

Josephus and Judah Ben-Hur

Judah Ben-Hur, the protagonist of Lew Wallace's very popular and commercially influential novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, was derived from the life and works of Josephus. We know from the correspondence of General Lew Wallace, the author of the novel, that at the Library of Congress in the fall of 1873 he researched "everything on the shelves relating to the Jews." Using Whiston's translation, Wallace found in the biography of Josephus that he had been an anti-Roman Jewish commander, was captured by the Romans, and ultimately received both favor in Rome and citizenship as a Flavian. Earlier in his life he survived a shipwreck [*BJ* 2.7]. This brief outline of major events in the life of Josephus provided a template for the major events in the life of Judah Ben-Hur, not to mention the name for Judah's faithful business manager, Simonides, which was the nomen of one of Josephus' sons (Flavius Simonides Agrippa). Josephus also describes in some detail the career of the anti-Roman Zealot, Judas of Galilee [e.g. *BJ* 18.4], and in the novel Judah's aspirations continually lead to becoming an anti-Roman soldier like Judas, who is specifically mentioned in the novel several times. In identifying the Zealots, Wallace also derives his discussions of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes from Josephus [e.g. *AJ* 13.5.9], and in identifying Judah Ben-Hur as a Sadducee he establishes the cultural and theological justification for Judah's vengeful quest to destroy his Roman adversary Messala. (In the novel Judah intentionally destroys Messala's chariot in the Antioch race; it is in the better-known 1959 Hollywood film adaptation that Messala is portrayed as the aggressor.)

Wallace inserts Josephus' account of Pompey's entry into the Great Temple in Jerusalem [*AJ* 14.4] into his first (of eight) book in *Ben-Hur*, and regards it as the beginning of and the symbol of Roman occupation. He then fast-forwards to the arrival of the historical Roman

procurator Valerius Gratus, for whom Josephus [*AJ* 18.2] is our only source. Gratus violated local tradition by replacing the high priest, and Wallace makes this one of the initial turning points in the novel. It was during the initial procession of Gratus through Jerusalem that Judah accidentally knocked a tile from his parapet and was subsequently arrested. Josephus (*BJ* 2.9.2) described the historical event in which Pontius Pilate orders troops to bring into the city by stealth of night a number of imperial images which represented a sacrilege to the Jewish population, causing a five day protest. Wallace involves Judah in this very incident. Later Judah learns that Pilate has appropriated sacred monies from the temple treasuries to build an aqueduct. This, too, comes from Josephus (*BJ* 2.9.4), who says that when the Jews protested this particular outrage, Pilate ordered Roman soldiers to disguise themselves as locals, infiltrate the crowd, and create a riot. Wallace recreates this part of Josephus' account, too, and then he brings it to a climax by having his protagonist hero Judah fight a victorious and impressive duel against one of the disguised Roman centurions. The crowd of Galileans who watch this duel are quite impressed and find Judah worthy of being the leader of their anti-Roman rebellion (à la Judas of Galilee).

In a more general application, Wallace understood the thesis of Josephus' lesser known *Against Apion* to affirm that Jewish philosophy and culture was older and superior to the Hellenic, and by implication far older and superior to the Roman. He applies this argument to the words Judah's mother says to him early in the novel and will lead ultimately to the triumph of Christianity at the conclusion of the novel.

Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906) 2:891.

William Whiston (trans.), *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (Auburn and Buffalo: John E. Beardsley, 1857).