

# Study Guide for Ben Hur

As a film passes so rapidly, it is wise to do a pre-study and provide students with guides and questions before the actual viewing. As Ben Hur is so long, this study unit provides for approximately forty-five minutes of viewing on five consecutive days. Questions for each session can be given the students on the preceding day, so that they may have some guide as to what to look for in any given session. If the class periods are long enough to allow it, some class discussion at the end of each unit is profitable. Any questions to be answered on paper should probably be done at the end of each session; at least before the next. Special credit could be given for the most correct answers or for extra observations not requested.

## Study notes for pre-viewing preparation

### A. Cultures

#### Roman

Three cultures of the ancient world are presented, and to a certain extent stereotyped, in this film. The Romans, the Jews, and the Arabs are all presented in various forms and ways. The might of Rome is clear in this film, as is the arrogance of some Romans. Students should note, however, that both Tiberius Caesar and Quintus Arrius are men whose power, far greater than Messala's, does not seem to have turned them into monsters as Messala's power has. In his early meetings with Judah Messala seems to regard Rome merely as a staircase on which he can rise. Arrius makes a better Roman character study. He has the toughness, the "death before dishonor" code, the respect for courage and strength, and the love for it.

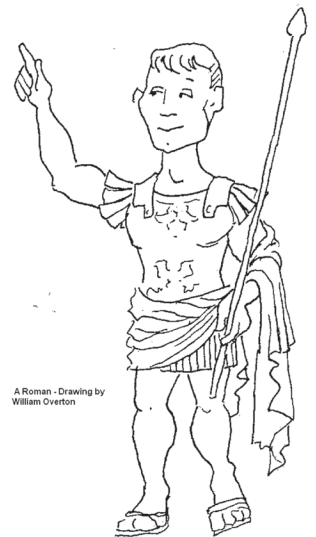
Judah which he can only express by setting him free, which make a great human and a great Roman. The emphasis which Romans placed on having a son to carry on one's name and to honor family graves makes his sacrifice to Judah's wishes all the more potent. Pontius Pilate, the other prominent Roman in the film, is a friend of Arrius who does not wish to harm Judah. However, he intends to maintain peace in Judea regardless of who may suffer for it.

Cultural signs to watch for: Roman dress and armor; sailing vessels; marching formations and musical instruments; triumphal parade.

#### Arabian

The culture of the Arabian desert peoples is represented by Shiek Ilderim, the trader with the magnificent horses, and by Balthazar the Wise Man who comes back looking for the mature Christ. Ilderim with his impish sense of humor, his interesting defense of polygamy, his knowledge and love of horses, and his subtlety in dealing with the Romans and with Judah shows the wisdom and cleverness of his people. His reference to the common descent of Jews and Arabs from Abraham throws still more light on this prince of the desert. Balthazar, who is traditionally considered a Chaldean astronomer, comes from desert people not grandchildren but cousins of Abraham--the ancient and learned Sumerian-Babylonian races. His gentleness and truth-seeking show another facet of the desert peoples.

Cultural signs to watch for: Arab dress; horses and their names; polygamy; subtle reasoning.



A Roman - Drawing by William Overton

A Roman

Drawing by William Overton



An Arab - Drawing by William Overton

Arab - Drawing by William Overton



Jewish Man—Drawing  
by William Overton

## Jewish

Jewish culture is of course paramount in this film and needs understanding. Judea had the misfortune to be a small country located on the crossroads between several powerful and warlike civilizations. It had suffered much at many hands before two rival claimants for the throne submitted their claims to Pompey the Great. The loser in this decision did not accept Pompey's decision, but placed an army in Jerusalem. Pompey besieged the city and won, and Judea became a protectorate of Rome. Wiser and saner Romans than Messala marvelled at the Jews' resistance to Rome even in the face of certain destruction. Many nations lived happily and productively under Roman rule, but both Romans and many modern students have failed to understand that "Jewish" is both a religious and a racial designation. To accept outside domination was to betray both one's nation and one's Temple.

