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### April 12, 2020: On Watching Ben-Hur

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Title: On Watching Ben-Hur

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4/12/2020—I used to watch the 1959 version of Ben-Hur with my children every year to celebrate Passover/Holy Week. But I haven't seen it in years. Then I watched it last night.

It is a very good film still, with a great plot, marvelous acting, a love story and a happy ending. Oh, and very good action, even for today. The chariot race still holds up. (the perched camera never gets old, but the naval battle doesn't get work and never did). And one of the greatest musical scores of all time, not just because the music is moving, but because it so aids in telling the story.

But what is astonishing is the sophisticated theological issues addressed. And the restraint with which they are presented.

I have never read the novel by Lew Wallace, but it is aptly subtitled "A Tale of the Christ." Jesus appears infrequently and we never see his face. That plus the haunting musical line associated with him in the movie creates an air of mysticism and reverence. (This effect is lessened at the end of the movie, when characters try to describe him during his passion. The failure of that dialogue emphasizes the power of the earlier, understated treatment.)

Basically, the story of the Christ is told by the effect he has on the characters. From the first scene at the manger with the three wise men, to his interactions with his father, Joseph ("He's working," Joseph replies to a critical friend when the young Jesus neglects his carpentry and walks alone in the hills—a quick case study in how to be a father.) to the moment that Jesus changes Judah ben Hur's life by intervening with water in defiance of the Roman soldiers, the power and goodness of Jesus's presence are shown.

The movie elicits piety without being preachy.

The movie also still speaks to a materialistic age. The early miracles are called "magic tricks" by a Roman official. But the teaching that God is in every man affects the official. The movie stops short of the resurrection, emphasizing the power of Jesus's sacrifice to heal the world by ending on Good Friday.

But the greatest aspect of the movie is its serious treatment of the different way of life Jesus is presenting and practicing. Judah's desire for revenge, which ultimately dominates every aspect of his life and closes him off to love, is entirely justified. But, on the other hand, the Roman government he hates is not presented as simple tyranny that must be resisted no matter what.

In other words, the world of the movie is the real world.

Into this world Jesus says forgive your enemies. Only his life and example make this simple admonition credible. Jesus changes the world right before our eyes.

A character says that Jesus took upon himself the sins of the world, but that is not what we see. What we see is overwhelming compassion and love that brings forth love and compassion in

everyone it touches.

That love and compassion is real power. The movie does not argue that Rome is not real power, despite Messala's claim that it is. It simply juxtaposes the two ways.

The movie does not argue that the normal way of the world is death. It shows us Judah becoming Messala by practicing the normal way of the world.

Who would not want to be a follower of Jesus after watching this movie?

Who would not wonder why Jesus has so few followers?