

Ben-Hur (2016): Jesus Finds a Voice

Larry J. Kreitzer

There are some films that are so iconic that it is hard to imagine they could ever be remade. William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) is one of those films. The chariot-racing sequence alone is enough to fix the film in the mind of most viewers, even though it takes only eight minutes of the film's three and a half hours. Wyler's film was phenomenally successful, and was nominated for twelve Academy awards, winning eleven of them, a record that has only been matched twice (*Titanic* in 1997 and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* in 2003). It helped secure the place of Charlton Heston as one of Hollywood's leading actors, and gifted him with his only Oscar as Best Actor.

Wyler's film was based on General Lew Wallace's novel from 1880 entitled *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. It is perhaps the most well-known film adaptation of the story, although it is by no means the only one. In fact, there have been seven films based on Wallace's novel including the most recent adaptation by the Russian-Kazakh director Timur Bekmambetov. These seven films are:

Ben Hur (1907 silent)
Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1925 silent)
Ben-Hur (1959)
Ben-Hur (1988 animated)
Ben Hur (2003 animated)
Ben Hur (2010 TV)
Ben-Hur (2016)

Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) keeps to the tried-and-trusted idea that the basic plot of the film is about the relationship between Judah Ben-Hur (played by John Huston) and his adopted brother Messala (played by Toby Kebbell). Several other characters with whom we are familiar from William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) make their appearance here as well. The most important of these, at least from the standpoint of enticing the audience to see the film because it features an A-list actor, is the character Sheikh Ilderim (played by Morgan Freeman). Judah's love interest Esther (played by the Iranian actress Nazanin Boniadi) also has a prominent role in the film, and is even elevated to the status of his betrothed wife, something only hinted at in the 1959 film.

I would like to suggest that the most distinctive feature of Timur Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) is the way that it re-images the role of Jesus within the narrative. There are six major scenes in which Jesus of Nazareth features within the film. What is perhaps most significant about these is that Jesus is here given a speaking role, something that did not happen in William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959). This is partly due to the insistence of the novel's original author, Lew Wallace, who, out of his own religious convictions, forbade that the character of Christ say anything in the dramatic portrayals of his novel. Indeed, Wallace went so far as to forbid that the person of Jesus Christ be portrayed by an actor at all, insisting instead that his presence be limited to a stage light or similar disembodied visual representation.

Wallace's wishes had an enduring impact on the various cinematic adaptations of *Ben-Hur*. William Wyler's film from 1959 did contain several scenes, which included an actor portraying Jesus (it happened to be the actor Claude Heater, who was uncredited), but his face was never seen, and certainly he never said anything within the film. Instead, what we were presented with in Wyler's film were very powerful images of the effect that Jesus of Nazareth had upon other people (more on this below). In this key respect, Wyler's film was a return to Lew Wallace's principle of a non-speaking Jesus, a principle, which had been somewhat overturned by Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (1925) that does have a "speaking" Jesus. Of course, given the fact that Niblo's was a film from the silent era, it would have been impossible for Jesus actually to have said anything. What we have instead is the silent-era equivalent of speech—intertitles—and there are five occasions where the words of Jesus are communicated through this vehicle. Meanwhile, the cartoon adaptation of *Ben-Hur* by Al Guest and Jean Mathiesen from 1988 returns in part to Wallace's strict rules about the presentation of Jesus Christ, and gives us a silent Jesus. This cartoon version contains several scenes in which the face of Jesus is shown, but again he is never allowed to say anything in the film.

Within Timur Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* the figure of Jesus of Nazareth is played by the up-and-coming Brazilian actor Rodrigo Santoro. As the film premiered in theatres in the USA on August 19, 2016, one cannot help but wonder whether such casting was deliberately designed to coincide with the fact that the 2016 Olympics in Rio took place between 2 and August 21, 2016. However, the casting of a Brazilian actor in the role has not been without its critics. Stephen Brown, for example, commenting on how Bekmambetov's film compared to earlier versions of *Ben-Hur*, said in his 2016 review of the film in the *Church Times*:

Earlier versions avoided close-ups of Jesus, let alone dialogue. Those men had real presence, whereas the moment Santoro opens his mouth, a Brazilian accent alienates him from everyone else. No longer the Man for Others, he is just—well—Other in a way that compromises his humanity.

