

B E N - H U R



# BEN-HUIR

A TALE OF THE CHRIST

CAROL WALLACE

*based on the bestselling novel by* LEW WALLACE



*Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*  
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*In memory of my father, William Noble Wallace, the family historian*





# Acknowledgments



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And my father, William Wallace, an author like his great-grandfather Lew, a devotee of American history, would have been tickled pink to see this book.

# Foreword



Maybe you grew up with *Ben-Hur*. Maybe your family watched the movie every Easter. You've probably come across clips of the chariot race on TV award shows—they're certainly all over YouTube. Maybe there's an image in your head, right now, of the 1959 film's logo, those massive stone letters spelling out *Ben-Hur*.

I grew up with *Ben-Hur* too, but in a different way, because my great-great-grandfather wrote the original book. *Ben-Hur* was published in 1880 and, for over fifty years, was the bestselling novel in America. That meant there were copies of it everywhere in our house because people kept giving them to us.

It didn't mean we read the novel, though. We were a bookish family and happily devoured almost anything between covers, but *Ben-Hur* was too much of a challenge. It stood to reason that there was a story in there somewhere—why else would it have been adapted for the stage and the movies? We just couldn't find the excitement buried in Lew Wallace's old-fashioned prose.

But recently I picked up an old dark-blue hardcover (with an inscription dated 1892 on the inside cover) and sat down to read in earnest. It was work, I have to admit. The plot moves very slowly



and the dialogue was obviously written to sound antique. Characters swear in Latin, for instance. What's more, the descriptions of settings and scenery last much longer than they need to. In 1880, before much of the Middle East had been photographed, those details were new and exotic. Now they just get in the way of the action.

All the same, I finally understood the durable appeal of *Ben-Hur*. It's both exciting and moving. Lew Wallace, an Indiana lawyer and author, was inspired to write the novel as an exploration of his Christian faith. The adventures of the heroic Judah Ben-Hur dramatize the moral and spiritual choices so urgently presented in the early days of Christianity. In the original novel, the famous chariot race is certainly the most iconic scene. But it lasts only eleven pages and occurs two-thirds of the way through the book, which means there's much more to our hero's story. Judah Ben-Hur's heart and soul are at stake.

As a writer, I could see the potential in my great-great-grandfather's much-loved book. It could be brought up to date with some cutting, some rearranging, more depth for the female characters, faster pacing, and contemporary language.

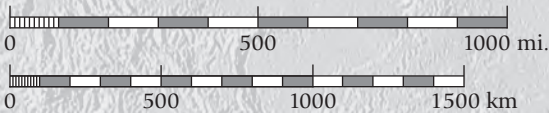
So here it is, a lively retelling of a story that has excited and enlightened millions of readers around the world for over 125 years.

*Carol Wallace*

*When I sit down finally in the old man's gown and slippers,  
helping the cat to keep the fireplace warm, I shall look  
back upon Ben-Hur as my best performance.*

LEW WALLACE, 1885

Extent of the Roman Empire  
in AD 20





PART 1





CHAPTER 1

# YOUTH

**I**t was early. The courtyard was still in shade and the cool air hadn't evaporated the water spilled by the gardeners. Judah Ben-Hur leapt over a puddle at the bottom of the massive staircase. At seventeen he was too old to be hopping around like a child, but he couldn't help his excitement: Messala was back! Judah would be far too early for their meeting, but it didn't matter. He wanted to leave the palace before one of the women saw him and asked where he was going.

But . . . "Judah," called Amrah, his former nursemaid, rounding the corner from the kitchens. "Where are you off to so early?"

"Nowhere," he said. "Out."

"Does your mother know? When will you be back?"

He looked down at her brown face, wrinkled beneath the veil. "No, she doesn't. I'll be out all day." He knew he sounded surly, so he leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Messala is back, Amrah. I'm



going to meet him. I'll be home around sunset." And before she could say anything, he moved his arm from her grasp and slipped through the door cut in the massive gate, waving to Shadrach the gatekeeper on his way.

This had always been the plan. Messala was Roman, from a powerful and rich family. His father had been stationed in Jerusalem for years as a tax collector. Rome ruled its client states with the help of their strongest citizens, so Prince Ithamar of the house of Hur, a merchant and trader with fleets of ships and warehouses all over the East, had known Messala's father. Thus the boys became friends. They had spent days on end together, exploring Jerusalem, building slingshots, telling stories. At fourteen, Messala had been sent back to Rome to finish his education. Five years later, he had returned, and now Ben-Hur pelted through the narrow streets to meet him. He ran through blocks of shade and sun, feeling the difference in heat a few steps later. When he neared the palace gardens, he slowed down. He didn't want to meet Messala while he was gasping for breath.

A wagon rolled past, leaving billows of dust, and Ben-Hur stepped back into a doorway, brushing down his white linen tunic. He glanced at his sleeve, where Amrah had clasped his arm, but the creases were set in the fine fabric. He shrugged and told himself that Messala wouldn't notice.

