



Ben-Hur

Lew Wallace

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Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ is a novel by Lew Wallace published on November 12, 1880 by Harper & Brothers. Considered "the most influential Christian book of the nineteenth century", it was the best-selling American novel from the time of its publication, superseding Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852). It remained at the top until the publication of Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind (1936). Following release of the 1959 MGM film adaptation of Ben-Hur, which was seen by tens of millions and won 11 Academy Awards in 1960, book sales surpassed Gone with the Wind. Blessed by Pope Leo XIII, the novel was the first work of fiction to be so honored.

The story recounts the adventures of Judah Ben-Hur, a Jewish prince and merchant in Jerusalem at the beginning of the 1st century. Judah's childhood friend Messala returns home as an ambitious commanding officer of the Roman legions. They come to realize that they have changed and hold very different views and aspirations. During a military parade, a tile falls from the roof of Judah's house and barely misses the Roman governor. Although Messala knows that they are not guilty, he condemns the Ben-Hur family. Without trial, Judah is sent to the Roman galleys for life; his mother and sister are imprisoned in a cell previously used for lepers and all the family property is confiscated.

Through good fortune, befriending and saving the commander of his ship, Judah survives and is trained as a soldier. He returns to Jerusalem, where he seeks revenge against his one-time friend and redemption for his family. Running in parallel with Ben-Hur's narrative is the unfolding story of Jesus, who comes from the same region and is a similar age. The two reflect themes of betrayal, conviction and redemption. With the Crucifixion, Ben-Hur recognizes that the Christ stands for a different goal than revenge, and he becomes Christian, turning to supporting the new religion with money which he has inherited, inspired by love and the talk of keys to a greater kingdom than any on earth.

The name "Ben Hur" derives from the Hebrew for "Son of white linen".

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