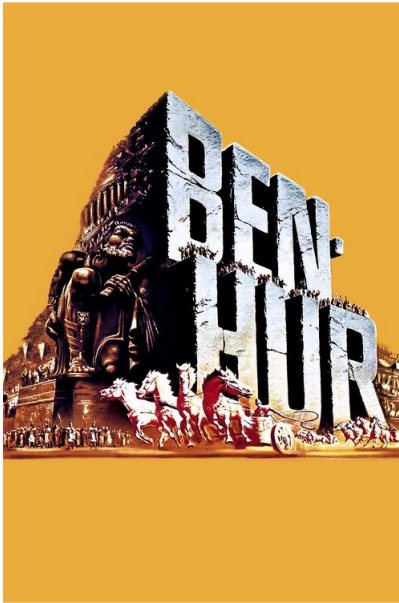




HISTORY · DRAMA · ADVENTURE

Ben-Hur

1959 · Directed by William Wyler

Biblical Epic

Historical Epic

Classical Hollywood

In Roman-occupied Judea, a wealthy Jewish prince and a Roman officer, boyhood friends, meet again as men serving opposite sides of an empire. What follows is a long, spectacle-filled story of loyalty, ambition and revenge, told on the widest screen Hollywood could build.

DIRECTOR	William Wyler
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YEAR	1959
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RUNTIME	3h 32m (212 min)
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COUNTRY	USA
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GENRES	History, Drama, Adventure
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CAST	Charlton Heston, Stephen Boyd, Hugh Griffith, Jack Hawkins, Haya Harareet
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MUSIC	Miklós Rózsa
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IMDB	8.1 / 10 (269,891 votes)
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ROTTEN TOMATOES	87% (critics)
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METACRITIC	90 / 100
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TMDB SCORE	7.9 / 10 (3,281 votes)
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WHERE TO WATCH	Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home
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Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.



Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The summit of the Hollywood biblical epic

Ben-Hur won eleven Academy Awards, a record at the time, and is the most lavish expression of the studio epic's last great era. It set the standard that later spectacles chased.

2 One of cinema's great action sequences

The chariot race, built around real horses, a huge purpose-built arena and precise editing, is still the benchmark for staged spectacle. It rewards watching as craft, not only as excitement.

3 A serious director at epic scale

William Wyler, known for intimate, carefully staged drama, brings the same patience with actors to a vast canvas. The result is a personal rivalry story held inside an enormous frame.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of the late-1950s biblical epic and of the widescreen roadshow era, when Hollywood answered television with scale, length and big-event release.



WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a personal quarrel told through public spectacle, where every grand set piece is also a step in one relationship.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How Wyler holds faces and two-person scenes in the wide frame, letting the actors carry the drama before the spectacle arrives.
- How Miklós Rózsa's score uses distinct musical themes for Rome, for Judea and for personal feeling, and how they return.
- How the long action sequences are built from clear geography and repeated camera positions, so you always know who is where.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

When a film gives you a rivalry and an empire at once, which one is it really about?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Technology:** Shot in MGM Camera 65, a 65mm process giving an extremely wide image. Cinemas showed it on huge screens with stereo sound, something television could not imitate.
- **Industry:** MGM, financially weakened, staked its fortunes on a very expensive production made largely in Rome's Cinecittà studios, part of Hollywood's wider move to shoot abroad.
- **Dominant styles:** Epics such as *Quo Vadis*, *The Robe* and *The Ten Commandments* had made religious and Roman stories a box-office staple, usually with pageantry placed ahead of character.
- **Director's moment:** Wyler was a veteran of prestige drama who had assisted on the 1925 silent version. He was an unexpected choice for a spectacle, which shaped its emphasis on character.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1925)

MGM's silent version of the same story, a lavish production of its time, which this film remakes on a far larger scale.





FILM

Quo Vadis (1951)

Its success revived the Roman epic in Hollywood and showed that religious spectacle set in the Roman empire could fill cinemas.



