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The Wealthiest Man in the Empire: *Ben-Hur* as Model of Evangelical Political Engagement

T HE INTRODUCTION TO THE 2003 SIGNET EDITION OF Lew Wallace's 1880 epic novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* is written by none other than Tim LaHaye, a leader of the conservative evangelical movement and co-author of the best-selling *Left Behind* series. LaHaye begins this rapturous essay by declaring, "You are about to read one of the finest novels ever written" and goes on to describe it as both a spiritual and literary inspiration: "I am going to make a confession. This is the book that made me realize that fiction could be used to send a message that is even more important than the story" (v, x). In a 2008 essay on the *Ben-Hur* tradition, Howard Miller suggests that LaHaye's introduction is part of a renewed effort to market this novel to a specifically evangelical audience. In 2000, Focus on the Family, then under the leadership of James Dobson, released a radio dramatization. In 2003, *Ben-Hur* was reproduced as an animated feature, starring the vocal talents of Charlton Heston. Of this evangelical rediscovery of *Ben-Hur*, Miller says, "In *Ben-Hur*'s Christ narrative they [evangelicals] found affirmation and identity in a culture from which they felt increasingly alienated" (173). The fervent efforts of evangelical leaders to encourage lay readers to pick up this novel indicate that they see in this Union general's work a relevant expression of the values promoted by their movement.

The continuing relevance of *Ben-Hur* (the novel that surpassed *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to become the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century) to American popular culture and religion speaks to a need

for scholarly engagement, but thus far, Miller's article represents the
only comprehensive treatment of its legacy outside of the two major
biographies of Lew Wallace. In her influential essay, "Nation, Region,
Empire," published in the 1991 *Columbia History of the American Novel,*
Amy Kaplan declared *Ben-Hur* "in need of the kind of critical atten-
tion paid to Stowe's novel in its cultural context," yet since then,
more articles and books have been written on *Left Behind* than on the
novel that arguably launched evangelical popular literature as a finan-
cially viable modern enterprise (258).[1] The ongoing influence of *Ben-
Hur* among twenty-first century evangelicals suggests that its appeal
extends beyond its Biblical subject matter. I argue that evangelicals
find in this novel an interpretation of the Scriptures that articulates
their historically ambivalent relationship to authority and dramatizes
a model of political and social engagement consistent with the desires
of evangelicals at the turn of the twenty-first century. Formed as the
populist answer to the more authoritarian models of Protestant prac-
tice—namely Anglicanism and Puritanism—evangelicalism from the
eighteenth century on has emphasized the importance of the every-
day individual's relationship with the divine, their immediate access
to the truths of Scripture, and their ability to experience immediate,
direct revelations. Yet in times of social and political upheaval, when
the truths of Scripture and the power of conventional authorities have
been called into question, evangelicals have consistently stood behind
those conventional authorities and sought to increase their influence
through their alignment with political and economic elites, producing
what W. Bradford Wilcox calls the "paradoxical mix of moral individ-
ualism and authority-mindedness" in evangelical thought (*Soft Patri-
archs* 27). Wallace's novel, which was supposedly written as an answer
to the skeptical atheism of Robert Ingersoll, was just such a challenge
to the forces of scientific skepticism, theological liberalism, and moral
backsliding.[2] Furthermore, it was written as the United States began to
extend its influence both across the continent and into other parts of
the world, rhetorically positioning this expansion as the advancement
of a Christian empire. Thus it is perhaps not so surprising that evangeli-
cal elites saw fit to revive this 120-year-old novel as the Clinton era—a
symbol for evangelicals of moral license and liberal antagonism—came
to a close and George W. Bush, the great evangelical hope ascended to
power. Less surprising is the fact that these efforts to promote the novel

continued in the post–9/11 era, as the U.S. became involved in multiple religiously-charged wars.

<center>AUTHORITY AND DEMOCRACY IN
AMERICAN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY</center>

At the center of the American Evangelical ethos is a tension between democracy and authoritarianism. Forged in the revolutionary spirit of the late eighteenth century, evangelicalism advocated the unmediated relationship between the individual lay believer and the scriptural text, laying the groundwork for the religious innovations of the nineteenth century: Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism, Christian Science, etc.[3] Yet the innovators of the Second Great Awakening shared a commitment to total submission to one overarching authority: the Protestant Christian God. And those popularizers of Christianity and democratizers of American Bible reading also shared the concern that the United States was insufficiently submissive to His will and committed to His cause. Despite their vaunted egalitarianism, many nineteenth-century evangelicals believed that submission to properly ordained authorities was the solemn duty of all humankind. According to American Bible historian Paul Gutjahr, Elias Boudinot formed the American Bible Society in 1816—the greatest promoter of lay Bible reading in the nineteenth century—out of the dual desire to make God's Word accessible to each and every U.S.-American and to counteract what Boudinot saw as the dangerous democratic impulses of the Jeffersonian Era: "Boudinot believed that the rise of Jefferson, with his heretical religious views and ill-advised optimism in the abilities of common man, could only mean decline of the United States. . . . He sensed that the best way to counteract evil in print was with the most powerful piece of printed material, the Bible" (*American* 11).

Evangelicals would mimic this pattern at other points of perceived crisis in religious authority: encourage submission to God, to the Bible, and "men who possess most wisdom . . . and most virtue" by presenting Christianity as more accessible and making certain concessions to a more open culture (qtd. in Gutjahr, *American* 9). During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, evangelicals have responded to the erosion of traditional religious values by taking measures based on market-research to make churches more appealing to more people—adding gourmet coffee bars and fitness centers to ever-growing megachurches.