Cultural signs to watch for- Mazuzah- or mezuzah-small niche in wall at door of Jewish home(it contains a scroll with a scripture; Jewish men pay it reverence when they enter)-, Judah's headdress at prayers and meals; Eating customs-, dress.

## B. Music

Music themes are many, but for students with so much to watch for three are probably sufficient: the Christ theme, the Roman power theme, and the love theme. All of these are woven into the overture of course, but the Christ theme should be apparent in the nativity scene which precedes the credits and even more clearly in the first appearance of the grown Christ walking in the hills while the Romans march through Nazareth. The Roman power theme is played on both sides of this, and the love theme arrives with the first appearance of Esther when she comes

with her father to Judah's house. Music students can add others.

## C. Symbolism

Hand and water symbolism are very important to the deeper appreciation of this film. A few of the more important symbols will be listed here; students once alerted will find many more.

1. The credits are superimposed on Michaelangelo's central painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome; the painting shows God touching Adam's hand and giving him life.
2. The Roman handshake exchanged by Judah and Messala at their first meeting in the film shows trust. Similar handshakes are exchanged between other characters. Hands also show comfort, affection, and sometimes a desire to control.
3. Christ when saving Judah's life gently touches him.
4. On the way to the galley ship, Christ gives Judah water, and Judah lives. Water in this film is very appropriately the symbol of life.
5. When Judah and Consul Arrius are rescued by the Roman ship, the Consul is given water. Instead of drinking it, he hands it first to Judah, the slave.
6. On the way to the cross Judah attempts to give Christ water, but Christ is destined to die, and Judah is not allowed to give it.
7. As Christ walks away to Golgotha bearing the cross, the hand of Judah is in the forefront of the picture, with his water gourd hanging in a drooping hand while the water drips on the ground.
8. The hands of Christ on the cross are emphasized.

Many of the hand and water symbols are combined. In Judah's first encounter with Christ, He shows compassion with touch and with the drink of water. A major combination is composed of the hands of the leper women, the hands of Christ on the cross, and the rain that flows over Christ's hands and over the hands of the suddenly healed lepers.

## Questions for Viewing Section I

In the pre-credit scene notice the Christ theme and the faces of the three wise men. The center face we shall see in three more important contexts.

### Questions

1. What color is typical of the Roman legions?

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2. Where does Messala say he and the legions are in their journey?

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3. What does the elderly Jew who enters Joseph's house do at the door?

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4. When Messala and his troop arrive at the Fortress Antonia in Jerusalem, how does Sextus say that Messala's father is remembered?

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5. How does Messala plan to change things in Judea?

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6. What is Messala's definition of friendship?

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Quote from the Messala/Judah scene to be remembered and written about:

*"it was no accident that one small city on the Tiber came to rule the world."*

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7. What dining customs do you notice at Judah's meal with his mother and sister?

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8. What small object does Judah pay reverence to when entering his home? What does he do?

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9. Why must Esther have Judah's permission to marry?

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10. What usual welcome for a new Roman governor did Gratus expect and not get?

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11. What accident brings about Judah's arrest for treason?

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*Section I ends when Messala inspects the roof.*

### *Questions for viewing Section II*

12. What normal Roman legal proceeding does Judah say that he has not received?

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13. What does Messala hope to gain for himself by sentencing Judah to the galleys and destroying his family?

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14. As Romans did not typically build prisons in the manner of the Greeks or even the Jews (the "Ben Hur" episode of the mother and sister is not very historical), most convicted felons were either executed or put to some useful but gruelling work. On the long march of the assigned galley rowers to the sea, how is Judah's life preserved?

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15. How does Judah attract the interest and admiration of Consul Arrius?

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16. Why are the galley rowers (who are convicted felons) chained to the ship?

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17. What is Arrius' attitude toward religion?

