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August 30, 2016: Ben-Hur, Done That

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Title: Ben-Hur, Done That

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8/30/2016—Why remake a religious class movie if you are not interested in religion? The new Ben-Hur movie is a lot better than people are saying. Yet, it is absolutely inferior to the 1959 version on several grounds. On the other hand, some choices made by the Director are just different, not inferior, but revealing of a different cultural stage. The one, obvious way that the new version is not as good is the crucial depiction of Jesus. The actor, Rodrigo Santoro, is fine. But he is reminiscent of Liam Neeson in the Episode 1 Star Wars movie—likeable, rugged, intense, good. But the movie chooses an intensely naturalistic portrayal. There is no sense of transcendence—handled with great skill and piety in the 1959 version. The movie makes it seem odd that people were so affected by Jesus. The other naturalism is in Judah Ben-Hur himself. He has no obvious religious feelings in the new movie. This makes little sense in the context of first century Israel. Nor does it make his conversion believable. The other obvious flaw in the movie is just in storytelling. In the 1959 version, all ends were gathered up. For example, the new movie is forced to explain—how the mother and sister are affected by the crucifixion, how they are freed etc. The ways in which the movie makes choices that are revealing involve the role of evil. In the 1959 film—and book, I guess—the event that brings down the house of Hur is an accident—a shingle breaks off. Not only is this poignant, it gives Messala a choice to do the right thing. Conversely, in the new movie, Judah harbors a zealot who shoots Pontius Pilate with an arrow. Obviously, there must be retaliation. This is not as dramatically interesting. (It also makes Judah into a fool). The other problem with Messala is related. Just as he could not do anything for the family even if he had wanted to, he is a compromise figure in general. Messala is portrayed in the new movie as trying to do the right thing but being frustrated. In the 1959 version, Messala makes a real choice for evil and suffers the consequences. This is my final beef with the movie—the happy ending. Yes, in the 1959 version, there is a happy ending, but not for Messala. He is killed in the chariot race. And Judah plays a role in his death. This is not undone by the miracle around the crucifixion. In the new movie, Messala lives and everyone is reunited. This is pablum.