**Ben-Hur: The Construction of the Greatest Christian Epic of its Time**

Across the history of modern filmography, few epics have enjoyed the scale and grandeur of the 1959 film *Ben-Hur*. With a budget exceeding $15 million and access to over 200 camels, 2,500 horses, and 10,000 extras, *Ben-Hur* was Hollywood´s most expensive film at the time. Directed by William Wyler, this cinematic masterpiece was based on Lew Wallace’s novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, one of the most influential Christian novels of the 19th century (Lifson, 2009). The film chronicles the life of Judah Ben-Hur, a Jewish prince who fought Roman oppression in Judea in the first century AD. The budget and resources invested in *Ben-Hur* are the material manifestations of the film’s moral mission: a testament to Christian values. Throughout the movie, the director draws from Roman culture and highlights Roman egocentricity, brutality, and opulence to demonstrate Roman oppression in Judea and convey support for Christian values.

Throughout the film, the Romans are depicted as narcissistic and egocentric. From Messala’s first conversation with Ben-Hur in his office, it is apparent that the Romans hold no respect for anyone who dares oppose them. When discussing a potential rebellion in the region, Messala gloats that the army will “crush” anyone who stands up against the regime. He exhibits brutality, a quality celebrated in Roman culture (Week 7, Slide 15), and claims to view Ben-Hur as a Roman, who has little in common with the “rabble that makes trouble” in those lands. According to Messala, “it is a Roman world,” and fine men like Judah must join them if they want to be part of it. He thinks it is not an accident that “a small village on the Tiber was chosen to rule the world.” He attributes Roman greatness not only to their legions, but to their roads, ships, law, architecture, and literature. Despite Messala’s childhood upbringing in Jerusalem and friendship with Ben-Hur, he renounces his past to condemn the Jews and other tribes as inferiors and barbarians. The self-ascribed superiority of the Romans is made explicit in the scene where a bookie in the baths, a prototypical Roman space, offers Messala to place a bet against Judah. Even though it was for a substantial amount of money, Messala accepts the 4 to 1 odds, stating that that is “the difference between a Roman and a Jew”. This negative trait is an exemplar of Roman arrogance and egoism.

The film also highlights the Roman Army’s exploitation of their slaves and the cruelty with which slaves were treated in the Roman Empire. Because slavery in Rome was rooted in wartime victory rather than in racial differences – that is, after losing a war against the Army, citizens of other tribes were often captured and enslaved – it was common even for people of Roman ethnicity to be forced into servitude. Slavery was seen as a legal status and the fruit of war. Thus, historians have suggested that, unlike the transatlantic slave trade of the 16th to the 19th centuries, slaves of the Roman Empire were not always treated poorly or forced to do manual labor. Rather, many Roman slaves were well-educated and performed valuable tasks for their masters, like scribing, tutoring their children, and keeping the books for the family business (*Out of the Hands of Slaves: A Comparative History of the Roman Book Production Economy – Dartmouth Ancient Books Lab*, 2016). However, these historical accounts of Roman slavery are not accurately represented in the film *Ben-Hur*. The film’s depictions of slaves of the Roman Army, including and especially the scenes in the sea, highlight the exploitation and harassment of the enslaved people. These characterizations reinforce the perception of the Roman Army as a brutal, harsh, and privileged institution (Week 7, Slide 14). By omitting the fact that not all slaves were forced to do manual labor in Rome, the film constructs an image of a villainous and merciless Roman Empire.

The arrogant and cruel Romans are juxtaposed with the Jews to impose a social and moral divide between these two groups. The clothing and adornments of the Romans highlight their opulence, as do the buildings and Roman architecture on display. Roman characters, regardless of their social status, are draped in togas, or showing off legion armor, while Judah and the other Jews are dressed simply, with less jewelry or colorful clothes, both of which were expensive things at the time (*Colors of Roman Clothing*). Further, when Ben-Hur and the Consul return to Rome after their sea voyage, the viewer is presented with one of the most magnificent scenes of the movie: the Roman Triumph (Week 3, Slide 20). Hundreds of soldiers in shiny armor walk through Rome with the victorious general in a chariot up front. The display of Rome as a white, glistening city made of marble and gold paints a stark difference with the scenes of the Jewish towns, which are less bright and with fewer buildings, most of which are made of wood and mud. The clear disparity between the wealth of the Romans and the plight of the Jews helps differentiate the moral status of the tyrannical Romans from that of the virtuous Jews.

The Jews, who ultimately convert to Christianity, are contrasted with the Romans to depict the former as morally righteous and to promote Christian values of love, peace, kindness, faithfulness, and self-control (*Galatians 5:22-23 NIV*). Presumably to appease a wider audience, the movie’s plot was transformed from the original story of Jesus and peripheral biblical figures. The director instead focuses on Ben-Hur’s role as an underdog, and how he represents Christian values while fighting the Romans. Throughout the film, Judah shows goodness and forbearance. He treats his slaves as friends and equals, and readily frees Simonides’ daughter when she asks to marry a merchant. He also is presented with the opportunity to kill Messala in his office, and the Consul in his sleep, but regardless of the pain they have caused him, he chooses not to. While not a Christian at the beginning of the movie, he encounters Jesus and other biblical figures throughout the plot. By the conclusion of the film, Ben-Hur becomes a true believer in the gospel of Christ, which can be observed when his family is miraculously redeemed from leprosy. The conversion of Ben-Hur associates all the positive attributes and goodwill garnered by Ben-Hur throughout the film with the Christian faith, completing the arc of the story and securing the film’s status as a Christian epic.

In sum, through the use of Roman material culture to construct an anti-hero – specifically, Messala, or more broadly, the Roman Empire – who acts as a moral counterbalance, *Ben-Hur* emphasizes the positive values of Christianity and distills the teachings of the Bible into a captivating movie for a wide audience. The movie and Wyler’s talents as a director enjoyed critical acclaim in Christian-dominated circles across America and Europe. Yet, perhaps the most telling evidence of *Ben-Hur*’s proselytizing mission is where the film was shunned: under the regime of Mao Zedong, China banned the movie for promoting “propaganda of superstitious beliefs, namely Christianity.” Nonetheless, as the greatest Western epic film of its time, *Ben-Hur* inspired a generation of Christian films, which continue to advocate for and disseminate Christian and Christian-inspired values in modern society.

**References**

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