Minutes later he reached the meeting place, a marble bench near a pool in the palace gardens. They were empty at this time of day as the sun poured over the marble terraces and the palm trees dropped long-stemmed shadows. No Messala. Ben-Hur sat on the bench. Was that a pebble in his sandal? He wriggled his toes. Maybe a thorn. He slipped off the strap and slid his foot out. But before he could find the thorn, he heard Messala's footsteps on the gravel and stood up to see his friend.

A man now! The distance in their ages had always been important. Two years is an eternity when one friend is twelve and the other

fourteen. Ben-Hur knew he had changed. He had grown, developed; his voice had changed. The face he saw in the polished bronze mirror was no longer that of a child. But Messala! Urbane in his thin wool tunic edged with red. Taller, solid. Tanned by the sun, but elegantly groomed. As they embraced, Ben-Hur caught a whiff of some exotic pomade. Then Messala held his friend at arm's length to look at him. Ben-Hur suddenly felt gauche, standing on one foot with his sandal in his hand.

"So here we are again!" Messala said heartily and sat on the bench. "Come, sit. Get that pebble out of your shoe and make yourself comfortable."

Judah sat and pulled the long thorn from his sandal where it had become wedged between strap and sole. He held it up to Messala. "I suppose your paved Roman roads are always perfectly clean."

"Always." Messala nodded. "We have slaves sweep them. You could walk over them barefoot in comfort." Then his face changed. "I was sorry, Judah, to hear about your father's death. He was a good man."

"Thank you," Judah answered, looking at his hands in his lap. "He was. We miss him."

"I'm sure all of Judea misses him. How did it happen?"

"A storm at sea," Ben-Hur said. "There were no survivors, but some of the wreckage washed up on the coast of Cyrenaica. There were reports later of a sudden tempest. Some said a waterspout."

"How long ago?"

"Three years now," Ben-Hur replied.

"And your mother?"

"She grieves."

"And what about little Tirzah? How old is she now?"

"Fifteen."

"A young lady, then! She must be very pretty."

Ben-Hur nodded. "She is, but she doesn't know it. She is still almost a child."

“Time to be thinking of marriage, though,” Messala said. “Has your mother chosen a husband for her?”

“Not yet. I think my mother would like her company for a while yet.”

“Because you, my friend Judah—you will be going out into the world soon?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ben-Hur temporized. “It’s not easy. My mother doesn’t say anything, but I think she would like me to start thinking about my father’s business. We have a manager, but my father worked so hard. Someone in the family should take an interest.”

“And keep the shekels rolling in,” Messala said sardonically. Judah looked at him in surprise. “Well,” Messala went on, “everyone knows how much Jews care about money.”

Judah felt himself blushing but managed to retort, “That’s ridiculous! Especially coming from the son of a tax collector. Don’t I remember your father with his strongboxes of coins and his ledgers?”

Messala was silent for a moment, then said, “You’re right. I’ve been away too long. Such things can’t be said in Jerusalem.”

“Or thought, I hope,” Judah added.

“Oh, certainly not,” Messala said, standing. “Let’s walk. I’d forgotten how hot the sun is here.”

Judah hurriedly buckled his sandal and leapt to his feet. “What is Rome like?” he asked. “As a city, I mean.”

“You’ll have to go see for yourself sometime,” Messala told him. “There’s nothing like it in the world. Not just because it is beautiful—though it is. You never saw such magnificent buildings.”

“More so than the Temple?”

“The Temple Herod started to build here is fine for a provincial capital with a primitive religion,” Messala began.

“No,” Judah said, standing still. “Remember? You can’t say that.”

“About the provincial capital?” Messala asked. “Or the primitive religion?” He clapped Judah on the shoulder and gave him a little

push to get him walking again. “All right, I’m sorry. It’s just the way everyone talks in Rome.”

“That doesn’t mean it’s right or true,” Judah argued. He thought he might sound sulky, so he added, “I’m your friend, so I know you don’t mean it. But if you were overheard . . . There’s strong feeling against Romans. You need to be more careful.”

“Fine,” Messala said breezily. “Where should we go? The bazaar?”

“Yes, of course,” Judah answered, “though it won’t be much cooler.”

“At least there will be shade,” Messala said.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. Judah eyed Messala, comparing his old friend to the man who strode along beside him. Finally he said, “I know what it is! You walk differently!”

Messala burst out laughing, and for the first time Judah recognized the young man he had known. “That’s exactly what I remembered about you,” he said. “You are so observant!”

Judah shrugged, but he liked knowing that Messala had an opinion about him. “Well . . . I hope you aren’t offended.”

“Not if you explain what you mean.”

“Oh, nothing important. But you walk . . .” Judah drew himself up and pulled back his shoulders. “Like a soldier, I suppose.”

“Well done! You guessed without my telling you!”

“What, that you’ve joined the army?”

“I have,” Messala said. “Remember? I always wanted to.”

“I do,” Judah answered. “Everything we found we turned into weapons.”

“Especially swords. You could make a sword out of anything. Do you remember those massive leaves? Huge leathery things from the roof of your palace?”

