent nearly double as he goes amongst the morbid huddles, the effect of the extreme format is pointedly claustrophobic. There are stunning compositions taking advantage of the black mouths of the caves, some with the dramatic pictorial urgency of a silent-era image.

Devastated by the condition of his family, Ben-Hur still bristles with anger over Rome’s oppression of Judea. The film economically underlines Ben-Hur’s potential as an insurgent in a terse exchange with

Pontius Pilate (the excellent Frank Thring), who, trying to persuade the victorious charioteer to stick with Rome, only encourages the hothead Judah to denounce his newly won Roman citizenship and pledge to fight on against oppression. Unfortunately, before he has a chance to kick any Roman butt, there are lepers to cure.

VII. Water Everywhere

Here's where Christ's Blood enters in, and it's unfortunate that no number of rewrites could resolve the diseased fates of Judah's mother and sister in any other way than by divine intervention. In the book and in 1925, both of them are instantly cured on the Via Dolorosa as Christ passes (He's allowed to make more of a fuss over them in the novel); in 1959, they become clean the instant Christ yields his spirit and a massive thunderstorm overtakes the landscape where mother and sister are wandering. As the blood of Jesus, mixed with the rainwater, runs in rivulets down the stones of Golgotha, both women feel their faces returned to health and freshness. This is as silly as the picture gets; even at ten years old, I felt let down by the contrived miracle. But the rainstorm midst the twisted trees of the darkling soundstage is also an example of a well-conceived conceit of the screenplay: the motif of water as representing a redemptive healing force, or, as it appears more often in the film, the equating of water and the quenching of physical thirst to Jesus (or the power of Jesus) and the quenching of spiritual thirst. The metaphor does not come from Wallace; possibly it was suggested by one of Jesus' seven last words, "I thirst."

Lots of water gets drunk in this film, mostly by Ben-Hur himself, but at the very start of the film's prologue, when the citizens of Judea assemble for tax assessment at the Joppa gate, the filmmakers initiate the conceit by having Joseph stop at a cistern to refresh himself and his wife Mary. The metaphor becomes focused when a young Jesus ladles a drink for a desperately thirsty Judah on his forced march to the galleys. Years later, when Arrius joins the picture, a battle ensues, the ship sinks, Judah rescues Arrius, and their trial at sea ends onboard a Roman galley; there, on deck, in a swift, deft gesture, the elder consul defers to the slave, insisting that Judah drink first from the fresh water offered. It's only on the road to Golgotha, as Ben-Hur attempts to quench the thirst of Christ, that the circle is drawn complete. But unlike Judah's, Christ's thirst cannot be quenched; His endured physical agony is the icon of redemption. Then, of course, come the healing rains.

Symbolically, there's nothing subtle here, but the wordless imagery functions with expressive force, getting across, without billboarding it, the juncture of physical and spiritual pain (and the relief therefrom) that underlies the suffering and death of Christ and what it means for a believer. Post chariot race, Ben-Hur wants to be a believer, but he's stuck in a morass of anger and despondency. On their way back from Judah's first visit to the Valley of the Lepers, Judah and Esther encounter Balthasar hurrying to hear the young Nazarene rabbi speak to the multitudes. Esther immediately links arms with Balthasar, but Judah stands apart, waffling. Here the film serves up its most revelatory instance of the water metaphor. As Judah decides whether or not to join them, the filmmakers provide a clear running brook over which he must cross if he wants to catch The Word.

The panoramic view of the Sermon on the Mount, dappled with the colorful garments of the crowd, is

the best biblical visualization in the film. You don't hear sound bites from the sermon; it's just an outing on a lovely spring day, with the crystalline brook, glittering with sunshine and reflecting the blue sky, providing the message already underscored by Miklos Rozsa's music. Before his friends cross to join the crowd, Judah stoops to run his hand through the stream's refreshing current, but when he drinks from it he says, "I am thirsty yet." Then, isolated in doubt, he simply walks away. There are several places where I wish this film might end, and this is one of them.

