

'Ben-Hur' Blends Action, Romance—and Jesus

What if you took a classic robe and sandal soldier epic such as *Gladiator* and placed Jesus Christ right in the center of it? In the middle of all the rage, betrayal, fighting and bloodlust, what if the beautiful feet of the King of Kings, sharing an eternal message, steps in to offer another way? That is the premise behind the classic *Ben-Hur* story, first introduced as an 1880 novel, then released as a silent film in 1925, released again in 1959 and now in 2016.

The new version, which stars Jack Huston, Toby Kebbell, and Morgan Freeman, is billed as a re-envisioning classic story, not necessarily a remake of the revered Charlton Heston version. The plot is streamlined and the effects are updated, but most importantly, the evangelical punch is strengthened. While Jesus' presence and visage was felt in previous versions, He's been upgraded to a strong supporting character in this version (played by Rodrigo Santoro).

Judah Ben-Hur (Huston) faces betrayal by his adopted brother Messala (Kebbell) because of his refusal to fully accept the Roman occupation. Ben-Hur and his mother and sister are arrested and what was a lavish, comfortable life spins out of control. Esther (Nazanin Boniadi), Ben-Hur's love interest, encounters Jesus just as Ben-Hur is delivered from his spiritual shackles. But the emotional and physical ones remain.

As anyone familiar with the story knows, there is an opportunity for vengeance during the famous, climactic chariot race, here updated for 21st century viewers. When Ben-Hur is almost demolished by four charging horses, it is heart stopping and I'm sure the 3D version is even more impressive. During this third act, however, is when 2016 diverges the most

significantly from 1959. Without detailing spoilers, the changes in this version more specifically engage viewers on a spiritual level. What happens when you achieve everything you have been desperately fighting for and yet you find yourself still empty?

While *Ben-Hur* succeeds as a notable remake and a standout summer action film, there is such a deeper level to it. It is a film that provokes spiritual questions, not only for the faithful but also for those who have never engaged in Christian thought. After a lifetime of hurt, is forgiveness and restoration truly possible? How do we reconcile with those who have wronged us or that we have mistreated? That's a question the world is asking right now and kudos to the *Ben-Hur* team, including stellar producers Mark Burnett and Roma Downey, for providing answers.

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