Robbie Collin, a film critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, contrasts the staccato delivery of Santoro's Jesus with the enigmatic presentation of the silent Jesus contained in Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959): "Unlike Wyler's version, we both see Christ's face and hear His voice delivering faintly Yoda-esque homilies about compassion and hope to the downtrodden" (2016).

I propose to offer an exploration of Bekmambetov's film in this respect, noting some of the ways that it relies on earlier cinematic versions of *Ben-Hur*, and some of the ways that it breaks new ground and brings fresh dimensions to the story by presenting us with a Jesus who speaks. We shall examine each of the six scenes in which Jesus gains a voice within Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016). They will be handled in the order in which they occur within the film, although there is some inevitable cross-referencing and overlap between the scenes.

Scene 1: Jesus the carpenter speaks to Ben-Hur about love of neighbor

The first instance in which Jesus speaks occurs just after Roman officials have pronounced judgment in the public market on a Jewish Zealot for his defiance against Roman authority. Judah Ben-Hur and his wife Esther have witnessed the pronouncement, as has the carpenter Jesus who is working in his shop. The following exchange takes place:

Judah Ben-Hur: Ah, the Zealots!

Esther: All they want is freedom.

Judah Ben-Hur: And at what cost? If they have their way, they will bring the whole of Rome down on us. And then where will our freedom be? [*To a stall seller as he wishes to purchase an item for Esther*] How much?

The Stall Seller: Five. [*As Judah pays him*] Thank you, my lord.

Jesus of Nazareth [*interrupting, as he planes a piece of wood*]: There is freedom elsewhere.

Judah Ben-Hur: Excuse me?

Jesus of Nazareth: Love your enemies.

Judah Ben-Hur: Love your enemies? That's very progressive.

Jesus of Nazareth: It's the truth. God is love. He made us to share that love.

Judah Ben-Hur: And where will your love be when the Romans turn their anger on the rest of us?

Jesus of Nazareth: Hate and fear are lies that turn us against each other. Those are the lies that make us slaves. He has a path planned for you.

Judah Ben-Hur: If he has a path planned for me, how am I better off than a slave?

Jesus of Nazareth [*To Judah, as he looks to Esther*]: Why don't you ask her?

This scene highlights Jesus's status as an ordinary carpenter, taking his place alongside other Jewish traders plying their goods in the city marketplace. Similar scenes depicting Jesus as a carpenter are contained in Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (1925), where the arm of Jesus is seen sawing a piece of wood, and in Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) where a shot of the inside of Jesus's carpentry shop in Nazareth is shown and the sound of him sawing a piece of wood can be heard. However, both of these films suggest that Jesus is a carpenter in his home town of Nazareth and have the scene take place in connection with Judah

Ben-Hur's forced march from Jerusalem to the sea in order to be made a galley-slave; along the journey the prisoners pass through Nazareth. Bekmambetov's film, in contrast, has this initial encounter between Judah and Jesus take place in Jerusalem. In fact, Bekmambetov's Jesus is never depicted as being anywhere but in Jerusalem or its environs; the Nazareth connection so beloved of earlier *Ben-Hur* films is here abandoned.

Scene 2: Jesus offers a cup of water to Judah

The second instance in which Jesus speaks occurs as Judah Ben-Hur is shackled and is being led away to serve as a slave on a Roman galley. Judah is knocked to the ground by one of the Roman soldiers, and his wife Esther, who is in the crowd, attempts to bring a cup of water to her husband, pleading that the soldier show mercy. The soldier pushes her away and Jesus emerges from the crowd, coming face to face with the Roman soldier. Jesus takes the cup of water from her hands and bends down to offer it to Judah. They exchange the following words:

Jesus of Nazareth [*as he lifts Judah's head and brings the cup to his lips*]: Drink!

Judah Ben-Hur [*after he drinks*]: Thank you!

Jesus of Nazareth: You would do the same. [*He tries to encourage Judah and helps him to his feet, saying*] Get up, Judah!

Jesus's statement "You would do the same" is vaguely reminiscent of the so-called Golden Rule of Mt. 7:12 ("Do to others what you want them to do to you."). It suggests that Jesus anticipated that Judah would do the same for him if their positions were reversed, something which, as it turns out, is exactly the case. The visual image of Jesus leaning over Judah Ben-Hur to give him the cup of water is used as a flashback at two later points in the film. Both of these occur in highly dramatic episodes in Judah's life, one as he is rowing in the Roman galley and the other during the chariot race with Messala.

