BEN-HUR

A TALE OF THE CHRIST

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Now a major motion picture

CAROL WALLACE

Based on the bestselling novel by Lew Wallace

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Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ

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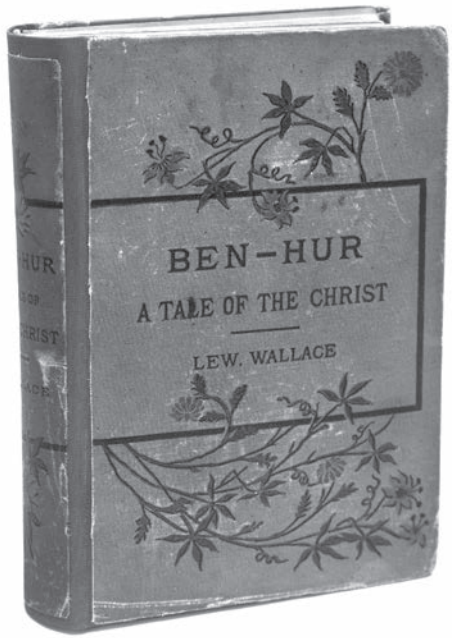
Foreword

Maybe you grew up with *Ben-Hur*. Maybe your family watched the movie every Easter. You've probably come across clips of the chariot race on TV award shows—they're certainly all over YouTube. Maybe there's an image in your head, right now, of the 1959 film's logo, those massive stone letters spelling out *Ben-Hur*.

I grew up with *Ben-Hur* too, but in a different way, because my great-great-grandfather wrote the original book. *Ben-Hur* was published in 1880 and, for over fifty years, was the bestselling novel in America. That meant there were copies of it everywhere in our house because people kept giving them to us.



A first printing, first edition copy of Ben-Hur

It didn't mean we read the novel, though. We were a bookish family and happily devoured almost anything between covers, but *Ben-Hur* was too much of a challenge. It stood to reason that there was a story in there somewhere—why else would it have been adapted for the stage and the movies? We just couldn't find the excitement buried in Lew Wallace's old-fashioned prose.

BEN-HUR SCREEN ADAPTATIONS

MGM has made *Ben-Hur* into a major motion picture three times: a silent film in 1925, the award-winning epic in 1959, and a 2016 movie. The 1925 and 1959 films were the most expensive movies of their times, costing $4 million and $15 million respectively.

The story was also developed as an animated feature in 2003 and as a miniseries (in a limited release) in Canada and parts of Europe in 2010.