Yet they also attempt to locate a lost moral center in established power
structures—the church, the traditional family, patriarchal marriage,
industrial capitalism, and particular political parties—pointing to the
restoration of those righteously appointed authorities as the only hope
for humanity. According to Gutjahr, *Ben-Hur*, a work of popular litera-
ture based on the life of Christ, was a similar response to a perceived
moment of crisis in U.S.-American Christianity: "The last two decades
of the 1800s were a time when the great prophets of the American
church were being replaced by the great scientific theorists and theories
of the day" (167). It was rapidly embraced by Protestant elites and lay
readers, who had long been skeptical about the moral qualities of novels
as a genre. I argue that this is because *Ben-Hur*, from beginning to end,
negotiates that fine line, demonstrating that the Word of God speaks to
and is accessible to anyone while maintaining that God anoints benev-
olent elites, gentle patriarchs to lead his people, privileging the radical
spiritual transformation of individuals while leaving the social, politi-
cal, and economic status quo unscathed.

The opening chapters of *Ben-Hur* depict the first encounter of the
Three Wise Men of the Christmas narrative. Hailing from Greece,
India, and Egypt, each is a wealthy and well-read representative of his
culture. They are cultural elites with considerable authority, yet the
message of this section is that Christianity is egalitarian, accessible to
all spiritual seekers without the intervention of a priestly class. As they
meet in the desert and regale one another with the story of how they
came to follow the mythical star, Gaspar, the Greek speaks to the illus-
trious history of his people:

> Far to the west of this . . . there is a land which may never
> be forgotten; if only because the world is too much its debtor,
> and because the indebtedness is for things that bring men their
> purest pleasures. I will say nothing of the arts, nothing of phi-
> losophy, of eloquence, of poetry, of war: O my brethren, hers
> is the glory which must shine forever in perfected letters, by
> which He we go to find and proclaim will be made known to
> all the earth. (15)

Melchior the Hindu and Balthasar the Egyptian follow in kind. Each
speaker presents his culture and religion as ancient and learned. They

speak of sacred texts and antique languages and of the indebtedness of the rest of the world to their innovations in language, poetry, oratory, record-keeping, and art.

Yet their reverence is tempered by their recognition that the enlightenment represented by these achievements was reserved for a royal or priestly class and ultimately separated their people from the true God. Melchior laments the Indian caste system and bemoans the austerity and legalism of the Brahmans: "I might not walk, eat, drink, or sleep without danger of violating a rule. And the penalty, O brethren, the penalty was to my soul!" (19). Balthasar identifies two religious traditions from his nation, "one of many gods, practiced by the people, the other of one God, cherished only by the priesthood" and supposedly derived from the Hebrew slaves and early teachings of Joseph and Moses. Balthasar concludes that the latter is the ultimate Truth and objects to the Alexandrian tradition of keeping the religion of the One God a secret (26).

By contrast, the proto-Christianity that the three travelers ultimately ascribe to is a religion of the unwashed and unlearned, a spiritual truth that is immediately accessible to the individual believer without specialized education or rank. As Balthasar says, "To begin a reform, go not into the place of the great and the rich; go rather to those whose cups of happiness are empty—to the poor and the humble" (27). It is also a religion of direct revelation. Wallace portrays these men coming to their conclusions about the nature of God and the imminent arrival of a Redeemer independently, without the aid of traditions, texts, or religious authorities. While walking "where the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmapootra rise to run their different courses; where mankind took up their first abode, and separated to replete the world," Melchior sees the legendary star in the heavens and hears a voice say "Thy love hath conquered. Blessed art thou, O son of India! The redemption is at hand" (21). Balthasar is also visited by a brilliant light, which tells him of his mission to join the two other seekers and find "he that is born King of the Jews" (29). *Ben-Hur*, therefore, depicts a Christianity that (according to its internal logic) is universally appealing, universally accessible (because God speaks to those whose hearts are open, even if no human is there to convey the Gospel message), and universally salvific. This Christianity is universally true and universally authoritative, but it is not authoritarian, because individuals, regardless of status, might come to it on their own, unforced, as the wise men do.

Yet despite adopting the religion of the meek and mild, none of these men are called to "sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" as Christ tells the rich young man in the Gospel of Matthew (New International Version, Matthew 19:21). In fact, we meet Balthasar later in the narrative as part of the entourage of the fabulously wealthy Sheik Ilderim. Neither do we see these men take any measures to alleviate the condition of the poor and oppressed, even the descendents of the Hebrew slaves whom Balthasar claims possessed the ultimate religious truth from the beginning. In fact, it is Balthasar who discourages the efforts of the Hebrews to rise up against the Roman oppressor late in the novel by pointing out that the role of the Messiah will be to redeem souls rather than nations. *Ben-Hur* essentially argues that the two outcomes—salvation for the next world and liberation in the present one—are antithetical to one another.

In fact, this emphasis on individual salvation over earthly struggles for liberation dramatizes a conflict that would come to define the fragmentation of U.S.-American Protestantism at the end of the nineteenth century into what Martin E. Marty calls "Private" and "Public" Christians. Whether Wallace intended it or not, *Ben-Hur* is friendlier to an evangelical, "Private Christian" reading. Public Christians, consisting primarily but not exclusively of the mainline denominations, were heavily influenced by the Social Gospel and saw the role of the Christian as one of public service and social reform. Private Christians, who "seized that name 'evangelical' which had characterized all Protestants early in the nineteenth century" were more interested in the saving of individual souls than in fighting for social justice (Marty 179).[4] These stylistic differences were born out of theological disparities related to the Bible's place in and representation of history. Private Christians tended to be premillenialists who believed that the world was doomed to end in calamity before the Second Coming of Christ. If the material strivings of men are hopelessly doomed to fail, the role of the Christian is to attend to the individual soul, to ensure his or her own spiritual and moral fitness—thus their exacting attention to private virtue and vice—and to recruit others. As such, the organizational energies of evangelicals were and continue to be directed toward proselytization and ensuring a political environment that is friendly to such activities. As sociologist Christian Smith explains: "This pessimistic view of

