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Study Guide and Questions for Ben Hur

1. Cultures

*Roman*

Three cultures of the ancient world are presented in this film. The Romans, the Jews, and the Arabs are all presented in various forms and ways. The might of Rome is clear in this film, as is the arrogance of some Romans. In his early meetings with Judah, Messala seems to regard Rome merely as a staircase on which he can rise. Arrius makes a good Roman character. He has the toughness, the “death before dishonor” code, the respect for courage and strength, and the love for it. Judah is a great human and a great Roman. The film shows the emphasis which Romans placed on having a son to carry on one’s name and to honor family. Pontius Pilate, the other prominent Roman in the film, is a friend of Arrius, who does not wish to harm Judah. However, he intends to maintain peace in Judea regardless of who may suffer for it.

*Cultural signs to watch for:*

Roman dress and armor; sailing vessels; marching formations and

musical instruments; triumphal parade.

*Arabian*

The culture of the Arabian desert peoples is represented by Shiek llderim, the trader with the magnificent horses. llderim with his impish sense of humor, his interesting defense of polygamy, his knowledge and love of horses, and his subtlety in dealing with the Romans and with Judah shows the wisdom and cleverness of his people. His reference to the common descent of Jews and Arabs from Abraham throws still more light on this prince of the desert.

*Cultural signs to watch for:*

Arab dress; horses and their names; polygamy; subtle reasoning.

*Jewish*

Jewish culture is, of course, paramount in this film and needs understanding. Judea had the misfortune to be a small country located on the crossroads between several powerful and warlike civilizations. It had suffered much at many hands before two rival claimants for the throne submitted their claims to Pompey the Great. The loser in this decision did not accept Pompey’s decision, but placed an army in Jerusalem. Pompey besieged the city and won, and Judea became a protectorate of Rome. Wiser and saner Romans than Messala marveled at the Jews’ resistance to Rome, even in the face of certain destruction.

*Cultural signs to watch for:*

Mazuzah- or mezuzah-small niche in wall at door of Jewish home (it contains a scroll with a scripture; Jewish men pay it reverence when they enter)-, Judah’s headdress at prayers and meals; Eating customs-, dress.

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING SECTION 1

1.What color is typical of the Roman legions?

2. What does the elderly Jew who enters Joseph’s house do at the door?

3.What dining customs do you notice at Judah’s meal with his mother and sister?

4.What small object does Judah pay reverence to when entering his home? What does he do?

5. What accident brings about Judah’s arrest for treason?

*Section 1 ends when Messala inspects the roof.*

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING SECTION 2

6.What normal Roman legal proceeding does Judah say that he has not received?

7. What does Messala hope to gain for himself by sentencing Judah to the galleys and destroying his family?

8. Romans did not typically build prisons in the manner of the Greeks or even the Jews; most convicted felons were either executed or put to some useful but grueling work. On the long march of the assigned galley rowers to the sea, how is Judah’s life preserved?

9. How does Judah attract the interest and admiration of Consul Arrius?

10. Why are the galley rowers (who are convicted felons) chained to the ship?

11. What is Arrius’ attitude toward religion?

12. Why does Arrius receive a triumph (parade) when he arrives in Rome? What does he ask of the Emperor?

*Section 2 ends at the close of the scene in Rome.*

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING SECTION 3

13. When Judah returns to Palestine, what ring is he wearing and why?

14. What advice does Shiek llderim have for Judah at dinner?

15. What does he want Judah to do? How does he try to persuade him?

16. Explain quote from this section:“The stone that fell from this roof so long ago is still falling.”

17. What gift does “Young Arrius” bring Messala?

18. What does he demand that Messala do?

19. Why does he have the authority to make this demand?

20. Where do Judah’s mother and sister go and why?

21. When told that his mother and sister are dead, what does Judah do to the little door-shrine?

22. What does he agree to do?

23. How does llderim use the Romans’ pride against them?

*Section 3 ends with the stable scene and the horses.*

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING SECTION 4

24. What does Sheik Ilderim give Judah just before the race? What does it signify?

25. How is the race started? How do the race managers signal the end of the lap?

27. Explain the quote at end of race:

“You are the people’s one true god--for the time being.”