



Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1925)

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Despite the fact that there is nudity in this film, it was passed by censors of that time because it dealt with Christianity, as it was originating.

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The troubled Italian set was eventually torn down and a new one built in Culver City, California. The famed chariot race was shot with 42 cameras were and 50,000 feet of film consumed. Second-unit director [B. Reeves Eason](#) offered a bonus to the winning driver. The final pile-up was filmed later. No humans were seriously injured during the US production, but several horses were killed.

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Future stars [Gary Cooper](#), [Clark Gable](#), [Joan Crawford](#), and [Myrna Loy](#) were uncredited extras in the chariot race scenes. Crawford and Loy also played slave girls.

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According to The Guinness Book of World Records (2002), the movie contains the most edited scene in cinema history. Editor [Lloyd Nestler](#) compressed 200,000 feet (60,960 meters) of film into a mere 750 feet (228.6 meters) for the chariot race scene - a ratio of 267:1 (film shot to film shown).

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[Louis B. Mayer](#), head of MGM, was disappointed with the chariot scene, as he felt it was too tame. He offered a prize of \$100 (worth about 10 times that today) to the winner. This led to a much more competitive race that ended with a horrific crash that can be seen in the film. That crash, and another that resulted in a fatality, led to changes in rules of filming safety on film sets.

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This film had an "extra" cast like no other. Many Hollywood stars showed up on set to watch the shooting and were pressed into service as extras, especially in the chariot race. In addition, many who would later become Hollywood's top stars, but who were at the time just struggling actors, were also in the crowd scenes as extras. Among well-known and soon-to-be-well-known names "working" in the film were [John Barrymore](#), [Lionel Barrymore](#), [Joan Crawford](#), [Gary Cooper](#), [Marion Davies](#), [Myrna Loy](#), [John Gilbert](#), [Douglas Fairbanks](#), [Clark Gable](#), [Harold Lloyd](#), [Carole Lombard](#), [Janet Gaynor](#), [Fay Wray](#), [Mary Pickford](#), [Colleen Moore](#), [Lillian Gish](#), [Dorothy Gish](#), [Samuel Goldwyn](#) and [Rupert Julian](#).

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Forty-eight cameras were used to film the sea battle, a record for a single scene.

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Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ

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A staged fire on one of the ships got out of control. Armor-clad extras had to jump in the water. There is conflicting information as to whether any of them were killed.

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At \$3.9 million, the most expensive silent movie ever.

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MGM inherited the production when the company was founded in 1924; with the film over budget and getting out of control, the studio halted production and relocated the shoot from Italy to California, under the supervision of [Irving Thalberg](#). [William Wyler](#), one of more than 60 assistant directors for the chariot race, went on to direct the remake [Ben-Hur](#) (1959).

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The religious scenes, plus Ben Hur's entrance into Rome and some interior scenes that occur thereafter, were shot in two-strip Technicolor.

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All the religious scenes are in Technicolor, but the chariot race is not - an intense amount of lighting was required to shoot Technicolor, making it extremely difficult.

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The first attempt to film the chariot race was on a set in Rome, but there were problems with shadows and the racetrack surface. Then one of the chariots' wheels came apart and the stuntman driving it was thrown in the air and killed. See also [Ben-Hur](#) (1959).

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Advertised as "The Picture Every Christian Ought to See!"

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Although the film grossed \$9 million on its initial run, its huge cost overruns and the deal with rights-holder [Abraham L. Erlanger](#) meant that MGM was unable to make good on its initial \$4-million investment. It was not until a 1931 re-release did it make a profit.

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Producer [Irving Thalberg](#) was short of "hedonist slave girls", so he called up [Hal Roach](#) and [Mack Sennett](#) to ask a favor: to loan out their famous "Bathing Beauties". They were happy to oblige, as many girls were making their film debuts. Among the group of 20 or so girls who eventually appeared in the film: [Janet Gaynor](#), [Carole Lombard](#), [Fay Wray](#) and [Joyzelle Joyner](#).

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[Clark Gable](#) and then future wife [Carole Lombard](#) first met in late 1924 while working as extras on the set of this film. They would run into each other off and on again for the next year and a half (the two also appeared as extras in the epic [The Johnstown Flood](#) (1926)), but would not formally meet until 1931.