history suggested that the only task left for the Church was to remain separate from and unblemished by the world and to 'win' as many souls to heaven before the damned ship of history went down. This left less rationale for social reform or political engagement, for the world's demise was an inevitable part of God's plan" (*American* 8). By contrast, Public Christians, though theologically diverse, tended to believe in a metaphorical Kingdom of Heaven that is always present. At the end of the nineteenth century, they took a decidedly more optimistic view of human potential and saw their mission as one of fulfilling the promise of the Kingdom rather than toughing it out until the Rapture.[5]

These theological orientations had distinct political consequences.[6] Public Christians tended to be more engaged in public health, temperance, and other social causes than Private Christians.[7] These late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century disparities have shaped the twenty-first-century presence of both mainline and conservative evangelical Christianity. Mainline Christians have maintained their open attitude toward the world and have historically accommodated shifting social attitudes toward civil rights, abortion, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the role of religion in public life. Evangelicals have continued to resist such shifts. Because challenges to biblical authority have tended to go hand in hand with challenges to other forms of authority, conservative evangelicals from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first century have tended to support existing social arrangements, believing that the answers to the problems faced by the poor and marginalized can be traced to spiritual malaise rather than exploitation.

WAITING FOR KINGDOM COME

Amy Kaplan describes the title character of *Ben-Hur* as a "hero who is confused about whether he is fighting a material battle for a new earthly kingdom of the Jews or a spiritual battle for an unknown messiah" (258). I would revise that assessment to say that the hero begins the novel fully intending to fight a battle for a new earthly kingdom and only in the final pages comes to the stunning realization that he is merely a tool of God in a spiritual battle for souls. Through that transformation, the evangelical preference for saving the world by saving souls rather than addressing entrenched institutional power structures is affirmed. *Ben-Hur* is simultaneously an interpersonal and military-polit-

ical drama. Judah Ben-Hur, a lavishly wealthy young Jewish nationalist who dreams of overthrowing the Romans, is betrayed by his Roman friend Messala, who allows the Hur family to be arrested for attempting to murder the Roman governor—Valerius Gratus—and sentenced to slavery and imprisonment following an accident outside their estate.

Judah's struggle to free himself, exact revenge on Messala, and overthrow the Roman oppressor, is set alongside the story of Christ, whose selfless ministry and sacrifice serve as a direct contrast to Judah's thirst for blood. Rather than seek vengeance against those who will also wrongfully arrest him and seek his death, Christ submits to his God-given mission and role in history, and the tension between the two narratives dramatizes the futility of trying to correct systemic injustice on earth. Until the very end of the novel, Judah's solemn purpose is to do just that, and the two storylines intersect as Judah attempts to enlist the Messiah in his quest for Hebrew liberation. When Judah first learns of the existence of Jesus from the Egyptian magus Balthasar, he interprets it in accordance with his nationalist ideals: "[The Messiah] was to be, when come, the King of the Jews—their political King, their Caesar. By their instrumentality he was to make armed conquest of the earth, and then, for their profit and in the name of God, hold it down forever" (266–67). In collaboration with Sheik Ilderim, an Egyptian with his own particular reasons for hating Rome, and Simonides, the fabulously wealthy steward of the Ben-Hur estate, Judah plans to lead the vanguard of the Messiah's re-conquest of Israel and dissolution of the Roman Empire. The ultimate goal is, of course, a sovereign Jewish state: "The king implied a kingdom; he was to be a warrior glorious as David, a ruler wide and magnificent as Solomon; the kingdom was to be a power against which Rome was to dash itself to pieces. There would be colossal war, and the agonies of death and birth—then peace, meaning, of course, Judean dominion forever" (279).

Balthasar, one of the three wise men and a member of Sheik Ilderim's entourage has a different interpretation of the Messiah's earthly mission. He believes that the Kingdom Christ came to establish is not a kingdom on earth, but

> a kingdom of wider bounds than the earth—wider than the sea
> and the earth, though they were rolled together as finest gold
> and spread by the beating of hammers. Its existence is a fact as

> our hearts are facts, and we journey through it from birth to
> death without seeing it; nor shall any other man see it until he
> hath first known his own soul; for the kingdom is not for him,
> bur for his soul. (276)

Such pronouncements, Judah says, are a "riddle" to him, and the
hero spends nearly the entire novel ignorant of Balthasar's meaning.
The truth that "he comes to be a Saviour of souls" and not of nations
becomes evident only when the dreams of re-conquest are dashed at
the moment of the Messiah's execution. But even at the moment of
crisis, Ben-Hur is tempted by his men-at-arms to take up the crown and
scepter rejected by Christ continue the worldly fight: "The Nazarene is
not the King; neither has he the spirit of a king. . . . he failed himself,
and us, and Israel. . . . But hear you, son of Judah. We have your swords,
and we are ready now to draw them and strike for freedom!" (539). This
moment is the turning point, "the sovereign moment of his life," and he
rejects the opportunity. Had he struck for freedom, Wallace says,

> History might have been other than it is; but then it would
> have been history ordered by men, not God—something that
> never was, and never will be. A confusion fell upon him; he
> knew not how, though afterwards he attributed it to the Naza-
> rene; for when the Nazarene was risen, he understood the
> death was necessary to faith in the resurrection, without which
> Christianity would be an empty husk. (539)