It's only later, when Esther returns from the Mount and beats Judah over the head with some of the sermon's catchier riffs, that the script careens into obviousness. Brushing her off, Ben-Hur remains focused on how horribly Rome treats people, and goes the next day to confront his mother and sister in the valley. When it turns out that Tirzah is dying, Esther convinces the whole lot of them that Jesus just might be the answer. By this time, Esther has become a tiresome, proselytizing mouthpiece — three hours into the film and your lower back suddenly finds itself in contact with the unyielding hardwood of a church pew. But seeking out Christ means that they must leave the caves, and visually — with the wide screen framing the black mouth of the cave against the blue sky and a sunlit landscape — the scene has a powerful conclusion. As Esther coaxes a hesitant Miriam into the sunshine, the screenwriter allows Esther a surprisingly good line: "The world is more than we know."

VIII. The Triumph of Miklos Rozsa

Making a dash from the Valley of the Lepers, the Hurs plus Esther arrive in a mysteriously empty city. Picturing the Hurs as dumbfounded by the empty streets is a good angle; they have to be brought up to speed by a disaffected blind man who obviously has never sought the powers of the Nazarene. Arriving late for the trial of Jesus, the Hurs miss the washing of the hands entirely, but on the Via Dolorosa they move close to the action. As Christ passes, Judah separates from his family to see what he can do to help Him; so, in the end, Judah's alone, a puzzled but very moved onlooker. The script makes a good decision to remove Esther, Tirzah, and Miriam at this point; it allows Ben-Hur, with his proffered ladle of water, to have a moment alone with Jesus, just as he had years earlier, tables turned.

Before they leave, the three women can see that Jesus' faith-healing days are pretty much behind him. Esther actually apologizes for dragging Miriam and Tirzah all this way for nothing, but Miriam says, with hushed reverence, that, no, it was worth it. Earlier pictures, like the '25 *Ben-Hur* and De Mille's '27 *King of Kings*, had Christ actively healing folks on the way to Golgotha; Wyler cuts this business out and reserves His death for the moment of redeeming, healing grace.

Jesus proceeds to Calvary and, to avoid a bible pageant staging, the director provides a somewhat detached point of view, focusing on faces in the crowd, and it's another ingenious move. Christ staggers, and some of the spectators smirk, a few looking as if they might spit in His face; others, like Judah, are dumbstruck with awe. Until Ben-Hur runs into Balthasar at the crucifixion and the wise man gives the whole thing away, Wyler frames the action as it might have been seen by those not prepared by prophecy or by two thousand years of iconic imagery. Judah has simply stumbled unawares onto the sudden execution of a beloved yet strangely despised young man. For the sake of this grand popular entertainment, though, someone — better it be Balthasar than the voice of Cecil B. DeMille — must state it: the man on the tree is dying for thee.

No fresh angle, no innovation in the writing, can face down the climax of the Greatest Story Ever Told, although Wyler's treatment, as opposed to that of the '25 film, has the advantage of taking its Passion scenes very seriously. Half-heartedly, the silent film had glued these scenes, as static tableaux, to the resolution of the vengeance drama as if saying, "Well, we gave you a great chariot race, didn't we? The rest must take care of itself." In '59, however, there's a strong attempt to intertwine the two Passions of the story — Christ's (*take from me the cup of sacrifice and death*) and Judah's (*take from me the cup of hatred and violence*) — so that the arc of the story survives the emotional rush of the chariot race and ends successfully in the realm of the spiritual. Wallace's novel achieved this, but as a movie, Wyler's *Ben-Hur* must deliver not dogma but joyful release. And so it does — but not without stumbling like Christ under the cross. Where Simon of Cyrene took up Christ's burden, it falls to Miklos Rozsa to take up Wyler's.