TRADITION

Lew Wallace's novel Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ

The hugely popular 19th-century novel set in Roman Judea that supplied the story, and which was staged as a theatre spectacle before it reached cinema.



THIS FILM

Ben-Hur (1959)

NEW AT THE TIME *It combined the scale of a roadshow spectacle with the psychological focus of a personal drama, and staged action at a size and realism that few films had attempted.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in Cold War America at a peak of public religiosity, when Hollywood was staking its future on huge Biblical spectacles, with a Jewish émigré director.

- **Country and moment:** Late-1950s America was prosperous, anxious about the Cold War and strongly religious. "Under God" entered the Pledge in 1954, and stories of faith set against a tyrannical empire had a ready audience.
- **Economy:** MGM was financially shaky and gambled heavily on the film. Shooting in Rome in 1958–59 took advantage of Italy's lower labour costs and its postwar boom, and employed thousands of local extras and crew.
- **Politics and censorship:** Hollywood was still marked by the anti-communist blacklist of the late 1940s and 1950s. The Production Code was loosening, but studios still favoured moral, family-friendly, patriotic material for mass audiences.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Wyler was born in Alsace to a Jewish family and emigrated to the US. He had worked on the 1925 silent version as an assistant, and in 1947 he joined Hollywood figures protesting the congressional investigations of the film industry.



WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Deliberate and long. The first act is mostly conversation and politics before the big set pieces, and the story spans years.
- **Format:** Roadshow epic with an overture and an intermission. Plan to watch it in two sittings if needed.
- **Style:** Grand, theatrical performances and formal dialogue, in the manner of the era's epics.
- **Colour / aspect ratio:** Rich Technicolor-era colour in an extremely wide 2.76:1 frame. A large screen helps.
- **Language:** English throughout, with a mix of accents standing in for the ancient world.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

10+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from US G and French all-ages to GB PG and German 16; 10 reflects the intense action, grim themes and very long running time.

Official ratings: US G · UK PG · Germany 16 · France TP

- **Good for:** Older children and families who enjoy grand historical epics, with huge sets, large crowds, ships and a famous chariot race, plus a story of friendship, loyalty and rivalry.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Large-scale action, including a sea battle and a dangerous chariot race, with injuries and some harsh treatment. Mostly bloodless by modern standards but still intense.
- **May unsettle, peril:** Characters face prolonged danger and hardship, and some sequences are tense and distressing for younger viewers.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Betrayal, injustice, slavery and the harshness of foreign occupation are central, along with themes of grief and revenge.
- **May unsettle, pace:** At over three and a half hours with an intermission, the stately, dialogue-heavy stretches may test young attention spans.
- **Explain first:** The story is set about 2,000 years ago, when the Roman Empire ruled Judea and many local people resented being under its control.
- **Explain first:** It is very long and has an intermission, so you may want to watch it over two sittings.
- **Explain first:** Some of the acting and dialogue are in a formal, theatrical style typical of 1950s Hollywood epics.

Talk about it after: *Have you ever had a friendship tested because you and a friend cared about different things? What makes it hard to stay close in that situation?"/>*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.



After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film explores how private hatred and the pull of vengeance play out against empire and faith. It can be read as a story about whether a man consumed by revenge can be restored to compassion.

THEMES

- **Friendship turned to enmity:** The break between Judah and Messala is political, not just personal. Each stands for the world he belongs to, and neither can step outside it.
- **Empire and occupation:** Rome appears as order, wealth and cruelty at once. The film keeps asking what loyalty to a people costs under foreign rule.
- **Revenge versus mercy:** Judah's drive for vengeance powers the plot, but the film sets it against a quieter, spiritual current that offers another way to answer suffering.
- **Faith and identity:** Judah's Jewish identity is the thing the empire tries to use or break. His faith is tested by loss, not simply affirmed.
- **Family and restoration:** The hunt for his lost mother and sister gives the revenge story its emotional stakes, and gives the ending its meaning.