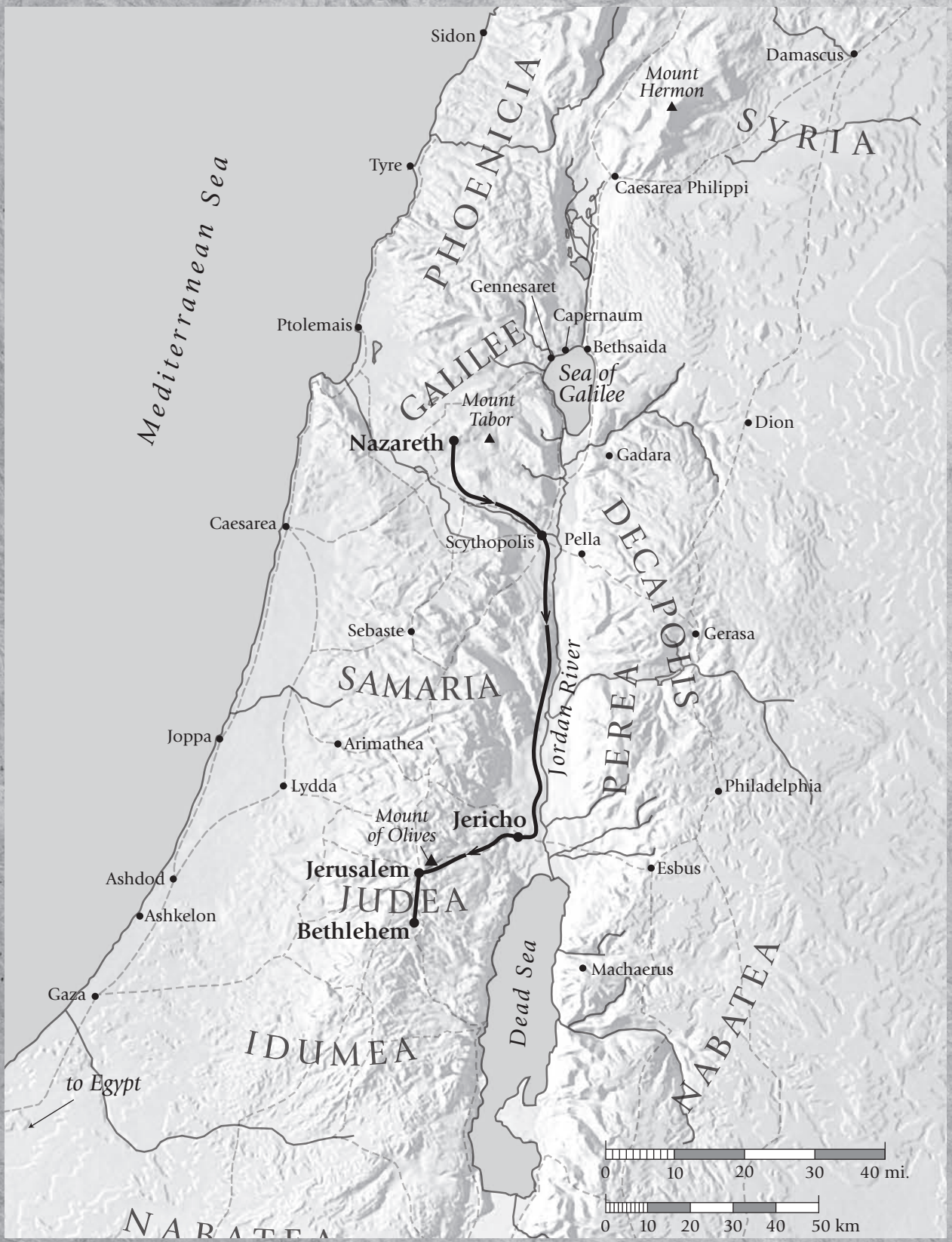
But recently I picked up an old dark-blue hardcover (with an inscription dated 1892 on the inside cover) and sat down to read in earnest. It was work, I have to admit. The plot moves very slowly and the dialogue was obviously written to sound antique. Characters swear in Latin, for instance. What's more, the descriptions of settings and scenery last much longer than they need to. In 1880, before much of the Middle East had been photographed, those details were new and exotic. Now they just get in the way of the action.

All the same, I finally understood the durable appeal of *Ben-Hur*. It's both exciting and moving. Lew Wallace, an Indiana lawyer and author, was inspired to write the novel as an exploration of his Christian faith. The adventures of the heroic Judah Ben-Hur dramatize the moral and spiritual choices so urgently presented in the early days of Christianity. In the original novel, the famous chariot race is certainly the most iconic scene. But it lasts only eleven pages and occurs two-thirds of the way through the book, which means there's much more to our hero's story. Judah Ben-Hur's heart and soul are at stake.

As a writer, I could see the potential in my great-great-grandfather's much-loved book. It could be brought up to date with some cutting, some rearranging, more depth for the female characters, faster pacing, and contemporary language.

So here it is, a lively retelling of a story that has excited and enlightened millions of readers around the world for over 125 years.

Carol Wallace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Tyre
Caesarea Philippi
Gennesaret
Capernaum
Ptolemais
GALILEE
Bethsaida
Sea of Galilee
Mount Tabor
Dion
Nazareth
Gadara
Caesarea
Scythopolis
Pella
DECAPOLIS
Sebaste
Gerasa
SAMARIA
Jordan River
PEREA
Joppa
Arimathea
Lydda
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Mount of Olives
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PART 1

CHAPTER 1

WONDERMENT

Was this it?