Privileging the Kingdom of Heaven over kingdoms on earth is not a
politically neutral stance. In *Ben-Hur* we have a narrative that renders
resistance to empire and oppressive social inequality not only futile but
also faithless and arguably sinful. If Judah were allowed to foment rebel-
lion at the moment of Christ's crucifixion, it would interfere with the
origin story of Christianity and impede the work of God. Indeed, at
many points in the novel, Wallace condemns the idea of correcting
worldly injustice through worldly means. He advances the evangelical
thesis that what troubles the world most acutely is not political or social
injustice but spiritual footlessness:

> Studying the situation after two thousand years, we can see
> and say that religiously there was no relief from the universal

> confusion except some God could prove himself a true God,
> and a masterful one, and come to the rescue; but the people
> of the time, even the discerning and philosophical, discovered
> no hope except in crushing Rome; that done, the relief would
> follow in restorations and reorganizations; therefore they
> prayed, conspired, rebelled, fought, and died, drenching the
> soil today with blood, tomorrow with tears—and always with
> the same result. (269)

The Ben-Hur we encounter in the epilogue, therefore, is not a revolutionary but an upstanding private citizen living the model of domestic bliss with the virtuous Esther and their children in the Italian city of Misenum. Years after the death and resurrection of Christ, Ben-Hur inherits the estate of Sheik Ilderim (a fortune which he adds to his already immense wealth), a token of their former partnership in arms against Rome. This inheritance comes at the same time as the news of the persecution of Christians by Nero in Rome. Yet Judah's response to this particular injustice is to use the money to wage an underground "culture war," by funding the catacomb churches. The final sentence of the novel, "Out of that vast tomb Christianity issued to supersede the Caesars," speaks to the evangelical desire to ensure Christian supremacy by transforming a culture from within—using the power of the denarius or the dollar—rather than overthrowing the bastions of power (558).

Except for individual cases of cruelty, even Rome's pursuit of global empire is never challenged in this novel. An anti-imperialist critique comes through much more strongly in William Wyler's 1959 film than it does in its source material. In one of the opening scenes of that film, we see the Roman legions marching through the Judean countryside to Jerusalem, led by Messala (much older and wielding a higher military rank in the film than in the novel). Wyler's portrayal of the Roman military is haunted by the specter of two World Wars and the Holocaust. These early scenes are replete with fascist allusions, as the legion greets Messala with raised arm salutes that evoke Hitler (they salute Pontius Pilate prior to the chariot race in the same fashion). The problem with Rome in the film is Rome's militarism, imperialism, and repression of dissidents. Wyler obscures the kingdom on earth/Kingdom of Heaven question and centralizes the political problems of the Roman occupation of Judea. The chariot race of the film, which takes place in Jeru-

salem instead of Antioch, becomes the triumph of an oppressed people over the Roman aggressor, typified by the image of Pontius Pilate overseeing the proceedings in purple robes, forced to crown Judah Ben-Hur with laurels and to declare him a "god" among his people while those same people flood the arena in a show of patriotism. This is a transparent allusion to the crown of thorns and the decidedly different reception of Christ, an actual "God" in Christian theology.

The problem with Rome in the novel is not that Rome wields power over occupied territories but that Rome is unworthy of wielding that power due to its decadence and amorality. Wallace is not critiquing the concept of imperial power so much as he is making an argument about how it ought to be exercised and by whom, just as he has no problem with the concept of political and cultural elitism so long as the elites are righteous and benevolent. No aspect of the tradition narrative illustrates this better than the differences in the portrayal of Messala in the book and film. The Messala of the early chapters of the novel is not the mature, menacing Messala of the film, who exhorts Judah to give up the names of Hebrew revolutionaries in exchange for continued friendship and protection. The Messala of the novel is like a sociopathic fraternity brother, an entitled and irresponsible mischief-maker who later attempts to run down an old man and his daughter in a chariot purely for the fun of it. What strikes Judah upon their first encounter is not his friend's militarism and political ambition but his satirical attitude toward the political situation in Jerusalem. In contrast to the smoldering intensity of Stephen Boyd's performance in Wyler's film, Wallace's Messala takes nothing seriously, and the narrator of the novel traces this character flaw to his Roman education: "reverence as a quality of the Roman mind was fast breaking down, or, rather, it was becoming unfashionable" (83). Wallace attributes this lack of reverence to the decline of religion in Rome: "The old religion had ceased to be a faith; at most it was a mere habit of thought and expression . . . . As philosophy was taking the place of religion, satire was fast substituting reverence" (83–84). Throughout the disastrous initial conversation between Messala and Judah, Wallace notes the flaring of his nostrils, the artificial languidness of his tone, "affected as the best vehicle to convey the idea of general indifference" (84). Even at the moment where Messala betrays the Hur family, he does not forget his drawl and declares "there is richer entertainment in the street" (121).

The decadence and <u>fecklessness</u> of Greco-Roman culture is show-cased later in the Grove of Daphne episode, where Ben-Hur, liberated from the galleys and walking under the protection of the name of his adopted Roman father, Quintus Arrius, visits the shrine of Apollo. During this period just prior to the discovery of Messala's whereabouts, the chariot race, and the news of the coming Messiah, Judah contemplates the easy pleasures of this bucolic setting, where many a devotee had dedicated their lives to tending the garden. Wallace's description of the Grove and its denizens is woven with considerable Victorian circumspection, but there are clear indications that sexual license rules this idyllic scene. At the statue of Daphne, Judah comes upon a young couple "lying upon a tiger's skin, asleep in each other's arms" with the tools of their labor flung aside (204). Judah is shocked by the "exposure" and reflects mournfully on the fact that "the law of the place was Love, but Love without Law," that vast stores of private and public wealth had been given to maintain this place of sensualism and irreverence (204–5).

