Ben Hur (1959), a Twentieth Century Spectacle ©2022

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In ancient Rome, the spectacle acted as the heart of politics in the Empire. The exhibition of the ancient games reflects the strength and power of Rome's ability to control the populous. The Romans literally perfected the art of captivating entertainment. Ancient Romans were obsessed with chariot racing and could not look away from the games. The gambling, violence, and drama captured the full attention of their minds, bodies, and loyalties.

Similarly, "Ben-Hur" (1959), a film directed by William Wyler, starring Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur, acts as a captivating spectacle for the movie-going audience. In *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino*, Jerry Toner describes the elaborate spectacle of the circus as emotional food for the monster (the Mob).[1] Perhaps "Ben-Hur," like the original games, captures the minds and emotions of the viewing public, validating their beliefs of ancient Rome.

Wyler's film, reminiscent of a production at the Circus Maximus, follows Roman form with its grandeur in size and scale. However, with "Ben-Hur" set in Judea, rather than Rome, Wyler takes license with the accuracy of the event and the design and size of the chariot racing stadium. Similar to the Greeks and Romans who manipulated sports for their gain, Wyler masterfully manipulates the chariot racing event and architecture in "Ben-Hur."

Through analysis of "Ben Hur," a film directed by William Wyler, it is clear that the action and special effects support Roman chariot racing with historical accuracy in many ways. However, although the film received critical acclaim and won eleven Academy Awards in 1960, including Best Production Design, it falls short of recreating the authenticity of the ancient chariot racing stadium of Judea and events of the games.

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[1] Toner, Jerry. *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2014, pp. 67.

The "Ben-Hur" chariot race takes place in Jerusalem, where stadiums were neither elaborate nor grand in size. "Ben Hur" takes place at the time of Jesus Christ's crucifixion in 29 CE and Judea was not yet Romanized. However, in "Ben-Hur," the stadium appears modeled after the Circus Maximus architecturally in size and grandeur. The Circus Maximus, built in the 6th century BC, was the oldest and largest public space in Rome and held upwards of 150,000 spectators. No other arena challenged the Circus in size, scale, nor grandeur. However, Wyler's "Ben-Hur" set design seems to replicate the Circus Maximus in size.

A stadium outside of Rome would have held no more than 40,000 people; however, the "Ben-Hur" arena appears to hold 150,000 or more spectators. Although the "Ben-Hur" stadium accurately holds a *spina* in the center of the racetrack, it fails to hold an obelisk; instead, two colossal statues of gladiators adorn the long narrow platform. The statues of gladiators seem unlikely when the Circus Maximus held statues of Victoria, the goddess of victory, Cybele, the goddess of fertility, and Seia, the agrarian goddess. Wyler's set design accurately displays three *metae*, tall cylindrical columns, at each end of the *spina*, indicating the turning point for the charioteers and horses. However, the *spina*, lined with spectators during the race, seems unlikely since their location poses a great physical risk.

Chariot horses were prized animals in Ancient Rome. Toner writes in *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino* that the horses of the chariot races were thoroughbreds coming from stud farms in Spain, Thessaly, and Northern Africa.[2] Fik Meijer writes that "seventy-eight thoroughbreds were selected"[3] for the film. Sheik Ilderim (Hugh Griffith), a wealthy man from Arabia, owns Ben-Hur's chariot horses. The Sheik explains to Ben-Hur that his horses "are

[2] Toner. pp. 53.
[3] Meijer, Fik. *Chariot Racing in the Roman Empire*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2010. pp. 159.

descended from the Arabians of the Pharaohs"[4] and are the finest in all Rome, and the chariot race in Jerusalem will include the world's finest teams. In these ways, Wyler accurately portrays the value and training of the chariot horses.

Chariot racing was an expensive sport due to the cost of the cart and the care of the horses. Cheating disqualified chariot racers. It is unlikely that a charioteer would risk his horses and carriage by cheating. However, in "Ben-Hur," we see Messala Severus (Stephen Boyd) cheat by using disqualifying tactics to win. Messala outfits the wheels of his chariot with sharp blades that stick out from the axels. The bladed axels eliminate several charioteers and damage Messala's cart, leading to his death.

Ben-Hur, a wealthy Jewish merchant, may have become a charioteer in the Roman Empire while enslaved. However, once he becomes adopted by the Roman consul, Quintus Arrius, Ben-Hur rises to the level of an aristocratic elite. Only in Olympia would Ben-Hur have competed as an aristocrat. The aristocratic elite did not compete in the Roman games.