Rozsa's score is truly *Ben-Hur*'s x-factor, much less a traditional underscore than a one-on-one collaborator, joining in with text and image as a powerful articulating voice. Rozsa, born in Hungary in 1907, was one of the few film composers rising from the 1930s not to write under the overwhelming influence of the Germanic and Viennese-flavored scorings of the émigré pioneers, Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Max Steiner, who had based their tonal language on Wagner, Mahler, and Richard Strauss. Harmonically, Rozsa's scores have a unique tint that's hard to pin on these or other post-Romantic sources; melodically, too, there's a Slavonic vocabulary derived not from any Russian school, but more likely from his Hungarian roots. When taking on a historical project, the composer also had a penchant for deep research into a period's music, or, when none has survived, for conjecturing what that music might have been like.

Working sporadically into the '80s, Rozsa came to *Ben-Hur* mid-to-late career, but the assignment drew from him what might be his finest score and one of the most extraordinary ever written. Rozsa scored nearly two-thirds of *Ben-Hur*'s 212-minute length, and much of it refuses to go unheard, breaking one of the cardinal rules of underscoring — that it not draw attention to itself. But it's a rule that the best film composers always break. Rozsa provides multiple themes and motifs for characters; a languorous love theme (whose long phrases have unusual tensile strength); several remarkable "Roman" marches; and an extended, percussive overlay to the sea battle sequences.

Rozsa knew how to pull forth a pretty tune — here, most obviously the love theme — but his finest work in *Ben-Hur* can have an astringent, mournful quality. Carried in extended, ruminating melodic lines, under which shifting harmonies play an uneasy game, much of the music associated with Ben-Hur, his family, and their struggle (coupled with that of the Jews in general) has an ennobled but troubled cast. Judah's own theme is a simple succession of chords from which Rozsa improvises in all directions. Heard in isolation, the tune has a certain transparent grayness, a stolid immobility that plays in a gentle striding rhythm, but it can modulate easily into grief and anger, or into yearning, a striving upwards — just as Ben-Hur himself must move from his position as well-established prince to slave, to questing charioteer, to uncertain spiritual seeker.

In the early scenes with Messala, the theme plays insistently in a warm major key, until the swift thrusts of the Roman's malevolence (jagged lines from the basses, punctuated with woeful brass) hurl it into bruised, minor-key broodiness. Late in the film, in the Valley of the Lepers and the Passion sequences, Rozsa's gloomy manipulations of the theme give way to outright anguish. Another theme, an authentic Hebraic melodic thread, first introduced in the Overture, lends dignity to Miriam and Tirzah's lurid predicament. Like much of the composer's writing for Ben-Hur, the lyrical theme is extremely malleable, and there's a hot-blooded melancholy to it reminiscent of the *cantilenas* of Giuseppe Verdi, who knew

how pull emotional grandeur from awkward, overwrought libretti.

As the Passion climaxes, Rozsa must perform similar alchemy, not as a great opera composer would but as a film composer. Wyler does what he can to push the mythic, but it's not enough. Camera 65 shoots too wide and dispassionate on the Via Dolorosa and Golgotha, and the soundstage lighting, in deference in the demands of Technicolor, flattens and blands out the crucifixion. Rozsa's music, however, plays right in your face. The gush of suffering in the Passion music flows organically out of the vast reservoir of melancholy and anxiety already established throughout the score. At the crucifixion, when Christ dies, storm and earthquake erupt, and the miracle occurs, Rozsa's harmonies darken even further, but when His blood runs free, in rivers of increasingly wider span — a final water image this time, showing salvation spreading throughout the world — the score goes triumphantly major key, expanding the sparely scored (organ, harps, some strings), oft-recurring theme for Jesus into a swift-footed andante for full orchestra. It's traveling music for the soul.