The image of Jesus offering Judah a cup of cold water is one of the most powerful scenes in most of the film versions of *Ben-Hur*, and it is firmly anchored in Lew Wallace's original novel. The importance of the "cup of cold water" has long been recognized as an essential vehicle of the plot, particularly within Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), which has a number of related scenes in which Judah's drinking of water is depicted (Kreitzer 2013). Gordon Thomas notes the importance of water within the film, arguing that it serves as a visual expression of the spiritual struggle within Judah Ben-Hur, which lies at the heart of the story. Thomas ([2006] 2014) sees

the motif of water as representing a redemptive healing force, or, as it appears more often in the film, the equating of water and the quenching of physical thirst to Jesus (or the power of Jesus) and the quenching of spiritual thirst.

That is not to say that every film version of *Ben-Hur* slavishly follows the traditional line in presenting the crucial encounter between Jesus and Judah Ben-Hur. Thus,

Steve Shill's *Ben Hur* (2010) provides us with a creative variation on the image of Jesus offering Judah a cup of cold water. As Judah is being led away from Jerusalem by the Roman soldiers to be a galley-slave he stumbles and falls to the ground. Judah is struck by one of the soldiers as Jesus comes out of the crowd to help him to his feet. Jesus says to Judah, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." The two separate as a soldier ushers Jesus away and Judah continues on to his fate. Jesus's words to Judah are of course taken from Lk. 23:34 where they are spoken by Jesus to his Father concerning those engaged in crucifying him. The saying of Jesus from the cross is one of the most powerful declarations about the need for forgiveness, and when it is transplanted to this scene involving Judah's unjust treatment at the hands of Messala and his Roman conspirators, it is given added narrative significance. It is an image that is used later in the film in flashbacks designed to heighten the theme of forgiveness. Thus, when Judah, as the adopted son of Quintus Arrius, returns to Jerusalem from his exile, he momentarily stops along the road to listen to a man preaching to his band of disciples. The preacher is, of course, Jesus and the substance of his preaching are words drawn largely from Matthew (16:20-21; 5:38-40, 41, 43-44). In the midst of Jesus's preaching (between Mt. 5:40 and 5:41) the flashback of Jesus's words to Judah in Jerusalem ("Forgive them for they know not what they do") is shown on the screen as if it is being recalled by Judah. This declaration of Jesus about forgiveness also appears later in the film as part of the depiction of the passion and crucifixion (more on this below)

Scene 3: Jesus of Nazareth interrupts the stoning of a man

The third instance in which Jesus speaks occurs during the stoning of a man by a mob of angry Jews as some Roman officials, including Messala and the governor Pontius Pilate, look on. Jesus pleads with the mob and puts himself between the crowd and the man being stoned. The following words are heard:

Jesus of Nazareth: Don't! Please don't! This man is your neighbor. The Torah tells us love your neighbor as we love ourselves. Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! [*He lifts the man being stoned from the ground, and turns to address the crowd*] Hate, anger, fear. Those are lies they use to turn you against each other. When you set aside the hate they force you to carry, that's when you know love is our true nature.

Pontius Pilate [*to Messala as they look on*]: Do you see what is happening here? Mark my words, Messala, this is the poison. That man offers the people something more and calms them with compassion. This Jesus of Nazareth is more dangerous than all of the Zealots combined.

The specific contrast between Jesus's message of love and compassion and the Zealots' message of violence and hatred against Rome runs through the film. As Wilkinson (2016) puts it:

Ben-Hur's main focus is how the way of Jesus presents a path that threatens the powerful, challenges the violent, and models radical compassion. Christ's way

challenges two extremes: the desire of the Romans and their colluders for peace at the cost of liberty, and the desire of the zealots for liberty no matter the bloodshed.

