The story of Ben-Hur is probably one of the most known fictional accounts of first-century Judaism and early Christianity worldwide. The story of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* was originally written by Lew Wallace, an American army officer and governor of New Mexico, and published in 1880. Since then, it has experienced numerous stage adaptations and four film versions, two of them produced by the Hollywood company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Both the 1926 silent black and white version directed by Fred Niblo and the 1959 sound and colour version by William Wyler were hugely successful in America and abroad. The 1959 film won seven Academy Awards and is probably the version people are most familiar with today.

The tale is set in the first half of the first century c.e., when Palestine had been under Roman rulership for almost half a century. Judah Ben-Hur, the main protagonist, is a young Jewish aristocrat whose Jerusalem-based family had always been friendly with the Romans. When Massala, his Roman childhood friend, returns to Jerusalem after five years, at a time of political upheaval, the two young men clash over their contrary political views and decide to end their friendship. By accident, the new governor is hit by a loose stone from the balcony of Judah’s family residence. As a punishment, his mother and sister are incarcerated and Judah is enslaved. This downward development from aristocrat to slave is followed by an upward movement from slave to Roman citizen and richest man in Judea in the second part of the story. As a galley slave, Judah saves the Roman tribune Quintius Arrius’ life. He is subsequently adopted by him and becomes a prominent Roman charioteer, but he cannot forget the fate of his mother and

4 On this film version see Freiman 1959; Babington and Evans 1993, esp. 177–84, 194–97, 201–2; Tatum 2004, 61–75.
sister and returns to Palestine to take revenge on Massala. He eventually wins a chariot race against his enemy. The story of Jesus provides a background to Judah’s story. At the end, Judah, his girlfriend, and his recovered mother and sister become adherents of Jesus, and Judah realizes that revenge and violence against the Romans are not the right way to proceed.

Slavery features prominently in the story of Ben-Hur, not only as far as Judah himself is concerned. Slavery is also present in the form of Simonides and his daughter, domestics of the House of Hur, who administer—and also appropriate—the family’s property after their disappearance. Judah falls in love with Esther, Simonides’ daughter, who is legally his slave. The reversal of fortunes, already mentioned with regard to Judah, is prominent in the Simonides/Esther story as well.

In the following, we shall focus on the representation of slavery in the different versions of the Ben-Hur tale and examine how this representation relates to what we know about ancient Jewish slavery from historical sources. Obviously, the purpose of this comparison is not to determine to what extent Lew Wallace’s fiction and its visual representations in film reflect historical truth. As Robert A. Rosenstone has pointed out “…the historical film must be seen not in terms of how it compares to written history, but as a way of recounting the past with its own rules of representation.”5 Literary works and films are able to make the past alive and to evoke the reader’s and viewer’s compassion and understanding in ways scholarly accounts never can.6 In addition, “…written history is not a solid and unproblematic object but a mode of thought, [and] so is the historical film.”7 Therefore fictional and historical sources shall be juxtaposed here to see how the literary and visual media reconstruct the ancient world.8

The Enslavement of a Jewish Aristocrat

Lew Wallace draws a grim picture of Judea under Roman rule at the time of Judah and Massala’s reunion. It is a time of “political agita-

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5 Rosenstone 1995, 3.
6 See also Aichele and Walsh 2002, IX: “…the movies transform the biblical materials in question, rewriting and recontextualising them.” They “…produce commentaries on the biblical stories and on the culture that produces and consumes both the Scripture and the movies.”
7 Rosenstone 1995, 4.
8 For a similar analysis of the film “Spartacus” see Hoffmann 2000, 63–70.