Fik Meijer tells us in *Chariot Racing in the Roman Empire* that *tentores* "opened the starting gates at a signal from the official starter."[5] Although Pontius Pilot, the official starter in the film, drops a white handkerchief as an indicator for the gates to open, the chariot track of "Ben-Hur" lacked gate stalls. Fik writes that the starting line is the least realistic.[6] Lacking starting stalls, nine *quadrigae* (four-horse chariots) wait in the open, without gates to indicate the go signal. In addition, the *quadrigae* are not staggered; instead, all wait along an imaginary line.

Flagmen standing on the spina lower their flags, indicating that the charioteers can advance, and the horses race forward toward the *metae* at the end of the spina. In an ancient

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[4] "Ben-Hur." Directed by William Wyler, performances by Charlton Heston and Stephan Boyd. Metro Goldwyn Mayer.
[5] Meijer. pp. 56.
[6] Meijer. pp. 158.

Roman chariot race, rules require that charioteers stay in their lane for 160 meters before vying for a position closest to the *spina*. Although Meijer writes, "the track itself […] looks extremely authentic,"[7] in "Ben-Hur," the charioteers immediately drive their horses as close as possible to the *spina*. Ancient Roman guidelines would have disqualified the charioteers for breaking this rule of the racetrack. In "Ben-Hur," none of the charioteers are disqualified.

Roman officials used bronze dolphin figures to count the charioteer's laps. The bronze dolphin models hang from a pole, and the race official drops one for each lap. In "Ben,-Hur," the dolphin counting mechanism is accurately displayed; however, there are nine dolphins in the counting mechanism. In ancient Rome, the counting mechanism required only seven dolphins because seven laps completed the race.[8]

According to Alison Futrell, the charioteers appear more Roman, in that they wear brightly colored clothing. However, Ben-Hur wears a Roman uniform of leather strapped armor, a leather helmet, and a scabbard and dagger.[9] During the first century CE, four factions or teams raced in the Roman circus. The charioteers wore either *russata* (red), *albata* (white), *veneta* (blue) or *prasine* (green).[10] In "Ben Hur" charioteers from different countries race wearing brightly colored clothing. Nevertheless, according to Fik Meijer, the charioteers appear more Greek in that they wear brightly colored clothing and hold the reins, one in each hand rather than wrapped around the waist in Roman tradition.[11]

"Ben Hur," a masterful spectacle created for the theatrical spectator, recreates a contiguous association between the *Passion of the Christ* and Ben Hur. The text titled *Ben-Hur,*

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[7] Meijer. pp. 158.
[8] Meijer. pp. 53.
[9] Meijer. pp. 159.
[10] Futrell, Alison. *The Roman Games*. Blackwell Publishing. 2006. pp. 207.
[11] Meijer. pp. 159.

A Tale of the Christ, by Lew Wallace (1880),[12] inspired the film. However, "Ben-Hur"

eliminates the Jesus reference from the title and focuses on the hero Judah Ben-Hur. Instead of

the main character, Christ becomes Ben-Hur's shadow. Although Jesus plays a cameo role,

themes of Christianity dominate the film. The film opens with a still image of Michelangelo's

painting, the *Creation of Adam,* taken from the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the Vatican. The setting

recreates the Gregorian calendar era of *anno Domini*, "the year of the Lord." The image,

accompanied by a six-minute overture, is reminiscent of ancient games in that Romans conflated

religion, sports, and art.

Wyler, like the Romans, blends violence, blood, and awe with religion (Christianity) and

athletes (hero worship) to entertain the spectators. Juvenal, the ancient Roman poet, tells us that

powerful Romans used the games to pacify the spectators, hoping to distract them with "bread

and circus."[13] "Ben Hur" simulates the motivations of the Romans who intended to entertain the

spectators in exchange for personal gain, in that Wyler offers a spectacular tale of good versus

evil, propagating the Roman trope in exchange for profits.

Following the Roman's lead, Wyler recreates the spectacular drama and danger of the

Roman chariot race while conflating sports, religion, and hero worship. Though Wyler promotes

hero-worship ideology and conflates it with religion and violence, he creates a spectacular film.

"Ben Hur," a film of enormous proportion, similar to the Roman games, may not adhere to the

historical record; it nevertheless remains an opportunity to experience a first century CE Roman

chariot race while sitting safely in your home in the twenty-first century.

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[12] Meijer, pp. 154.
[13] Toner. pp.36.

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