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After being brought to Italy, many of the lead actors were kept waiting around (on salary) for so long that [Francis X. Bushman](#) went on a 25-country tour with his sisters, and [Carmel Myers](#) went to Germany to film [Garragan](#) (1924).

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[Ramon Novarro](#)'s weekly salary of \$10,000 was 80 times more than what he earned while filming [The Prisoner of Zenda](#) (1922) - \$125 per week - just three years previously.

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During a European visit to move the production from Italy to the US, producer [Louis B. Mayer](#) stopped in Berlin, Germany, and attended a screening of [Gösta Berlings saga](#) (1924). The production introduced him to the actress who would become one of the studio's most bankable stars a few years later: [Greta Garbo](#).

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The sea battle was filmed near Livorno, Italy. Many extras apparently lied about being able to swim, and due to political troubles engulfing Italy at the time, tension between Fascist supporters of [Benito Mussolini](#) and their opponents was evident.

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The famous chariot scene was filmed at what is now the intersection of LaCienega and Venice Boulevards in Los Angeles.

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This production used more than 600 gallons of Max Factor's Liquid Body Make-up.

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The budget skyrocketed due to all sorts of accidents, recastings and a change of director halfway through production.

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The cast was claimed to number over 125,000.

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Author [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) and his wife, [Zelda Sayre](#) became friendly with many of the cast and crew while in Rome revising his book "The Great Gatsby". They attended a cast/crew dinner on Christmas Eve, honoring director [Fred Niblo](#) and his wife [Enid Bennett](#). Zelda, among others, signed one of the dinner menus, which became the possession of [Carmel Myers](#), who played Iras in the film. The menu is now in the archives of the University of South Carolina library.

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Many of the scenes in this film, interestingly enough, were NOT remade in the more popular 1959 version of the story. Among these are the three Wise Men's journey through the desert, Mary and Joseph seeking refuge in the manger, and the scene in which Messala enlists the help of Iris to discover the identity of his chariot-racing opponent.

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[Abraham L. Erlanger](#) was the producer of a very successful stage production that had been running for 25 years. In 1922, two years after the play's last tour, the Goldwyn Company purchased the film rights, though Erlanger insisted on a generous profit participation deal and total approval over every detail of the production.

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Actor [George Walsh](#), the original choice for Ben-Hur, agreed to take a \$400 cut in salary, and was sent second-class on a ship to Italy, only to shoot one reel of film, a test with an unidentified Italian actor that was not intended for use in the finished film. He then heard, several months later, that he was being replaced with [Ramon Novarro](#) when co-

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star [Francis X. Bushman](#) told him he had read about it in the morning papers.

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When the production was foundering, studio boss [Irving Thalberg](#) replaced director [Charles Brabin](#) with [Fred Niblo](#).

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At one point during the Italian shoot, [Francis X. Bushman](#) was offered the job of directing the picture which he readily declined. He stated that he told the head office (MGM Culver City) to get the production back to Los Angeles or they would never get it completed. Bushman had been in Italy for the film from 1923-1925.

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According to press accounts, [Carmel Myers](#) (who played Iras) spent a lot of time shopping while on location for this film in Italy, leaving to go to major European capitals. The blond wig that Iras wears in her first scene was supposedly bought by Myers on a shopping trip to Vienna.

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One of the chariots from this film was at one point housed in The Crocker Museum in Hollywood, the first museum dedicated to props and other artifacts from American films. The museum was started by actor [Harry Crocker](#), circa 1928, and was located on Sunset Blvd.

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Both [Rudolph Valentino](#) and [Buck Jones](#) were considered for the role of Judah Ben-Hur.

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Second-unit director [B. Reeves Eason](#) had 62 assistants when working on the chariot race.

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According to [Kevin Brownlow](#)'s book "The Parade's Gone By", [Ben Lyon](#) tested for the role of Judah Ben-Hur.

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[May McAvoy](#) replaced [Gertrude Olmstead](#) in the role of Esther.

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The film was marketed in the trailer as "The Supreme Motion Picture Masterpiece of All Time".

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