In spite of Rome's godlessness and amorality, Wallace is not particularly eager to see it destroyed. Rather, his critique of Rome presages evangelical critiques of the decadence and immorality of American culture in the wake of the secularizing influences of the late nineteenth century and again in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To the degree that Wallace's Rome is an allegory for the modern U.S. (whereas Wyler's Rome seems to be an allegory for Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy), Wallace seems committed to the idea that God would rather see it transformed and purified without substantial cost to its global influence. He would rather see that power used as a tool for spreading Christianity than see it entirely dismantled. The one successful political maneuver that Judah, Simonides, and Ilderim actually achieve in their attempted coup d'etat is replacing Valerius Gratus with Pontius Pilate as Roman governor of <u>Judea</u>, a move fraught with historical irony. Like Pilate, the Romans are interpreted as necessary actors in the historical drama that leads to the birth and rise Christianity, their often contemptible actions—like Pilate's gutless surrender of an innocent man to the mob—part of the predetermined narrative of redemption. Judah, however, observes much to admire in individual Romans. During the famous sea battle that ends Judah's term as a galley-slave,

the hero stops to contemplate the dedication and bravery of the Roman hortator, who keeps to his post in spite of the chaos surrounding him. Likewise, Judah rescues the duumvir Quintus Arrius and so is able to reform him—a chronic gambler who first notices the young Hebrew as a likely contender in the arena—into a good man. Indeed, it is Ben-Hur himself who, by the end of the novel, becomes a model citizen of the Roman empire. As we gaze upon his sumptuous Italian mansion, the narrator tells us, "Everything in the apartment was Roman, except that Esther wore the garments of a Jewish matron" (554). Thus Wallace seems to be arguing that the model Christian is a model citizen, someone who seeks to transform the empire from beneath (through the catacombs), and this model of engagement mirrors the orientation of many modern evangelicals. The results of Christian Smith's 2000 study of contemporary evangelicals revealed that they regard direct political engagement with a certain amount of suspicion, despite the quite visible public efforts of the Religious Right. Though they would say that voting and lobbying for causes they support are important, they share a deeper conviction "that the world's problems are ultimately rooted in spiritual problems residing in individual human hearts; that solving those problems requires an inner spiritual transformation . . . . that the most effective strategy for real social change, therefore, is personal evangelism" (*Christian* 115). *Ben-Hur*'s privileging of individual spiritual journeys over large-scale political mobilization is certainly consistent with Smith's observations.[8]

THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARILY RICH MEN

Wallace's refusal to sanction the overthrow of Rome is consistent with the novel's protectiveness toward traditional institutions of power. *Ben-Hur* is a novel populated with strong patriarchs and captains of industry, with submissive wives and dutiful slaves. Yet Wallace attempts to both ameliorate and naturalize the inherently un-egalitarian social configurations in his novel by showing that many of his wealthy patriarchs are *deserving*. The novel clearly attempts to locate a set of elites to act—even temporarily—as the moral center of Wallace's universe, but it clearly also desires elites who are spiritually fit and who obtain their vast measures of influence in ways that might have been acceptable to late nineteenth-century (and now twenty-first-century) U.S.-American readers, socialized to revere a capitalist meritocracy. Messala, the

entitled young noble who lives decadently on family wealth and attains
his lofty position in the Roman military thanks to their rank, seems to
be the exception that proves the rule (appropriately, he loses his fortune
on a bet). At the opening of the novel, we learn that the House of Hur
was blessed by the "favors of Herod," its patriarch "accounted a Prince
of Jerusalem—a distinction which sufficed to bring him homage of his
less favored countrymen, and the respect, if nothing more, of the Gen-
tiles with whom business and social circumstances brought him into
dealing" (111–12). Hur had earned the friendship of Augustus Caesar,
and his mansion is festooned with treasures bestowed by the imperial
hand. Yet, the House of Hur is not founded on patronage alone but on
enterprise, for the patriarch

> . . . had welcomed the law that bound him to some pursuit;
> and, instead of one, he entered into many. Of the herdsmen
> watching flocks on the plains and hill-sides, far as old Lebanon,
> numbers reported to him as their employer; in the cities by
> the sea, and in those inland, he founded houses of traffic; his
> ships brought him silver from Spain, whose mines were then
> the richest known; while his caravans came twice a year from
> the East. (112)

Judah, as well, is determined to embark upon a profession, telling his
sister that "even you would despise me if I spent in idleness the results
of his industry and knowledge" (115). Wallace goes out of his way to
make Judah a self-made man like his father. In fact, the seizure of the
Hur family and their lavish fortune serves not only the revenge plot
of the novel but presents Judah with the opportunity to enact his own
Alger-esque rags to riches narrative.

Wallace seems committed to portraying a world in which the best
men naturally rise to the top no matter what circumstances lie in their
way. Sent to the galleys to die as one more anonymous slave, Judah imme-
diately distinguishes himself as exceptional. Quintus Arrius, the senior
officer on board the galley, sees in Ben-Hur a combination of physical
and mental abilities that mark him as the ideal athlete. Unlike his fellow
slaves, "rude and simple . . . . imbruted" by their condition in life, Judah
stands out for his robust physique and efficiency at the oar (139). The
hortator informs Arrius that Judah asked to be alternated from right to

left, because "he had observed that men who are confined to one side become misshapen. He also said that some day of storm or battle there might be sudden need to change him and he might then be unserviceable" (142–43). Judah's willingness to please the authorities who view him and his ilk as disposable labor eventually pays off. Arrius instructs the hortator to leave Ben-Hur unchained, such that when the ship finally breaks up during the climactic sea battle, Judah is able to escape.