The political struggle between the subjugated Jewish people and their Roman oppressors is also a staple in the earlier film versions of *Ben-Hur*, but it was never focused on the activities of the Zealots as it is here. This is no doubt a reflection of the fact that the Zealots are now recognized by biblical scholars to have been a significant Jewish sectarian movement in the first century CE. In other words, Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) attempts to update our understanding of the complexity of the political world of Jesus's day. In this sense it is following in the tradition of a number of "Jesus films" in which the Zealot movement featured as an important plot point. One of the first "Jesus" films to do this was Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977) in which both Barabbas and Judas Iscariot were identified as Zealots. The Zealot idea seems to have fallen on fertile ground, as there are plans afoot for developing a film based on Reza Aslan's bestselling book *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (2013). At the same time, while Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) can be applauded for including the Zealots in the narrative, this is done at the expense of the Jewish priests and Pharisees who are absent and play no part in the story of Jesus's death within the film. In this respect Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) is following the lead of Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (1925), which similarly downplays the role of the Jewish authorities in the trial and condemnation of Jesus, preferring simply to state in an intertitle that Jesus was handed over by Pilate "to the mob" (see Scodel 2013: 326 on this point).

Scene 4: Jesus is arrested by the Jewish authorities

The fourth instance in which Jesus speaks occurs as he is arrested by the Jewish authorities in the Garden of Gethsemane. During the mêlée Peter draws his sword and strikes one of the people involved, whom Jn 18:10 identifies as Malchus the servant of the high priest. At this point Jesus intervenes and speaks:

Jesus [*exhorting Peter to refrain from violence*]: Peter! Peter! No trouble, not from any of you! Those who live by the sword, will die by the sword.

The words of Jesus here are a re-working of Mt. 26:51-52. This is the only time in any of the *Ben-Hur* films that this particular couplet is used. It does emphasize once again the non-violent message of Jesus, which is so central to the film.

Other *Ben-Hur* films do have an equivalent scene to this, passages in which Jesus challenges the path of violence and the use of the sword. For example, in Bill Kowalchuk's *Ben Hur* (2003) there is a depiction of Jesus's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. As the arresting authorities surround Jesus, his disciple Peter draws his sword from his belt and strikes one of the Roman soldiers on his right ear, which Jesus immediately heals. Jesus then exhorts Peter with the words: "Put up thy sword into thy sheath. The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?" This represents a departure from the gospel narratives where it is the Jewish high priest's servant who is struck by

Simon Peter, not a Roman soldier (see Mt. 26:51/Mk 14:47/Lk. 22:50/Jn 18:10). The amalgamation of the exhortation to Peter that he sheathe his sword with the image of Jesus drinking the cup prepared by his Father is based on Jn 18:10-11. The significance of the reference to the “cup” is not to be missed and readily links back to the “cup of cold water” motif we have suggested is so important in the *Ben-Hur* story. The non-violent message of Jesus is given further weight in Kowalchuk’s film by a subsequent conversation between Jesus and Judah Ben-Hur. As Jesus is led away by a squad of Roman soldiers he is accompanied by Judah and the following exchange takes place:

Judah: Master, do you go of your own will? Tell me. For I will gather an army of soldiers to save you!
 Jesus: Go, my son. It is my Father’s will.

With this dismissal Jesus completely rejects the idea of an armed intervention to save him from his fate.

The non-violent message of Jesus is also emphasized in Niblo’s *Ben-Hur* (1925) where there is a scene in which Judah forces his way through the crowd watching Jesus carry his cross along the Via Dolorosa. As Judah comes to the front of the crowd he looks at Jesus, draws his sword from his belt and raises it in a gesture of defiance. An intertitle is then shown, which reads: “O King, two legions of fighting men are coming! Each blow to you will be avenged a thousandfold!” This is then quickly followed by another intertitle, which reads: “And a voice came to him saying: ‘My Kingdom is not of this world. Put up thy sword, for the Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.’” The intertitle suggests that this was a revelation given privately to Judah himself, which helps explain why the intertitle does not include a biblical reference (it is a montage of Jn 18:36, Mt. 26:52, and Lk. 9:56). This is the only time in the film that the words of Jesus are spoken to, and heard by, Judah.

Scene 5: Judah offers Jesus a cup of water as he is led away to be crucified

The fifth instance in which Jesus speaks occurs as he is carrying his cross on the way to his crucifixion on Golgotha. Jesus falls down under the weight of the cross, and Judah, one of the on-lookers in the crowd, moves forward and, seeing a well with drinking cups, takes a cup and attempts to offer it to Jesus. A Roman soldier tries to stop this act of kindness and the following words are heard:

Judah Ben-Hur [*offering the cup of water to Jesus who is lying face down in the dirt under the weight of the cross*]: Drink. Please drink!
 Roman soldier: No water for him! [*He strikes Judah with his whip, knocking him to the ground*] No water for him!
 Jesus of Nazareth [*as he exhorts Judah not to strike the Roman soldier with a rock he has picked up from the ground*]: No, Judah! My life . . . I give it of my own free will.