Key scenes

Judah and Messala's reunion and quarrel

The film's central relationship is made in a few quiet scenes. Their warmth, then the political divide, set the terms for everything that follows and give the spectacle its meaning.

The galley and the sea battle

Judah's years as a slave are conveyed through rhythm, drums and rowing, almost without dialogue. The sequence shows how the film moves from private injustice to epic action and changes his fortunes.

The chariot race

The race is a close-quarters duel as well as a spectacle. Clear staging, real stunt work and the personal stakes make the long sequence a model of how action becomes character.



The crucifixion and the rain

Wyer lets the faith strand break into the revenge plot at the end, with the film's most restrained directing. It resolves Judah's story by changing its question from vengeance to mercy.

Filmmaking

- **Direction:** Wyler stages scenes with patience and depth, favouring long takes and careful blocking so that dialogue scenes carry as much weight as the action.
- **Action staging:** The race was prepared over months, with second-unit directors Andrew Marton and Yakima Canutt overseeing stunts and a huge arena. Cutting between wide shots and close, fast views keeps it legible.
- **Cinematography:** Robert L. Surtees shoots in 65mm, filling the very wide frame with detailed sets and crowds, while keeping faces central in the intimate scenes.
- **Music:** Miklós Rózsa's score draws on his historical research into ancient music and uses recurring themes. The chariot race is notably played without music.
- **Design:** Large-scale sets, costumes and thousands of extras make the ancient world tangible, and the physical scale is why the film still feels real.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

In Judea, under Roman rule, the wealthy Jewish prince Judah Ben-Hur welcomes back his boyhood friend Messala, now a Roman tribune. Messala expects Judah to help him win over the Jewish leaders. When Judah refuses to betray his people, the friendship turns to bitterness.

During the entrance of a new governor, a loose roof tile falls and injures him. Though it was an accident, Messala condemns Judah to the galleys and has his mother and sister imprisoned. On the march to the coast, a stranger gives Judah water when no one else will.

At sea, Judah saves the Roman commander Quintus Arrius in a battle and is freed and adopted. He becomes a champion charioteer and returns to Judea. He meets the merchant Esther, the sheik Ilderim and others, and learns that his family was never freed.

He agrees to race Messala in the arena in Jerusalem. In a brutal contest, Messala is dragged and mortally injured, but lives long enough to tell Judah that his mother and sister are alive, living as lepers in a leper colony.

Judah finds them and hides them from Esther. As he searches for a cure, he is drawn to the preacher whose kindness he remembered. He witnesses the crucifixion of Jesus, and in a storm his mother and sister are healed. Judah is freed from his hatred and returns home with his family.

BEHIND THE FILM



- **Two Ben-Hurs:** MGM had made the story as a silent in 1925, a famously expensive production in its own era. The 1959 film was partly an attempt to repeat that triumph, and Wyler, who had worked on the earlier film, was hired after much hesitation.
- **Building the arena:** The Circus Maximus-style arena was built outside Rome and covered many acres, said to be the largest film set constructed up to then. The race was rehearsed for months before filming.
- **Stunts and the jump:** Yakima Canutt, a veteran stuntman and action director, planned the race. His son Joe performed a famous jump over a wrecked chariot, and Heston, who trained as a charioteer, drove many of his own shots.
- **Many hands on the script:** The script was reworked by several writers, with Karl Tunberg credited and Christopher Fry among those who revised it. Gore Vidal claimed to have contributed too, but this was disputed.
- **Rózsa's research:** Miklós Rózsa, already known for film scores set in ancient Rome, studied ancient Greek and Roman music to inform the score. He chose to leave the chariot race without any music.
- **Myth:** Gore Vidal wrote the film's famous hidden subtext between the two leading men, and Heston never knew. **Reality:** Vidal said he suggested a subtext to Wyler and Stephen Boyd. Heston and others denied it, and Vidal did not receive screen credit. The claim is disputed, so treat it as unproven.
- **Myth:** Stuntmen and horses were killed during the filming of the chariot race. **Reality:** That legend belongs to the 1925 film's reputation. In 1959 the race was carefully planned, with no reported fatalities, though the stunt work was dangerous.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1925)

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FILM

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TRADITION

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THIS FILM

Ben-Hur (1959)



FILM

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

Another 65mm epic of vast landscapes and a divided hero, which pushed the scale of the form while moving away from piety.