But Ben-Hur and his father are not the only self-made men in this novel. Following his rescue of and adoption by Arrius, Judah learns by overhearing a conversation that the Hur family's steward is alive, well, and extraordinarily rich in Antioch: "The prince [Hur] was a merchant, with a genius for business. He set on foot many enterprises, some reaching far East, others West. In the great cities he had branch houses. The one in Antioch was in charge of a man said by some to have been a family servant called Simonides, Greek in name, yet an Israelite" (171). Following the fiasco in Jerusalem, Simonides succeeded in sequestering all but the family's liquid wealth: "they say the procurator took only the prince's property ready at hand—his horses, cattle, houses, land, vessels, goods. The money could not be found, though there must have been vast sums of it. What became of it has been an unsolved mystery" (172). Indeed, Simonides has been investing the funds, "and in a space incredibly brief became the master merchant of the city. In imitation of his master, he sent caravans to India; and on the sea at present he has galleys enough to make a royal fleet" (171). Yet he has been doing this not simply to enrich himself but to grow and keep the wealth in trust in case a member of the Hur family should have survived. It is later revealed that the Romans tortured Simonides for information about the money's whereabouts and permanently crippled him in the process. Thus, like Judah during the galley episode, Simonides serves as a prime example of Wallace's compelling but fantastical slave-entrepreneurs. Simonides' back story suggests the Parable of the Talents, which appears in Matthew 25:14–30 and Luke 19:12–27.[9] In the parable, a wealthy man gives to three servants portions of his wealth before leaving on a journey. When he returns, he learns that two of his servants have successfully invested the talents (a New Testament unit of money) and increased the master's wealth. Pleased, the master gives them more responsibilities and invites the servants to share in his prosperity. The third servant, however, feared the master's wrath should the money go amiss and buried it

for safekeeping. The master calls him a wicked servant and orders him
to surrender his single talent to the servant who doubled the talents he
was given. This parable is told to illustrate an aspect of the Kingdom of
Heaven, namely that investing your god-given gifts in whatever portion
they are given (after all, the servants are allotted unequal portions) will
result in rewards in the hereafter.

It is almost as if the entire first half of the novel is working over-
time to cleanse the filthy lucre bestowed upon the Hur family by Herod
and convert it into a bounty won by industry, integrity, and gump-
tion. This reassures the audience that Judah's exalted position in the
social hierarchy was both ordained by the institutional structure (the
Herodian government) *and* the result of good character and hard work.
Despite the dramatic highs and lows experienced by Ben-Hur and his
compatriots, the social order at the end remains exactly where it was
at the beginning. Over the course of the novel, Judah will acquire the
fortune of Quintus Arrius upon his death, reclaim his father's fortune
(though he allows Simonides to keep the vast proceeds of his invest-
ment), inherit Simonides share—which includes the winnings from a
monstrous wager that Simonides made on the chariot race, bankrupting
Messala and several of his friends. By the end of the novel, Ben-Hur's
wealth beggars description. Yet the novel's unflagging affection for the
fabulously rich seems to have something to do with the discomfort that
pervades the novel regarding social change. Even when Wallace allows
his heroes to dream of glorious revolution against Rome, we can never
forget that this is not exactly a proletarian uprising but a war waged
by elites on elites. Similarly, Wallace seems to prefer a vision of early
Christianity led and funded by a great financier rather than a rag-tag
band of revolutionaries. Perhaps it is no accident that the Disciples
of Christ, humble working men as they were, barely warrant mention
in this narrative. Wallace is committed to a top-down model of social
organization even where he endorses a democratic, egalitarian concep-
tion of access to status and spiritual truth.

Essential to this top-down model of organization is a subordinate
class that seems happy to remain subordinate. Simonides, despite his
immense success as a private businessman, remains enslaved to the Hur
family for life. Born a slave, he was freed by Judah's father and remained
in his employ out of a sense of loyalty, yet he once again adopted the
status of a slave for the sake of love:

> It was then I saw thy [Esther's] mother, and loved her, and took
> her away in my secret heart. After a while a time came when
> I sought the prince to make her my wife. He told me she was
> a bond-servant forever; but if she wished he would set her free
> that I might be gratified. She gave me love for love, but was
> happy where she was, and refused her freedom. I prayed and
> besought, going again and again after long intervals. She would
> be my wife, she all the time said, if I would become her fellow
> in servitude. Our father Jacob served yet other seven years for
> his Rachel. Could I not as much for mine? But thy mother said
> I must become as she, to serve forever. (189–90)

Consistent with the relationship of his path to wealth to the Parable of
the Talents, Simonides acceptance of servitude seems to be analogous
to the way a Christian must become a servant of Christ. His wife's insis-
tence that she join her in her condition is a reference to the injunction
against marrying non-Christians, conceptualized with the apt meta-
phor, "be ye not unequally yoked." Yet in the shadow of the Civil War,
this is also a problematic depiction of the notion of the happy or willing
slave, who loves his master too much to obtain his freedom.[10]

GENDERING THE KINGDOM

One must remember, however, that it is actually Simonides' wife
who insists that her servile status is sufficient for her happiness, and
throughout the novel, women consistently serve as the examples of
dutiful servants. Amrah, the Egyptian nurse in the Hur household
remains hidden in the Jerusalem mansion, committed to serving the
family even when she believes they are dead. When it is discovered that
Judah's mother and sister are alive but infected with leprosy, Amrah
brings food and water to the leper colony and ultimately escorts them
to see Christ, whose presence finally heals them. However, it is Esther,
Simonides daughter who expresses the strongest and most consistent
sense of duty, even to members of a family she never personally knew.
After Judah leaves their initial encounter, Simonides asks her what he
should do with the immense wealth he has amassed, and she replies,
"Did not the rightful owner call for it but now?" (192). When reminded
that this would leave her a beggar after his death, she responds, "Nay,
father, am not I, because I am thy child, his bond-servant? And of

whom was it written, 'Strength and honor are her clothing and she shall rejoice in time to come'?" (192). Esther's reward for her duty is to be the eventual love interest of Judah, the successful rival of the bewitching but immoral Iras—the daughter of the Egyptian Balthasar. In her demure submissiveness, Esther is portrayed as the ideal Victorian Christian woman in contrast to Iras's sensuality and political scheming and rounds out the portrait of domestic bliss that we see at the end of the novel.