Judah laughed. “That we cut into sword shapes, yes. And then old Shadrach, the porter—he’s still there, by the way—helped us stiffen them. With, what? Slivers of wood?”

“Yes, because the gate was being mended!” finished Messala. “They were lethal! Look, I still have a scar.” He held out his arm, where a tiny line of paler skin ran from his shoulder halfway to his elbow.

“The one time I got lucky,” Judah said. “Is it all you hoped, being a soldier?”

“It is,” Messala said. “It’s a glorious thing, the Roman army. Better even than I could have dreamed.”

“Real weapons, anyway.”

“Real weapons, real drilling, real officers. And real opportunities, Judah! You’ll see—I’ll explore; I’ll conquer new lands for the empire. When I’m done, I will rule all of Syria! And you can sit at my right hand, my old friend.” He linked his arm through Judah’s as they left the palace garden and started in the direction of the bazaar. “That’s what being in Rome really taught me—ambition. Ye gods, the world out there! Did you know that there are places in the north where it rains all the time and the natives paint themselves blue? There are Romans there, building roads and subduing those wild men. And in the sand hills south of Libya, they say there are cities built entirely out of gold. Why should they not be Roman too?”

Judah began to feel uneasy again. “And why *should* they be Roman?”

“The gold, for one thing. Which Rome can make better use of than a horde of barbarians. And Roman rule brings benefits: Law. Roads. Buildings. Water. Protection from warring tribes. You know about the Pax Romana.”

“What if people don’t want it, though?” Judah asked. “This Roman peace. Here, for instance. Jerusalem isn’t populated by savages. There was a city here when Rome was still a swamp.”

“Judah, you have no idea,” Messala countered, shaking his head. “Jerusalem is just an outpost. Not even a very important one. What do you have here? The Temple. Your dry hills. Your quarreling tribes. The doctrine of this and the ordinance of that. Men bending over

books, running their fingers down columns of your backward script, muttering about this prophet and that law, shaking their beards—that’s what Jews produce. No art, no music, no dancing, no rhetoric, no athletic competitions, no great names of leaders or explorers. Just your nameless god and his lunatic prophets.”

“Lunatic?” Ben-Hur protested.

“Oh, all that nonsense about burning bushes and parting seas . . .”

“This from a man whose people turn their own rulers into gods!”

“Ruling Rome and the empire is a task for gods,” Messala answered coolly. “If you stay in Jerusalem, you’ll end up as a nearsighted rabbi, hunchbacked from crouching over your books. I can see it now, Judah. There’s nothing else here for a boy like you.”

Judah slipped his arm away from Messala’s and took a step back. The two were at the edge of a narrow street, with high walls on each side and a constant rumble of wagons passing.

“Why did you come back, then?” he asked Messala. “Why not just stay in Rome?”

To his surprise, Messala blushed. Judah wasn’t sure at first; an ox cart rolled by and its shadow slid across Messala’s face, but once it was past, Judah saw clearly the evidence of his old friend’s embarrassment.

“My father wanted me here,” Messala said curtly. “He sent for me. There are always new cohorts coming out here from Rome. He arranged it.” Judah studied him. Messala went on, more fluently. “My mother was worried. She would like me to be nearby for some months. There’s no telling where I’ll be sent next. I’m sure your mother worries about you, too.”

“No,” Judah answered, “I don’t think she does.”

“You probably haven’t given her any cause,” Messala answered, and Judah was surprised by the bitter tone in his voice. “You were always a studious, rule-abiding boy. A typical Jew, in fact.” He watched Judah as he said this, with frank malice in his eyes. He seemed to be waiting for a reaction.

But Judah was too stunned to answer. Was this even the same person who had been his friend? Messala had been constantly at the Hur palace. He had teased Tirzah; Judah's mother, Naomi, had sung for him. Even the servants had liked him, though Judah now remembered that Amrah had always held herself aloof. Had she sensed something about Messala's character that she disapproved of?

The silence between them lengthened; then Messala turned on his heel and began to walk away. But before he had taken three steps, he turned back. "I looked forward to seeing you today, but I see we can't be friends. My father warned me of that. He said it would be different now and he was right."

He paused. Judah waited for his friend to say something about regret, lost friendship . . . something kind. Instead, Messala went on. "The new procurator arrives today. Did you know? You must hate that. Hearing the troops marching around your old shambles of a house—seeing them fill the streets from gutter to gutter with their polished weapons. You must have to wait, sometimes for several minutes, as they march past the door, before you can even step outside. That's what life in Jerusalem is these days. And you know, Judah, you do not live in the glory days of Solomon and his Temple. You live *now*, under the reign of Caesar Augustus and his successors."

Judah stood still, willing his face into a mask. Messala was leaving. Let him go. Ignore him; make him vanish. Reacting would just keep him there. Messala stared for a few seconds longer, then spun around and walked away. The sun glinted on his black hair and his blue gauze mantle.

Messala turned a corner and was lost to view. Judah stood by the side of the road, leaning against the wall, looking at the ground, until a small boy came past with an unusually large flock of goats. The goats pushed him out of the way.