FILM

Gladiator (2000)

Revived the Roman epic with a wronged hero, an emperor's court and arena combat, openly in the shadow of the 1950s epics.



MOVEMENT

Roadshow epic cycle of the 1960s

Its success encouraged long, expensive widescreen productions with intermissions, which defined Hollywood's attempt to compete with television.

Reception and reputation

Ben-Hur was a major event on release in late 1959. It was MGM's biggest success in years and a huge box-office hit worldwide. Critics praised its scale, the race and its performances, though some found its piety slow and its length heavy.

Its reputation as a craft landmark has only grown, especially the race and Wyler's handling of the actors. Its theology and gender politics now draw more critical comment, but it is still regarded as the high point of the Hollywood epic.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 12 nominations, 11 wins (Best Picture, Director, Actor for Charlton Heston, Supporting Actor for Hugh Griffith, Cinematography, Art Direction, Costume Design, Film Editing, Sound, Visual Effects, Original Score).



Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Easter television ritual:** For decades the film was a staple of American holiday television, often scheduled around Easter. Its mix of Roman spectacle and a Christ story, with Jesus never shown face-on, made it a family and church-group favourite.
- **Queer subtext debate:** Gore Vidal said he wrote the Judah–Messala reunion as a barely coded story of former lovers, and that Stephen Boyd played it that way. Heston and others disputed this. The claim was popularised by the documentary *The Celluloid Closet* and still shapes queer readings of the film.
- **Heston's lasting image:** Ben-Hur cemented Charlton Heston as the screen's embodiment of the stoic, muscular epic hero. His later public life, including a term as National Rifle Association president, kept that heroic image in political debate and parody.
- **Shorthand for epic scale:** "Ben-Hur" and its chariot race became everyday shorthand for sprawling, expensive spectacle. They are invoked in sports commentary, spoofed on TV and revisited in remakes, including a 2016 version that did not win a comparable audience.

Its lasting influence

Its race became the model for later action set pieces, from *Star Wars'* pod race to *Gladiator's* arena, and its blend of personal revenge story and historical spectacle shaped later epics.

WHAT NEXT?

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

The Ten Commandments (1956)

The other great biblical epic of the era, also with Charlton Heston, and a useful contrast of DeMille's showmanship with Wyler's character focus.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

Ben-Hur (1925)

The silent version of the same story shows how the tale and its spectacle were first imagined, and how much the later film expanded them.

JUMP FORWARD

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)

A 65mm epic that keeps the grandeur but gives it a psychologically complicated hero, showing where the form went next.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Cleopatra (1963)

A late epic from the same cycle, whose enormous costs show the risks of the strategy that Ben-Hur's success had encouraged.

FULL CAST AND CREW



William Wyler
DIRECTOR



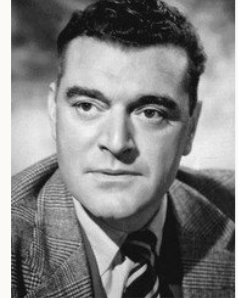
Charlton Heston
ACTOR
as Judah Ben-Hur



Stephen Boyd
ACTOR
as Messala



Hugh Griffith
ACTOR
as Scheich Ildirim



Jack Hawkins
ACTOR
as Quintus Arrius



Haya Harareet
ACTOR
as Esther



Miklós Rózsa
COMPOSER

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