The domestic arrangement we see at the end of *Ben-Hur* and the stereotypical deployment of the Madonna/whore dialectic obviously reflects Wallace's broader Victorian milieu. Both Private and Public Christians embraced the cult of domesticity and the logic of separate spheres as essential to bourgeois social order. Therefore, those gender configurations do not necessarily reflect anything distinctive about the novel's theological orientation. However, it does assist us in understanding the novel's appeal to modern day evangelicals. An emerging body of work by sociologists has brilliantly assessed the nuances of evangelical family and gender ideology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It tells us that, consistent with common wisdom, evangelicals have sacralized the Victorian domestic arrangement and invested it with the ability to restore a longed-for social and moral order associated with the culture of the 1950s. Insofar as evangelicals favor the performance of spiritual labor on the self, family, community and the nation over other forms of political action, the task of preserving traditional domestic arrangements and gender roles has become central to the project of Kingdom-building. It is the gendering of the idea of selfless servitude that makes possible the virtuous pursuit of wealth and individual accomplishment and the extension of Christian influence into other parts of the world by means of industry. If the real world work implied in building a Kingdom of souls involves extending the influence of Christianity through cultural, rather than militaristic or even political means, then women are responsible for maintaining the sacred order at home while men are supposed to be winning spiritual battles for Christ out on the world.[11] The image of the de-militarized "culture warrior" who embodies the attributes of stereotypical masculinity but whose more violent instincts are restrained by sacred domesticity is the dominant model of evangelical masculinity in the twenty-first century. As the title of W. Bradford Wilcox's book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men* illustrates, the desire

is for manly men conforming to traditional gender models (patriarchs) who are "softened" into strong but protective fathers and husbands.

Jeff Sharlet, famous for his investigative work on The Family, a fundamentalist political group based in Washington D.C. that includes many members of Congress and hosts the annual National Prayer Breakfast,has noted the rising trend in "warrior" rhetoric in the evangelical culture of masculinity "in books with titles such as *You, The Warrior Leader*; *The Barbarian Way* and *Fight on Your Knees*" (*Family* 000).[12] In an online article for Nerve, he notes that this fascination with a particularly medieval, "barbarian" style of militarism extends to mainstream popular culture in movies such as *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*. Sharlet cites the wildly popular Christian author John Eldredge as an example:

> In *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*—still a hardcover bestseller four years after publication—John Eldredge writes of a present given to him by his wife: "Stasi slipped out of the room with the words, 'Close your eyes . . . I have a surprise for you.'" When she tells him to look, Eldredge finds "a Scottish broadsword exactly like the one used by William Wallace. I had been looking for one for several months." ("Sex")

Howard Miller also notes the way in which William Wallace-esque masculinity has been merged with the Christ narrative in Mel Gibson's 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*: "Here is Christ as Braveheart—as interpreted by Mel Gibson. Both of Gibson's heroes—William Wallace and Jesus—exhibit stoic strength in the face of torture" (174). It is then, no surprise that *Ben-Hur*—with its physically dominating and longsuffering hero—has found a newly energized audience in contemporary evangelicals.

Lew Wallace, of course, was writing at a time when the cultural ideal of "muscular Christianity" was sparking a newfound interest in physical fitness, exploration of the frontier, and a rugged, adventuresome model of manhood based on Teddy Roosevelt's rigorously crafted public image.[13] During the latter decades of the nineteenth century, while *Ben-Hur* was enjoying unprecedented popular success and the chariot race was being endlessly recreated on stage, the YMCA and Boy Scouts were founded. The protagonist of *Ben-Hur* is a supreme

example of this masculine hero, the consummate athlete and soldier who performs such feats as expertly handling horses, killing a man with his bare hands (in self-defense), and besting a group of Roman soldiers. These victories are not incidental. Judah cultivates these skills throughout the novel. In one of the opening scenes, he tells his sister Tirzah of his desire to study war in a Roman camp: "War is a trade . . . to learn it thoroughly, one must go to school, and there is no school like a Roman camp" (116). Later, we learn that Ben-Hur trains in the *palaestra* as Quintus Arrius's adopted son, and it is this training that prepares him to triumph as a charioteer and in hand-to-hand combat. Wallace is clear that this combination of physical strength and cunning makes Judah a dangerous foe.

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Judah's <u>menace</u> is consistently kept in check, however, by the power of sentimental domesticity. As Wilcox notes, the softening influence of the home redirects this aggressive hyper-masculinity toward a protective role. Domestication makes this hyper-masculinity socially acceptable by limiting its tendency toward violence. The teenage Ben-Hur at the beginning of the novel is safely ensconced in the home with his mother, sister, and nurse. Following his initial confrontation with Messala, his mother soothes his aggressive anger through her own espousals of faith. After their capture, we are made to understand that Ben-Hur's primary motivation is finding and rescuing his mother and sister. His aggressiveness and occasional violence stem not only from a desire for vengeance but from a desire to protect. Esther similarly serves as a quiet (almost voiceless, as she is given few lines in the novel) domesticating force at the margins of the action, her dutiful femininity contrasting the political ambition of Iras. Therefore, Judah's ultimate fate as the non-violent patriarch represents not the eradication of his insuppressible masculinity but the fulfillment of it in the role of protector and provider, husband and father.