He sighed and shifted his weight, which the camel took as a signal to stop. Did the camel sigh?

No. It stood still with perfect patience at the top of a gritty rise. The dry, hot wind teased shards of sound from the bells on its harness. As Balthasar sat motionless in the howdah, other noises came to him: the rattle of pebbles from the camel's last step, the fluttering corner of the howdah's awning. Anything else?

The wind itself. No more than that.

Balthasar shaded his eyes and squinted into the distance before him. It was inaccurate to say there was nothing there. The ground rose and fell slightly. Thornbushes grew low to the ground. The color of the

Camels with howdahs

sandy soil changed from ivory to gray to russet, dyed by the minerals in the rocks that the wind, over thousands of years, had ground down to sand.

But this was not the place. Once again the camel began to move, obeying a signal Balthasar had not given.

He tried not to sigh again as the camel plodded onward. He tried not to wonder. He tried not to think of solitude in the desert and the hard quality of the sky at noon. He tried not to fret about water. Water had always appeared on this journey. Strange, untouched puddles materialized—once even a leather flask rolling as if just dropped. He had been cautious at first, dismounting and tasting each new supply in case it were brackish or tainted, but the water was always clean and fresh. And cool.

No one knew better than an Egyptian the value of fresh, cool water in the desert.

If there was one form of reassurance on this lunatic voyage, it was the water. Balthasar had prepared as much as possible for the journey, and the camel bore ample provisions for both of them. Water was the insoluble problem, and he had set out with no firm notion of how he would find it. But that was because he did not actually know where he was going. Just . . . north.

Nor did he know now, as the sun began to tilt away from its brazen vertical peak. He only knew that he had felt compelled, and still did. He thought perhaps he was traveling to find something. He only hoped he would recognize it.

* * *

Three days later the vegetation had changed from thorny scrub to the repetitive waves of sand dunes. He and the camel had trudged past a dry riverbed in which a broad band of clear water glittered. There had been one lonely palm tree. After they had passed it, Balthasar had turned around several times to reassure himself it was really there. Men went mad in the desert. Perhaps he was one of them. Yet at the same time he began to feel anticipation. Something would happen, and soon. The desert had been veiled in mist that morning, and now as the sun climbed higher, Balthasar felt something new in the vast currents of air around him. He scanned the horizons—nothing. Though the camel seemed more alert.

When the sun was right overhead, the camel stopped, as it had done every day, and knelt with its usual plunging awkwardness. Balthasar climbed stiffly out of the canopied howdah and walked around the camel, feeling the firm, hot sand shifting beneath his feet as the sun hammered his shoulders. He unstrapped his pack and fed the camel, then used some water from a flask to sponge the camel's eyes clear of dust. This was another

mystery: despite their endless days in the desert, neither he nor the camel seemed to suffer hardship. Balthasar had traveled before; he knew how a thorn could fester, how sun could parch skin. But the camel's coat was still white, the hump still solid despite inadequate rations. Balthasar himself felt strong and well, though crossing the desert at his age was a ridiculous project.

And now he began to unpack the tent. Until today he had been content with the shelter provided by the howdah. At night he slept at the camel's side, though he suspected the camel didn't like it. But the camel had all along seemed immune to his doubts, Balthasar thought. Whatever strange errand he was performing, the camel believed in it wholeheartedly.

Or perhaps that was fanciful. Still he erected the tent. By the time he had the red-and-white fabric stretched over the center pole and pegged into the sand, his shadow followed him like a black rind on the ground. Still he continued working. As the camel watched, he brought out wicker baskets and set them on the carpet laid in the tent's shade. There were dates and pomegranates, smoked mutton, unleavened bread, and three small flasks of wine.

Three. Food and drink for three. There in the middle of the desert. But that, too, was part of the compulsion. Balthasar had known from the start that he would meet two others. Out here. On the same mission. Or he had believed it, at least. At the beginning. And apparently now.

