Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ

Lew Wallace · *1880 · original English text*

A Jewish prince of Jerusalem, Judah Ben-Hur, is sent to the galleys after a Roman accident and a false friend, and spends the book seeking his mother and sister and his revenge. The Wise Men find the Child, a Roman admiral adopts a slave, a chariot race is run at Antioch, and Judah comes to see what the coming King is. Wallace wrote it as a Christian novel, and it ends at the Cross.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What can overcome the wish for revenge, and what kind of King did Israel need?

Wallace answers that revenge cannot heal a wrong. Judah wins in the galleys, in the sea fight and in the great race, and each win leaves him still hungry. When he sees his mother and sister made clean by Christ and then stands at the Cross, the hunger goes, and he gives his fortune to the faith. The Gospel scenes are Wallace's imagining, so read them beside the Gospels themselves.

KEY CHARACTERS

Judah Ben-Hur
A Jewish prince of Jerusalem, a galley slave, and then a Roman citizen.

Messala
A Roman officer and Judah's boyhood friend who becomes his enemy.

Quintus Arrius
A Roman admiral who adopts Judah.

Simonides
The Hur family's faithful servant and steward.

Esther
Simonides' daughter, who becomes Judah's wife.

Ilderim
An Arab sheik who owns four white horses.

Balthasar
The Egyptian Wise Man.

Iras
Balthasar's daughter, a clever and ambitious woman.

Tirzah
Judah's sister.

Amrah
The Hur family's old nurse.

Grades 8–12
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01
The Wise Men
BOOK FIRST, CHAPTERS I–XIV

An Egyptian, a Greek and a Hindu meet in the desert, are led by a star to Jerusalem, and find the Child at Bethlehem.

- Each of the three men speaks of the faith that brought him.
- They follow a light in the sky to the Joppa Gate of Jerusalem.
- They are questioned at Herod's court.
- They find Mary, Joseph and the Child in the cave at Bethlehem.

02
The Tile and the Galleys
BOOK SECOND, CHAPTERS I–VII

Judah Ben-Hur meets his boyhood friend Messala, now a Roman. A loose tile falls from the Hur roof on the new governor, and Judah is condemned without trial.

- The Hur house in Jerusalem is rich and pious.
- Messala has come back from Rome a proud Roman.
- A tile from the roof strikes the governor Gratus.
- Judah is chained for the galleys, and his mother and sister are seized.
- At Nazareth a young man gives him water.

03
At the Oar
BOOK THIRD, CHAPTERS I–VI

Judah rows for three years in the galley of Quintus Arrius. In a sea fight with pirates he saves the admiral and is freed and adopted by him.

- Judah is rower number sixty, held by a chain.
- Arrius notices his bearing.
- Judah saves Arrius from the sea after the fight.
- Arrius frees and adopts him.

04
Antioch
BOOK FOURTH, CHAPTERS I–XVII

Judah returns east to find his family and meets Simonides, once his father's servant, and Esther his daughter, the sheik Ilderim, and Balthasar the Egyptian.

- Simonides tests Judah before he owns him as master.
- Esther, Simonides' daughter, is kind to Judah.
- Ilderim offers Judah the driving of four white horses.
- Balthasar tells of the Wise Men and the Christ who is coming.
- Iras, Balthasar's daughter, is in the city.

05
The Race
BOOK FIFTH, CHAPTERS I–XVI

Judah drives Ilderim's team against Messala in the circus, wins, and leaves his enemy broken. Iras, who had smiled on Judah, proves to be Messala's ally.

- Judah trains the four horses to run as one.
- The wager is laid.
- Judah catches Messala's wheel, and Messala is trampled.
- Judah takes the crown.
- Simonides renders account of the Hur fortune.

06
The Lepers
BOOK SIXTH, CHAPTERS I–VI

In Jerusalem under Pilate, Judah learns that his mother and sister have been shut away for eight years and are now lepers living in a tomb.

- Cell VI in the Tower of Antonia held the two women.
- They were turned out into the city as unclean.
- The old nurse Amrah brings them food.
- They hide from Judah for his sake.

07
The King Who Is Coming
BOOKS SEVENTH AND EIGHTH

Judah follows John the Baptist and Jesus and asks whether the King is of this world. Christ cleanses his mother and sister, and Judah stands at the Cross.

- John the Baptist preaches at Bethabara.
- Judah asks if the kingdom is political or spiritual.
- Christ cleanses the lepers on the road.
- Judah sends Iras back to Messala with his defiance.
- He stands at Calvary and gives his fortune to the faith.

Revenge and mercy | Faith in the coming King | Slavery and freedom | Friendship broken and kept | The chariot race | Family and home

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 8–12

1. How the tile falls, and what Messala does and does not do.
2. What Judah sees in the young man who gives him water at Nazareth.
3. How Judah changes after the sea fight and the great race.
4. How Simonides, Esther and Ilderim help Judah.
5. What the Wise Men and Simonides say of the coming King.
6. The lepers' cry to Christ and what follows it.

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