The joy in the music has an effect akin to Wagner's resounding B-major resolution to four hours' worth of tonal ambiguity in *Tristan und Isolde* (maybe Rozsa took something from Wagner after all). Up to this point, much of Rozsa's score has spun passion, anguish, and uncertainty in low- and middle-range passages with melismatic turns, causing the melodies to fall back on themselves, creating a suspended emotional holding pattern. In the Valley of the Lepers, the redundant dissonances seem to hover like a miasma. Christ's lugubrious death processional drags the audience over the bloodied paving stones. When you finally hear the sudden, robust health of the high-reaching. major-key harmonies, it's like seeing a flower opening on Easter morning *before you go to church.*

This is not to say that Rozsa (*right*) saves the picture, only that his music has its own emotional text, which not only buttresses the film's imagery and drama but powers them with a plausible urgency it might not otherwise have, especially in iconic moments like Christ's death and a hero's spiritual transfiguration. But Wyler, too, has strong ideas about redemption. Judah doesn't return home from Golgotha hauling a gigantic crucifix behind him — he in fact pauses at the gate to honor his home's mezuzah, the first time he's done so since being hauled off to the galleys. Anger and disaffection have given way to a recognition that his Jewish faith still survives midst the wreckage; the conversion, if we assume it must happen, takes place after the closing credits. "I felt his voice take the sword out of my hands," Judah says to Esther as he tells her of the crucifixion. Christ's death grants Judah an ecstatic release: accompanied by Rozsa's ascending wordless chorus, the Hurs' final enraptured embrace feels exactly right — a homecoming, not a miracle.

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1. Historically, of course, the movies couldn't wait to shoot in color; by the mid to late twenties several features had sequences in the expensive two-strip Technicolor process, e.g. *Phantom of the Opera, The King of Kings*, and *Ben-Hur* itself, which seems to sport more color scenes than

the other two. In *Ben-Hur* '25, the two-strip process was reserved mostly for sprucing up the religious settings and not, understandably, for the race, which must have eaten up a ton of cheaper film stock. [↩]

2. In Greek mythology, Ganymede was a mortal boy so beautiful that a lustful Zeus changed into an eagle in order to abduct him; the god made the boy his cup-bearer. Wallace loved to pepper his text with these allusions, and, rather than an erotic underlining, it's more likely he meant this one to point up Messala's viewing the Judean, even as a friend, as subservient to a Roman like himself. [↩]
3. It seems likely that what we hear in the several screen tests included with the DVD set is the unrevised script. The text for the reading involving the Ben-Hur/Messala reunion is flat and bland. The run-through itself features a very young, deer-in-the-headlights Leslie Nielsen. [↩]
4. At the end of the day, neither Fry nor Vidal received mention in the credits; only Karl Tunberg, the last of the writers of the to-be-revised script, appeared. [↩]
5. I've not seen this edition, but apparently it's real and has popped up in some Best Buy stores. The study guide includes lessons to be shared between a leader and discussion group, with topics like "God Humbles the Proud" and "God Works with the Weak." Tent revivalist Billy Sunday similarly linked arms with the 1925 *Ben-Hur*. [↩]
6. In the novel, Wallace again seems to underscore the homoerotic when he has Quintus Arrius, taking initial stock of his galley slaves below deck, cruise Judah's nearly nude form manning the oar; the author at this point calls Arrius "a connoisseur of male form." Neither film followed through on this hint, but when, in the Wyler, the two men appear draped in matching togas among the sumptuous appointments of Arrius' villa, you might have a fleeting impression that Judah is being "kept." [↩]
7. It's possible Wyler saw parallels, in Israel's recent war with Egypt (1956), with the Jews' ancient struggle with Rome, i.e., in the fight for a homeland, just replace Romans with Arabs (Madsen, 339). How many people today would see this movie and replace Romans with Americans? [↩]
8. When Pilate settles the victory wreath on Judah's head after the race, crowning him "his people's' one true god — for the time being," the wreath joins with the red blood already dripping from the head wound Judah's incurred in the race, thus creating an odd resonance with Christ's crown of thorns. [↩]
9. These may very well be the same environs where Fellini shot his "man with the sack" sequences in *Nights of Cabiria*. [↩]

— Gordon Thomas

Gordon Thomas, trained as a painter, is a photographer living in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts with his wife. Film has fascinated and worried him ever since, as a small child, he saw *Godzilla* in 1954.