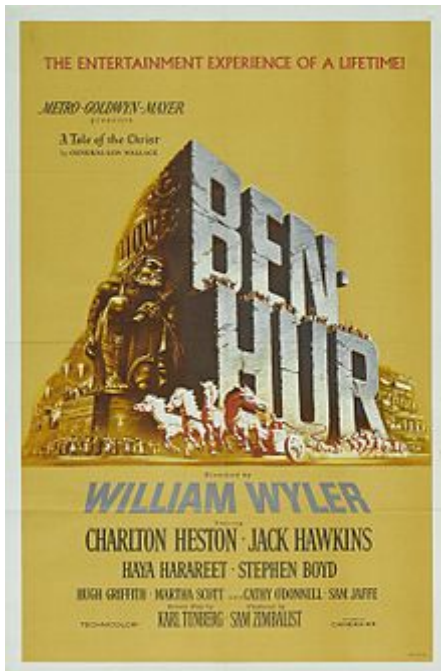


Ben-Hur (1959)



Original [film poster](#) by [Reynold Brown](#)

Certificate: T 212 min - Action | Adventure | Drama - 19 December 1960 (Spain)

Ratings: 8,1/10 from 97.053 users
Reviews: 326 user | 91 critic

When a Jewish prince is betrayed and sent into slavery by a Roman friend, he regains his freedom and comes back for revenge.

Director: William Wyler
Writers: Lew Wallace (novel), Karl Tunberg (screenplay).
Stars: Charlton Heston, Jack Hawkins, Haya Harareet.

Storyline

Judah Ben-Hur lives as a rich Jewish prince and merchant in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 1st century. Together with the new governor his old friend Messala arrives as commanding officer of the Roman legions. At first they are happy to meet after a long time but their different politic views separate them. During the welcome parade a roof tile falls down from Judah's house and injures the governor. Although Messala knows they are not guilty, he sends Judah to the galleys and throws his mother and sister into prison. But Judah swears to come back and take revenge. *Written by Matthias Scheler*
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Plot Summary

When Prince Judah Ben-Hur hears that his childhood friend Messala has been named to command the Roman garrison of Jerusalem, he is thrilled. He soon finds, however, that his friend has changed and has become an arrogant conqueror, full of the grandeur of Rome. When Judah refuses to divulge the names of Jews who oppose Roman rule, Messala decides to make an example of him and sends him off as a galley slave. Through fate and good fortune, Judah survives the galleys and manages to return to Jerusalem in the hopes of finding his mother and sister, who were also imprisoned, and to seek revenge against his one-time friend. *Written by garykmcd*

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0052618/>

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Background

Ben-Hur (1959) is MGM's three and a half hour, wide-screen epic Technicolor blockbuster - a Biblical tale, subtitled *A Tale of the Christ*.

Director William Wyler's film was a retelling of the spectacular silent film of the same name (director Fred Niblo's and MGM's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925)). Both films were adapted from the novel (first published in 1880) by former Civil War General Lew Wallace. Wyler had been an 'extras' director on the set of DeMille's original film in the silent era. MGM's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925), featuring a cast of 125,000, cost about \$4 million to make after shooting began on location in Italy, in 1923, and starred silent screen idols Ramon Novarro and Francis X. Bushman. This figure is equivalent to \$33 million today - it was the most expensive silent film ever made.

This remake of the novel was inspired by the fact that three years earlier, Cecil B. DeMille and Paramount had remade the 1925 version of his film as a successful 50's epoch Biblical tale titled *The Ten Commandments* (1956). The heroic figure of Charlton Heston (an iconic and righteous Moses figure) would again be commissioned to play the lead role in this film of a Jewish nobleman (the Prince of Judea) - after the role was turned down by Burt Lancaster, Rock Hudson and Paul Newman. In the plot, prince Judah Ben-Hur was enslaved by a Roman tribunal friend (with a homosexual subtext provided by co-writer Gore Vidal), but then returned years later to seek revenge in the film's centerpiece, a chariot race. Ultimately, he would find redemption and forgiveness in the inspiring and enlightening finale.

The colorful 1959 version was the *most* expensive film ever made up to its time, and the most expensive film of the 50s decade. At \$15 million and shot on a grand scale, it was a tremendous make-or-break risk for MGM Studios - and ultimately saved the studio from bankruptcy. [It was a big dual win for MGM, since they had won the Best Picture race the previous year for *Gigi* (1958).] It took six years to prepare for the film shoot, and over a half year of on-location work in Italy, with thousands of extras. It featured more crew and extras than any other film before it - 15,000 extras alone for the chariot race sequence.