This scene is, of course, intended to recall the earlier episode in the film where Jesus offered a cup of water to Judah as he was being led away by Roman soldiers to become a galley-slave. The reciprocal offering of a drink of water is a pivotal feature of Lew Wallace's novel (as Kreitzer 1993 argues), and it is faithfully depicted in four of the seven *Ben-Hur* films, with two others opting for a narrative equivalent. In fact, the only *Ben-Hur* film which does *not* contain the "cup of cold water" motif, or a narrative equivalent, is Morey and Olcott's *Ben Hur* (1907). This is hardly surprising given that Jesus does not appear at all within the film, either as a disembodied light or a visual effect of any sort. Meanwhile, Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959) is perhaps the best example of a deliberate linking together of the "cup of cold water" scenes in order to bring Judah and Jesus into narrative proximity. Richard Walsh goes so far as to argue that this allows us to see Judah as a Christ figure within the film. As Walsh states:

The 1959 film offers an elaborate sequence of references to the cup of water that Jesus gives to Judah on his way to the galleys. . . . The film uses this water motif to connect the twinned stories and to parallel the two characters (2016: 140).

Two *Ben-Hur* films have very interesting narrative equivalents to the "cup of cold water" motif. For example, the animated version of *Ben-Hur* from 1988 directed by Al Guest and Jean Mathiesen does depict Jesus offering a cup of water to Judah as he is being led away by the Roman soldiers, but it does not have the reciprocal scene where Judas offers water to Jesus on the Via Dolorosa. Instead, what it has as its equivalent is Judah being present at the crucifixion and offering Jesus a drink from Esther's headscarf, which is dipped into a bucket of water and extended on a staff to Jesus as he hangs on the cross. As Judah does this he explains to Esther, "I will comfort him, as he did me." This is based on Mt. 27:48/Mk 15:36/Jn 19:19 where it is recorded that some unnamed bystander(s) offered Jesus vinegar on a sponge put on a reed or a branch of hyssop.

Meanwhile, as noted above, Steve Shill's *Ben Hur* (2010) has a very different version of the "cup of cold water" motif. In this case, Jesus's offering Judah a drink of water was replaced by Jesus offering him an exhortation to be forgiving ("Forgive them for they know not what they do"). A portion of this scene between Judah and Jesus is also injected as a flashback during the depiction of Jesus as he moves along the Via Dolorosa. Judah and Esther are part of the crowd who witness Jesus struggling to carry the cross-beam on his shoulder. A Roman soldier strikes Jesus with a whip and he falls to the ground with the cross-beam on top of him. Judah pushes his way forward and lifts the cross-beam away from Jesus and helps him to his feet. The two look into each other's eyes and Jesus says to Judah, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." The scene between Judah and Jesus is then intercut with two flashbacks involving Judah's relationship with Messala: the first from when they were both children and embraced each other and said goodbye as Messala was being summoned by his father to Rome; the second from when Messala the mature soldier came back from Rome to Jerusalem and arrogantly treated Judah with disdain: Messala says, "Forgive me, you know half my performance is to convince myself," and the two again embrace. Judah then picks up the cross-beam and helps to hoist it once again upon the shoulder of

Jesus, who proceeds on his journey out of the city gates to Golgotha. All of this, of course, is designed to link the words of Jesus about forgiveness to the healing of the fractured relationship between Judah and Messala. This is precisely what happens as Judah then goes to the bedside of the mangled body of Messala, who is clinging to life in the hopes that his childhood friend would come before he dies. The two men are reconciled as Messala asks for forgiveness and Judah grants it, just before Messala dies.

Scene 6: Jesus of Nazareth's sayings from the cross

The sixth instance in which Jesus speaks occurs as he is hanging on the cross with an assembled body of Roman soldiers, Jewish authorities, and disciples and followers gathered around witnessing the spectacle. In fact, within the film Jesus says three of the seven sayings recorded by the four gospel writers; the first two of these come from the Gospel of Luke (23:34, 42-43), and the third comes from the Gospel of John (19:30). The following exchange takes place as part of the crucifixion scene:

Thief on the Cross: Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Jesus of Nazareth [*to the Thief*]: Today, you will be with me in paradise. [*As he looks down upon the crowd gathered to watch the crucifixion*] Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

[*The camera cuts to the face of Judah who looks on. Images of Judah's boyhood races with Messala and the conclusion of the chariot race are shown as flashbacks*]

Jesus of Nazareth [*looking again at the crowd*]: It is finished.

