

BOOK REVIEW

Bigger than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences. Edited by BARBARA RYAN and MILETTE SHAMIR. Television and Popular Culture. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016. P. xviii + 269. Paperback \$34.95. ISBN 9780815634034.

This edited volume gathers nine new studies to add to the many articles that have treated Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) and its adaptations. The forward (by Neil Sinyard) and introduction (by the editors) explains how Lew Wallace came to write what became the best-selling novel of the century, reached even more people via a spectacular stage version that ran from 1899 to 1925, and inspired a number of films, including Fred Niblo's 1925 silent film and William Wyler's blockbuster of 1959 (through which most people now know the story). *Bigger than Ben-Hur* appeared while we awaited the latest of the adaptations of the novel, the film by Timur Bekmambetov, as well as the Coen brother's hilarious new movie *Hail, Caesar!* about a day in the life of the producer of the fictional early-50s blockbuster *Hail, Caesar: A Tale of the Christ*. The 2010 TV miniseries, the 1988 and 2003 animated TV versions, and *Ben Hur Live*, the modern stage production that opened in London's O2 Arena in 2009, receive little or no notice: *Bigger than Ben-Hur* is still not big enough to contain the entire *Nachleben* of Wallace's story!

Four of the essays treat Wallace's novel, though they also look forward to the adaptations. Eran Shaley ("*Ben-Hur's* and America's Rome") puts the novel in the context of nineteenth-century USAmerican thinking about ancient Rome whereby the virtuous republic (Judah Ben-Hur's Zealots) resists the decadent, tyrannical empire; the antagonist Messala's character represents the decline of the republic into the empire. Milette Shamir, in the book's most sophisticated and original essay ("*Ben-Hur's* Mother"), shows how the novel successfully achieved the aim of the Protestant historical romance in the later nineteenth century to address the crisis caused by modern science and Higher Criticism's challenge to a nostalgic and sentimental traditional world view: Wallace immersed himself in the latest critical and archaeological sciences in order to

make first-century Palestine relevant to his audience, but he could still reassure them that Judah's development as a character depended on returning home to mother. Moreover, Shamir continues, Wallace unified historical and eschatological time by weaving together the Judah story, which ended in the first century, and the Christ story, still ongoing in the nineteenth.

Jefferson Gatrall ("Retelling and Untelling the Christmas Story") chronicles the Sunday School Movement of the nineteenth century that culminated in the Unified Lesson System of the American Sunday School Union in 1872. *Ben-Hur* came to dominate the curriculum and thereby allayed church-goers' suspicion of the mixing of sacred and profane. Hilton Obenzinger ("Holy Lands, Restoration, and Zionism in *Ben-Hur*") works from Wallace's biography to show how his sensitivity to complex cultural interactions derived from his experience of the Indian and Civil Wars, his governorship of New Mexico Territory, and his ambassadorship in Istanbul; Obenzinger equates Ben-Hur's wish to throw off Roman rule and replace it with a new Zionist empire with US Manifest Destiny, both depending on "the impossible notion of a good colonizing empire that is also anti-colonial" (76).

Howard Miller ("In the Service of Christianity") turns to the skillful marketing of the stage adaptation of *Ben Hur*, which had some 6000 performances over twenty-six years. By getting ministers to approve the production and by making the audience feel like they had gone to church, the producers Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger weakened religious opposition to the theater in general. The next two essays treat the 1925 silent film, which MGM originally had June Matthis write and produce.

Thomas Slater ("June Matthis's *Ben-Hur*") shows how the theater industry, once full of opportunities for creative and business leadership by women, came under the domination of the men whom the banking sector preferred to administer their funds. As a result (as well as because of some production mistakes), Matthis lost control of the film, which Fred Niblo took over, and so—as Slater shows in his analysis of Matthis's script—we have a version less sensitive to the feminine virtues of spirituality, justice, and giving than to masculine virtues of hard work, ownership, and autonomy.

Richard Walsh ("Getting Judas Right") looks at the figure of Judah Ben-Hur in Niblo's film and suggests that Judah stands for a Judas (Jesus's betrayer in the Gospel accounts) that we would like to have had: someone who at first misunderstands Jesus's political role but in the end accepts his spiritual role and

so does not turn against his master in disillusionment. Niblo also made the film palatable to non-Christians, including Jews, by minimizing the Jewish presence and reducing the message of Jesus to a rather bland, non-creedal religion of love, peace, and brotherhood.

Although many include it in their analyses, only one contributor focuses on the 1959 film by William Wyler, Ina Rae Hark in her excellent study of Wyler's treatment of gender roles ("The Erotics of the Galley Slave"). Wyler lets the audience avoid the fundamentally uneasy—because erotic and sadistic—experience of enjoying the sight of Jesus's tortured body; yet he enables a more acceptable frisson by having the Jesus-substitute Judah Ben-Hur undergo his own Via Dolorosa (sent to the galleys), culminating in a symbolic death (shipwreck) and resurrection (as the son of Quintus Arrius). In the end, tempered by Jesus and the women in his family, Judah displays feminized virtues such as compassion and rejects a political role represented by Messala, with his masculine goals of domination and vengeance.

The collection concludes with David Mayer's list ("Challenging a Default *Ben-Hur*") of a number of the novel's themes, such as the importance of capitalistic money-making, and characters, such as the vamp Iras that he would like to see given more attention in future adaptations; Bekmambetov's movie must have disappointed him. I leave aside Barbara Ryan's flawed attempt to read John Buchan's *Sick Heart River* (1941) as a repudiation of Wallace's novel ("Take Up the White Man's Burden") and Jon Solomon's long list of the commercial uses of the *Ben-Hur* name almost from its very beginning.

Scholars and students of Wallace's *Ben-Hur* and its adaptations as well as of political, religious, performance, reception, and literary history will find this collection useful and insightful. The editors have featured scholars coming from a variety of disciplines and ensured that they consider and cross-reference each others' work. Each essay shows thorough familiarity with the relevant scholarship, though the publisher has inconveniently grouped the documentation together as endnotes. Following them comes a general bibliography of recent studies of *Ben-Hur* and its adaptations and a useful index. This nicely-produced, error-free book also has a few appropriate and well-reproduced illustrations.

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