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18. How does he save Judah?

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19. Why does he try to kill himself?

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20. How does Judah recognize the Roman ship?

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21. Why does Arrius receive a triumph (parade) when he arrives in Rome? What does he ask of the Emperor?

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22. In what capacity does Judah serve Arrius?

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23. What change in Judah's status does Arrius make?

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24. What further proof of his love for Judah does he give?

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Quote from this section to be remembered and written about:

*"Whoever the gods may be, they take small interest in an old man's hopes.*

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*Section II ends at the close of the scene in Rome.*

### *Questions for Viewing Section III*

25. When Judah returns to Palestine, what ring is he wearing and why?

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26. Who does Balthazar hope Judah may be?

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27. What advice does Shiek Ilderim have for Judah at dinner?

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28. What does he want Judah to do? How does he try to persuade him?

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*(Part I of the videotape ends during this scene; change tapes and continue)*

29. When Judah arrives in Jerusalem, what does he do to the mazuzah?

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30. What has happened to his faithful slave Simonides?

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Quote from this section:

*"The stone that fell from this roof so long ago is still falling."*

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31. How do Messala's new quarters contrast with the "simple, austere, Roman" quarters of his father and Sextus which we saw at the beginning of the film?

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32. What gift does "Young Arrius" bring Messala?

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33. What does he demand that Messala do?

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34. Why does he have the authority to make this demand?

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35. Where do Judah's mother and sister go and why?

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36. When told that his mother and sister are dead, what does Judah do to the little door-shrine?

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37. What does he agree to do?

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38. Explain how Ilderim's speeches in the Roman bath scene have double meanings.

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39. How does he use the Romans' pride against them?

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40. How does he trap Messala?

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*This section ends with the stable scene with the horses.*

### *Questions for viewing Section IV*

41. What does Sheik Ilderim give Judah just before the race? What does it signify?

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42. How is the race started?

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43. How do the race managers signal the end of a lap?

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Quote at end of race

*"You are the people's one true god--for the time being."*

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44. How does Messala revenge himself on Judah?

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45. What graphic hand symbol comes at the end of their scene?

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46. Judah's mother asks two questions about him. Why does Esther answer only one?

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47. What has Balthazar found?

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48. Discuss hand and water symbolism in the Sermon on the Mount scene.

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49. Since Judah cannot face the fact that Messala was evil, whom does he blame?

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Quote from Pilate's apology for the miscarriage of Roman justice:

*"Where there is greatness, great government or power or even great feeling, error is also great."*

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50. What does Esther say Judah has become?

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*This section ends when Judah leaves Esther and goes back to the Leper Valley.*

### *Questions for viewing Section V*

51. Discuss the hand symbolism when Judah and Esther enter the Valley of the Lepers.

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52. Why is Jerusalem deserted as they enter?

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53. Why does Pilate wash his hands at Jesus's trial?

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54. What favor does Judah try to return to Christ on the Via Dolorosa?

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55. What does Balthazar understand that Judah does not?

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56. When are the women healed?

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57. When Judah comes home, what does he do to the mazuzah? What does this signify?

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Quote:

*"I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand."*

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58. What is the symbolism of the final scene (after the family one)?

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### *Projects for this study*

**Research previous to the viewing on key words and concepts:**

- Rome's relationship with Palestine
- Arabian tribes --Bedouin etc.--of the first century B.C
- Jewish people
- Any of the cultural signs mentioned in the introduction

### *Writing projects after viewing:*

- Discuss Arrius, Ilderim, and Judah as representatives of their races
- Write a paragraph explaining each of the quotes included in the study notes
- Locate and discuss Christian symbols in the film.

**Note:** *in the font a capital "i" looks like an "l." If the sheik's name were not capitalized, it would be: ilderim*

### *References*

1. Asimov, Isaac. The Roman Republic and The Roman Empire
2. Durant, Will. Caesar and Christ.