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Evangelicals began to rediscover *Ben-Hur* as they also rallied behind the presidency of George W. Bush, who received more evangelical support than any American president, with the possible exception of Ronald Reagan. It is notable that Bush, the privileged son of a wealthy political family and a former U.S. president but nevertheless successfully packaged as an everyman embodies the very tension

between authority and populism that *Ben-Hur* dramatizes, that contin-
ues to permeate the evangelical ethos in its third century of ascendency.
That continued influence on U.S.-American culture and politics is why
numerous studies in the past two decades have attempted to illumi-
nate the role of cultural production in evangelical identity formation.
As Christian Smith states, "It is through languages, rituals, artifacts,
creeds, practices, narratives—in short, the stuff of human cultural pro-
duction—that social groups construct their sense of self and difference
from others. This means that every group's sense of self is always the
product, not the essential nature of things, but of active, continuing
identity-work" (*American* 92). While those who study literature and
religion have paid considerable attention to contemporary popular phe-
nomena like *Left Behind* and Christian romance novels, critics ought
to also investigate the ways in which older, "classic" texts have been
appropriated and repackaged for evangelical consumption.[14] In addi-
tion to *Ben-Hur*, Focus on the Family has been involved in publish-
ing special editions and staging radio performances of novels like *Silas
Marner*, *Les Miserables*, *Billy Budd*, and *A Christmas Carol*. All of these
works come from the last moment in Western history in which Christi-
anity was the central social, cultural, and moral authority, even though
their authors had complicated and even antagonistic attitudes toward
religion. Thus, evangelical identity work seems to be both forward and
backward looking, a search for ways—not to restore the past in the pres-
ent—but to adapt past strengths to present challenges.

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NOTES

1. See Bivins 169-221, Gutjahr "No Longer Left Behind," McAlister, and
Schuck.

2. The essay "How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*" suggests that the novel was writ-
ten in direct response to the secularization of American culture. Wallace describes
an encounter with Robert Ingersoll on a train and came away ashamed that he
was unable to defend the Christian faith knowledgeably against the famed atheist's
arguments. This account is reprinted in the second volume of Wallace's autobiog-
raphy.

3. See Hatch, and Hutchinson on evangelicalism and religious pluralism in
the U.S.

4. On the history of American evangelicalism, see Carpenter, Marsden, and
Noll.

5. Wilcox states that contemporary mainline Protestantism "is marked by a posture of openness to the world: it self-consciously seeks to adjust its teachings—including some of its theological and moral teachings—to developments in the world around it. This posture is rooted theologically in a basic confidence in human nature and in the belief that God is at work and is powerful enough to do a 'new thing' in the world. It is also indebted to an Enlightenment faith in the power of human reason—especially reason exercised in universities, seminaries, and the professions—to discern truth as it unfolds in different ways in new social contexts and to revisit old assumptions in light of new intellectual discoveries" (*Soft Patriarchs* 26).

6. For a breakdown of how denominational affiliations impact styles of political involvement in the present, see Greenberg, who notes that at the present moment, organized community outreach among white Protestants appears to be the purview of mainline churches and progressive religious institutions, which "are facing declining membership and denominational resources," while conservative white evangelical churches, which are growing on pace with population growth, "are more concerned with organizational maintenance and bringing in new members" (390). The Catholic Church and Black Protestants, however, remain bastions of "commitment to service provision combined with social action" (392). It should be pointed out that white evangelicals do engage in charitable works, but these works are usually subordinate to evangelism and church growth and tend to be driven by individual initiative rather than communal effort.

7. A 2008 article by Blancard, Bartowski, Matthew, and Kerley showed that regions of the U.S. with high concentrations of conservative Protestants with strong otherworldly orientations tend to have fewer public health services and therefore higher preventable mortality rates. A forthcoming dissertation in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin purports to show a similar relationship between high concentrations of conservative Protestants, lack of reproductive services and teen outreach efforts and levels of teen pregnancy, infant mortality, and low birth weight.

8. Smith offers these findings as a corrective to the stereotype of evangelicals as militant social and political conservatives intent on imposing their will on the public, but it may also indicate a lack of interest in seeking to correct social and economic injustices through political involvement.

9. The reference seems to be literalized in Simonides' declaration that "that which was in my hand for stewardship is multiplied into talents sufficient to enrich a Caesar" (218).

10. Whether a knowing or accidental reference, the relationship between Simonides and the Hur family recalls the unwillingness of Stowe's Uncle Tom to leave the household of St. Clair due to his desire to see his kind-hearted master ultimately converted to Christianity.

11. As Kaplan notes, the vision of American influence in the world in the late nineteenth century was "anti-imperial in nature and not territorially based, but depending instead on international commerce and the spread of United States' cultural institutions," including, presumably, American evangelicalism (258).

12. The Family itself is a fascinating study in the nature of modern evangelical political engagement. It is an "underground" movement that seeks to influence major political figures on both a national and global scale. The Family does not openly lobby or campaign but seeks to influence these figures by building discipleship relationships with them.

13. Roosevelt, as is well known, was asthmatic and sickly as a boy and cultivated his hyper-masculine image of hunter, explorer, and military adventurer to compensate. Lew Wallace, thirty years his senior, might have served as inspiration. The General's post–Civil War heroics included capturing Billy the Kid and undertaking secret military missions in Mexico.

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14. See Neal on Christian romance novels marketed to women.

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