He stepped out of the tent. Everything was ready. This was the place and, he thought, the hour. He had made his voyage in faith. He shaded his eyes and looked eastward. The sun burned through the patterned kaffiyeh wrapping his head and the white cotton of his long, sashed kameez. He turned away, then looked back at the eastern horizon. There was a nick in it. A dark fleck—oh, tiny!

Then, surprisingly fast, not so tiny. Nor so dark. It was another white camel. Carrying another man. Balthasar's knees suddenly felt weak, and a chill went through him despite the hot, dry breeze. It was true, then? For an instant he felt shock, even revulsion. Somehow he grasped that his world had just been upset by a wholly new force. True, he had obeyed unreason to set out alone on this undefined mission—but he had retained a thread of skepticism. And fatalism; if he were to die in the desert, so be it. God the most knowing willed it thus.

But the sight of the distant man on the camel felt uncanny. Balthasar turned away, half-hoping to make the man vanish. The touch of God, it seemed, was no comforting thing. And it was insistent, too—for another moving fleck had appeared, this time traveling from the north.

TRADITIONAL NAMES OF THE MAGI

While the Bible does not specify how many magi visited Jesus, nor their names, the tradition of the three men named Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar comes from two early manuscripts: a sixth-century Greek document and an eighth- or ninth-century text of Irish origin, attributed (probably wrongly) to Bede the Venerable.

When the two travelers converged at Balthasar's tent, only the camels were unperturbed. They accepted each other as peers, magnificent ships of the desert. Each one alone would have attracted admiration in any bazaar from Carthage to Damascus; the three, with their princely howdahs and glittering harnesses, were worthy of an emperor. But unlike the camels, each man seemed prey to the same strong emotions: wonder and fear and gratitude, along with the dawning of tremendous hope.

The first arrival clambered down from his camel, crossed his hands on his chest, and bent his head in obvious prayer before approaching Balthasar. He was a Hindu, it appeared, wearing the turban and red leather slippers of the eastern lands. The two turned to face the third arrival, whose fair skin and golden hair identified him as a Greek. The three embraced formally, and Balthasar led his two guests into the tent, where he washed their feet and hands as good hosts do. Then they sat down, looking at each other. After a moment's hesitation, all of them bowed their heads to bless the meal, saying, "Father God, what we have comes from you. Accept our thanks and bless us to do your will."

Then they looked up and their eyes met in shock. Each man had used his own language, unknown to the others. But they had understood each other perfectly. Again Balthasar felt that icy touch of the truly strange.

The Hindu was named Melchior; the Greek, Gaspar. Each man had the same experience as Balthasar: a spiritual search lasting a lifetime, intense study, and finally the mystical call. As Melchior put it, "I saw a light. I heard a voice, and it told me that redemption for mankind was at hand."

Gaspar nodded. "And then the voice—which was so sweet!—said that with two others, I would see the Redeemer." The eyes of the three men met. "And I was to be guided by the Spirit to find you." He spread out his hands. "I have been following a light, and here you are."

Balthasar sat back on his heels and gazed into the gathered fabric surrounding the tent pole, where the afternoon sun glowed through the folds. "I believed, but I did not trust. Our Lord is greater even than I knew." He dropped his eyes and added, "I wonder . . . we have all spoken of light. Should we travel onward by night? It will be cooler for the camels."

"And I believe we will be well guided," Gaspar answered.

Melchior nodded. "The star I saw shone bright as the sun."

So after sunset they broke their little camp, and each man mounted his tall, white camel. The beasts seemed glad to be together, pacing faster than ever through the moonlit night. It was exhilarating, Balthasar thought. Fresh, cool air flowed over his face, and the footsteps of the other camels made him joyful. It was such a godsend not to be alone.

Suddenly before him, no higher than a low hilltop, flared an immense flame. Behind him came the shouts of Gaspar and Melchior; then he gasped with them as the flame shuddered and burst. In its place burned an enormous star. And Gaspar said, "Truly God is with us."