Ben-Hur proved to be an intelligent, exciting, and dramatic piece of film-making unlike so many other vulgar Biblical pageants with Hollywood actors and actresses. Its depiction of the Jesus Christ figure was also extremely subtle and solely as a cameo - it never showed Christ's face but only the reactions of other characters to him.

It was one of the most honored, award-winning films of all time. It was nominated for twelve Academy Awards, Best Picture, Best Actor (Charlton Heston - his sole career Oscar), Best Supporting Actor (Hugh Griffith), Best Director (William Wyler), Best Color Cinematography, Best Color Art Direction/Set Decoration, Best Sound, Best Score, Best Film Editing, Best Color Costume Design, Best Special Effects, and Best Screenplay (sole-credited Karl Tunberg). It was the first film to win eleven Oscars - it lost only in the Screenplay category due to a dispute over screenwriting credits (Maxwell Anderson, Christopher Fry, and Gore Vidal were all uncredited). *Titanic* (1997) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) are the only films to tie this phenomenal record, although unlike this film, they came away *without* any acting Oscars. Many felt that Heston's performance was inferior to other nominees in the Best Actor category: Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot* or Laurence Harvey in *Room at the Top*, and James Stewart in

Anatomy of a Murder.

The chariot race sequence in the Circus Maximus (an amazing replica of the one in Rome) is one of the most thrilling and famous in film history. [Homage was paid to it with George Lucas' pod-race in *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* (1999).] The site of the race, the Circus Maximus in Jerusalem (Judea), was constructed on over 18 acres of backlot space at Cinecitta Studios outside Rome, and the filming of the sequence took about five weeks. Except for two of the most spectacular stunts, both Charlton Heston and Stephen Boyd did all their own chariot driving in the carefully-choreographed sequence. There are contradictory reports about the fatality of a stuntman during the dangerous scene in the film, yet no published discussions of the film mention the accident, and Charlton Heston's 1995 autobiography *In the Arena* specifically stated that no one was seriously injured (beyond a cut on the chin) during the filming of the scene.

<http://www.filmsite.org/benh.html>

Review

To hell with *Gladiator*. Scratch that. *Ben-Hur* is no stupid *gladiator* movie. As the title sequence tells us, this is 'A Tale of the Christ,' an unabashed religious fable, albeit one that only shows its hero from the back. Of course, Jesus is not the real subject of this tale, it's Judah Ben-Hur, a Jewish prince living in Judea, played by the incomparable Charlton Heston. Ben-Hur lives high on the hog, here in the year 26, as we're told. *And* he's a good guy, nice to his slaves and everything. But woe be unto Judah when the Romans step up their military presence in his territory. Despite their being led by his old friend Massala (Stephen Boyd, who never starred in another big hit after *Ben-Hur*), tensions run high, and when some tiles accidentally fall

from Ben-Hur's roof, nearly hitting the new Governor of Judea, Judah is quickly sentenced without trial to hard labor, rowing in the galleys of the Roman navy. From prince to slave he goes, and because of his endless compassion, Ben-Hur finds himself legally adopted by a Roman nobleman whose life he has saved years later. He practices his charioteering, and soon enough he is at liberty to avenge not only his imprisonment, but that of his mother and sister as well. That vengeance, as any moviegoer knows, takes place on the chariot course in a sequence so famous, dramatic, and long it consumes 10 chapters of the film's 61-chapter DVD release. At 3 1/2 full hours of running time, you aren't likely to find another G-rated film that kids will hate more than *Ben-Hur*. Even as an (ostensible) adult, I'm torn on the film. It's not particularly well-written. The music is heavy-handed and grates on the ears. The story is far-fetched and lacks proper editing. *And it's 3 1/2 hours long*. But don't mind me. Nominated for 12 Oscars, *Ben-Hur* won 11, a record. Shot on 65mm super-widescreen film, it is one of the most resplendent films you'll ever see (check out the new DVD release if you don't believe me -- it also includes a documentary about the making of the film and a commentary track by Heston, not to mention an old screen test with *Leslie Nielsen* as Massala). And Heston is unforgettable (the rest of the cast is another story). Moviegoers agreed, when *Ben-Hur's* grosses saved MGM from bankruptcy. (Warner Brothers has the rights now.) All told, I'm content to let the overly dramatic theatrics of *Ben-Hur* fall by the wayside (case in point: after four years in prison, Ben-Hur's sister and mother develop *leprosy* -- and who do we know that can cure leprosy, hmmmmm). Instead, I'll sit back and take my place in the stands for that thundering chariot race. Hell, that's better than a cruddy, overrated gladiator picture any day. Ride 'em, cowboy.
by **Christopher Null**, Filmcritic.com