The actor playing the thief on the cross is Moises Arias and he is given the name Dismas in the film credits. This is an acknowledgment of the fact that he is so named in the Gospel of Nicodemus (10:2). The exchange between the thief on the cross and Jesus is unusual in that it does not occur in any other *Ben-Hur* film. It does inject the element of compassion and forgiveness into the depiction of the crucifixion and helps set up the second of Jesus's declarations from the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

It is worth noting that this is not the first time that Jesus's words as recorded in Lk. 23:34 appear in film versions of *Ben-Hur*. In fact, the words appear as an intertitle in Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur* (1925) as part of the crucifixion sequence. The intertitle separates two scenes in which four Roman soldiers are shown throwing dice to determine who will get to keep Jesus's clothes. Effectively this means that Jesus's words are a prayer to the Father that the Roman soldiers may be forgiven, which is exactly the same point that is made in Shill's *Ben Hur* (2010), although in Shill's version the scene in which this saying is spoken takes place on the Via Dolorosa rather than on Golgotha. Similarly, Bill Kowalchuk's *Ben Hur* (2003) also has Jesus speak the words about forgiveness from Lk. 23:34 as part of the depiction of the crucifixion. However, in this case the words of Jesus are spoken by Jesus as he looks down upon the crowd of witnesses below which are made up of mocking Jews and faithul disciples of Jesus, not Roman soldiers.

This is not to say that the words of Lk. 23:34 are completely missing from William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959). The saying does occur in the film, but it is not spoken by Jesus himself. Rather it is said by Judah Ben-Hur to Esther as the two meet in the dilapidated Hur house shortly after the death of Jesus. Judah caresses Esther and the following exchange takes place:

Judah: Almost at the moment he died I heard him say, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Esther: Even then?

Judah: Even then. And I felt his voice take the sword out of my hand.

These are the final words spoken within the film and help to confirm its message that Jesus offers a vision of a non-violent world in which forgiveness and love pervades. In its own way, Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) has an equivalent ending, although this time it is voiced by Sheikh Ilderim (Morgan Freeman) as we see images of the estranged brothers Judah and Messala embracing and saying to each other, "Forgive me." Freeman's final voice-over is:

There were many miracles that day, and in the days that followed. As time passed, forgiveness and understanding had re-united the family. To give hope and promise for a better way, to fight the good fight, to finish the race, to keep the faith.¹

However, it is worth noting that Timur Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) film is not the first time that cinematic adaptations of *Ben-Hur* depicted the reconciliation between Judah and Messala. Bill Kowalchuk's *Ben Hur* (2003) has a scene in which Messala, who is crippled from the fateful chariot race, asks to join Judah's army, which is being gathered to rescue Jesus from the Roman authorities. "Can you ever forgive me?" Messala asks Judah; the two then embrace. This helps set up the declaration by Jesus from the cross ("Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"). In this case, Judah stands at the foot of the cross alongside his old adversary Messala, with whom he has been reconciled, and together the two embody the very idea of forgiveness of which Jesus speaks.

The way in which Bekmambetov's film attempts to give the character of Jesus a new direction and purpose by giving him a voice is arguably one of the most creative features of the film. In this sense Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* certainly breaks new ground. But all the credit that is accrued in this regard is, in the opinion of many viewers, compromised by the hurried and unimaginative ending of the film. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is accompanied by miraculous wonders and healings, which owe much to Wyler's film but are now somehow unconvincing for a twenty-first-century audience. As Stephen Holden, in a film review for *The New York Times*, put it:

The movie pauses just long enough to observe the Crucifixion, which, like every other biblical element, comes across as a rushed, perfunctory nod to tradition, devoid of emotional or spiritual resonance. At the very end, it timidly tries to preach a message about revenge and forgiveness, but its heart just isn't in it. Violence is its calling card.

