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STUDY GUIDE FOR BEN-HUR

A. Cultures

ROMAN

Three cultures of the ancient world are presented, and to a certain extent stereotyped, 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. Students should note, however, that both Tiberius Caesar and Quintus Arrius are men whose power, far greater than Messala’s, does not seem to have turned them into monsters as Messala’s power has. In his early meetings with Judah Messala seems to regard Rome merely as a staircase on which he can rise. Arrius makes a better Roman character study. He has the toughness, the “death before dishonor” code, the respect for courage and strength, and the love for it.

Judah which he can only express by setting him free, which make a great human and a great Roman. The emphasis which Romans placed on having a son to carry on one’s name and to honor family graves makes his sacrifice to Judah’s wishes all the more potent. 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, and by Balthazar the Wise Man who comes back looking for the mature Christ. 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. Balthazar, who is traditionally considered a Chaldean astronomer, comes from desert people, cousins of Abraham--the ancient and learned Surnerian-Babylonian races. His gentleness and truth-seeking show another facet of the desert peoples.

*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 marvelled at the Jews’ resistance to Rome, even in the face of certain destruction. Many nations lived happily and productively under Roman rule, but both Romans and many modern students have failed to understand that “Jewish” is both a religious and a racial designation. To accept outside domination was to betray both one’s nation and one’s Temple.

*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.

B. Music

Music themes are many, but for students with so much to watch for three are probably sufficient: the Christ theme, the Roman power theme, and the love theme. All of these are woven into the overture of course, but the Christ theme should be apparent in the nativity scene which precedes the credits and even more clearly in the first appearance of the grown Christ walking in the hills while the Romans march through Nazareth. The Roman power theme is played on both sides of this, and the love theme arrives with the first appearance of Esther when she comes with her father to Judah’s house. Music students can add others.

C. Symbolism

Hand and water symbolism are very important to the deeper appreciation of this film. A few of the more important symbols are listed here.

1. The credits are superimposed on Michaelangelo’s central painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome; the painting shows God touching Adam’s hand and giving him life.

2. The Roman handshake exchanged by Judah and Messala at their first meeting in the film shows trust. Similar handshakes are exchanged between other characters. Hands also show comfort, affection, and sometimes a desire to control.

3. Christ when saving Judah’s life gently touches him.

4. On the way to the galley ship, Christ gives Judah water, and Judah lives. Water in this film is very appropriately the symbol of life.

5. When Judah and Consul Arrius are rescued by the Roman ship, the Consul is given water. Instead of drinking it, he hands it first to Judah, the slave.

6. On the way to the cross Judah attempts to give Christ water, but Christ is destined to die, and Judah is not allowed to give it.

7. As Christ walks away to Golgotha bearing the cross, the hand of Judah is in the forefront of the picture, with his water gourd hanging in a drooping hand while the water drips on the ground.

8. The hands of Christ on the cross are emphasized.

Many of the hand and water symbols are combined. In Judah’s first encounter with Christ, He shows compassion with touch and with the drink of water. A major combination is composed of the hands of the leper women, the hands of Christ on the cross, and the rain that flows over Christ’s hands and over the hands of the suddenly healed lepers.

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.”