Timur Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) cost over \$100,000,000 to make and it looks as if it will prove to be a financial flop (it only brought in \$11,000,000 on its opening weekend in the USA). In addition, the film has been slated by most film critics. Peter Travers's 2016 review of the film in *Rolling Stone* is entitled "A Remake Disaster of Biblical Proportions" and within it he says that the "latest version of the chariot-racing New Testament epic is one old-school cinematic car wreck." Still, that should not take anything away from Bekmambetov's attempt to give us a fresh interpretation of a cinematic *Ben-Hur* Jesus who finds his voice and preaches a message of non-violence and forgiveness. Indeed, Roma Downey, who along with her husband Mark Burnett, was one of the executive producers of the film, is quoted as saying (in McNeilly 2016):

Woven into the fabric of it is the story of faith. It is because Judah Ben-Hur has an encounter with Jesus Christ that Judah's heart is open. There, at the foot of the cross, we see his hardness drop away.²

Notes

- 1 This is a creative montage of biblical imagery drawn from 1 Timothy 6:12 and 1 Corinthians 9:24. According to Ong (2016) 1 Timothy 6:12 was the scriptural inspiration behind the film for executive producers Roma Downey and Mark Burnett.
- 2 Downey's comments were made in the wake of the news that the scenes depicting Jesus within the film (amounting to fourteen minutes) were cut by the distributors United International Pictures in Malaysia in order to meet local legal requirements within the largely Muslim country.

Works cited

- Aslan, Reza (2013), *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: Random House.
- Brown, Stephen (2016), "That Bit-part Saviour and *That* Chariot Race," *Church Times*, No 8008 September 9: 22–23, 28.
- Collin, Robbie (2016), "*Ben-Hur* Review: Sincere Spectacle That Doesn't Reinvent the Chariot Wheel," *The Telegraph*, September 6. Available online: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/09/06/ben-hur-review-sincere-spectacle-that-doesnt-reinvent-the-chariot/> (accessed October 8, 2016).
- Holden, Stephen (2016), "'Ben-Hur' Is a Savage Update for a New Generation," *The New York Times*, August 18. Available online: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/movies/ben-hur-review.html?_r=0 (accessed October 8, 2016).
- Kreitzer, Larry J. (1993), "*Ben-Hur*: The 'Cup of (Cold) Water' and the 'I Thirst' Saying of Jesus," in Larry J. Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow*, 44–66, Biblical Seminar Series, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic.
- Kreitzer, Larry J. (2013), "*Ben-Hur* (1959)," in Adele Reinhartz (ed.), *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*, 34–39, London and New York: Routledge.
- McNeilly, Claire (2016), "Roma Downey's *Ben-Hur* Anguish as Scenes of Christ Cut," *Belfast Today*, October 4. Available online: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/>

- entertainment/film-tv/news/roma-downneys-ben-hur-anguish-as-scenes-of-christ-cut-35100327.html (accessed October 8, 2016).
- Ong, Czarina (2016), "Find Out the Bible Verse That Helped Shape the Movie 'Ben-Hur,'" *Christianity Today*, August 20. Available online: <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/find.out.the.bible.verse.that.helped.shape.the.movie.ben.hur/93536.htm> (accessed October 8, 2016).
- Scodel, Ruth (2013), "The 1925 *Ben-Hur* and the 'Hollywood Question,'" in Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke (eds.), *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, 315–29, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, Gordon ([2006] 2014), "Getting it Right the Second Time: Adapting *Ben-Hur* for the Screen," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 52, May 2006; revised June 4, 2016. Available online: <http://brightlightsfilm.com/getting-it-right-the-second-time-adapting-ben-hur-for-the-screen/#.WE3VcvkrLb0> (accessed October 8, 2016).
- Travers, Peter (2016), "A Remake Disaster of Biblical Proportions," *Rolling Stone*, August 19. Available online: <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/ben-hur-movie-review-w435330> (accessed October 8, 2016).
- Walsh, Richard (2016), "Getting Judas Right: The 1925 *Ben-Hur* as Jesus Film and Biblical Epic," in Barbara Ryan and Milette Shamir (eds.), *Bigger Than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*, 125–42, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Wallace, Lew (1880), *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, New York: Harper.
- Wilkinson, Alissa (2016), "*Ben-Hur*: A New Twist on the Tale of the Christ," *Christianity Today*, August 17. Available online: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/august-web-only/ben-hur.html> (accessed October 8, 2016).