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## Jews in Hollywood, Altering Image through Religious Cinema

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# The Jews in Hollywood: Altering Image through Religious Movies

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the altering image of American Jews in Hollywood movies. Coming to America during the great migration, mostly from Eastern Europe, this Azkenazic Jews then contributed to the building and transformation of the Hollywood movies as a world icon. Though quite dominant, Jews are quite careful in this industry. Anti-Semitism, the World War and the Great Depression are some of the things that make Jews uncomfortable about being in the spotlight or talking about their identity among the Christian audience of the movies. However, the condition changed after the Second World War and the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Jews and Judaism later appeared in various representations, which does not only change their image in Hollywood, but also the acceptance of American society broadly. Focusing on the movie, *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1959) as the object of research, the study explores how Jewish people represent themselves through films produced, including the negotiations and changes made as part of the American Jews. Using the theory of Stuart Hall's Politics of Representation and Critical Discourse Analysis from Fairclough and Leuween as an approach, this work focuses on the analysis of text and images as a sign that represents the Jews and Judaism in the movie. Related to movie as a media construction, the filmmakers are able to reconstruct Jews in different image. Through the movie, the represented Jews are found to have conveyed various messages to the audience about their cultural and religious identity.

**Keywords:** American Jews, movie, religious, politics of representation, discourse

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini mendiskusikan perubahan imej bangsa Yahudi America dalam film-film Hollywood. Datang ke America pada masa

*the great migration, sebagian besar berasal dari Eropa Timur, bangsa Yahudi Azkenazic ini telah berkontribusi dalam membangun Hollywood dan menjadikannya sebagai ikon film dunia. Meski cukup dominan, bangsa Yahudi cukup hati-hati dalam industri ini. Anti-Semitism, Perang Dunia hingga the Great Depression adalah hal-hal yang membuat mereka tidak nyaman berada dalam sorotan kamera ataupun berbicara tentang identitas mereka di antara mayoritas Kristen yang merupakan penonton utama film-film Hollywood. Namun demikian kondisi ini berubah setelah Perang Dunia Kedua dan gerakan masyarakat sipil di tahun 1960. Yahudi dan Yudaisme kemudian muncul dalam berbagai macam representasi, yang tidak hanya merubah imej mereka di Hollywood, namun juga penerimaan masyarakat Amerika secara lebih luas. Fokus pada film, Ben Hur: A Tale of Christ, kajian ini mengungkapkan bagaimana bangsa Yahudi merepresentasikan diri mereka lewat film yang diproduksi khususnya lewat film yang bertemakan religius, termasuk negosiasi dan perubahan-perubahan yang dilakukan sebagai bagian dari Yahudi Amerika. Menggunakan teori Politik Representasi oleh Stuart Hall serta Analisis Wacana Kritis dari Fairclough dan Leuween sebagai pendekatan, tulisan ini menitikberatkan pada analisis teks dan gambar sebagai tanda yang merepresentasikan Yahudi dan Yudaisme dalam film tersebut. Terkait pada film sebagai konstruksi, para pembuat film ini mampu merekonstruksi Yahudi dalam wajah yang berbeda. Melalui analisis film, ditemukan bahwa Bangsa Yahudi dapat menyampaikan berbagai pesan kepada pemirsa tentang identitas budaya dan agama mereka.*

**Kata kunci:** Yahudi Amerika, film Hollywood, agama, politik representasi, wacana

## INTRODUCTION

One of the Jews' strength in America is their involvement in media and film. The majority of the film industry founders were the Jews. Neal Gabler (1988) maintains that there were many major and minor Jewish characters in Hollywood. The most prominent are Adolf Zukor, who was instrumental in creating Paramount; Carl Laemmle, the founder of Universal; William Fox of Fox Pictures, which later merged with the 20th Century; Louis B. Mayer, who built MGM; Harry and Jack Warner of Warner Brothers; and Harry Cohn of Columbia. Each contributed to building a Hollywood entertainment industry that remained at the center of cultural production throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Miles (1996) states that cinema was one of the areas of this ethnic success. Though Hollywood itself is not the only area for many people from various ethnicities' background, which have their contributions; it can not be

denied that Jews's contribution to Hollywood is crucially dominant. In Miles's words, the Jews have been "the backbone of film production in America" (1996, p. 84). In such a position, the Jews has been able to control and direct their business of bringing issues of their cultural and religious identity to light.

However, although Jews have built this industry since the dawn of the twentieth century, it was not easy for Jews to depict Jews's identity on the movies. Gabler (1988) mentions that as the World War began and the rise of Anti-Semitism increased in America, the Jews portrayal in the movies began to lessen. Along with the promotion of American unity as a national priority, the notions like 'the melting pot' and 'the salad bowl' of how to integrate many ethnicities into American society had become the focus of Hollywood presentation. Thus, the stories on inter-ethnic assimilation, success in the mainstream community and intermarriage with gentiles (non- Jews) was popular at that era.

Gabler (1988) also recognizes that Jewish did not use movies to spread Jewish thoughts and cultures and 'Hollywood' was itself a means of avoiding Judaism, not celebrating it. As he further mentions, the studio bosses like Fox, Warner, and Cohn did not use their power to make Jewish film or to mold American culture into Jewish likeness. The portarayals of 'non-Jewish Jewishness' was itself a feature of being Jewish in America.

The 1960s was called a time of growing ethnic awareness. Friedman (1987) calls it "the self-consciousness sixties." This decade was marked by the social and political changes in America in which social movements namely civil rights, new wave, feminism movement, right equality including ethnic concern, began to synthesize. This affected Hollywood, especially the American Jews in which the self-awareness of being Jewish began to strengthen. Abrams (2001) further states that the representations of the cinematic Jew entered a new phase. The period witnessed a shift towards more subtle, nuanced, playful and even outrageous representations of Jews and Judaism including Jewish rituals and traditionS such as *kashrut*, endogamous marriage, wedding ceremonies, *bar-mitzvahs*, and so on. A new generation of Jews and American-born actors starred are consequently in a range of Jewish films that represent the Jewish experiences.

One of the encouraging conditions for Jews and Judaism in America was the Judeo Christianity tradition. Though the tradition begun in Europe since *The National Conference of Christians and Jews* in 1928, the movement developed and grew in America. It aims to combat religious prejudice and seek to improve religious tradition. From that conference, the religious leaders of all three faiths agreed to stress their similarities in Judeo-Christianity heritage

and not overlooking such doctrinal differences that drive them (Gordon, 1984)

It is interesting to note that, this agreement was more of a response to the social and political conditions in America at that time. Sarna (2004) mentions that it was to counter earlier explosions of social hatred. Under the Judeo-Christianity commitment, the liberal-minded Protestant, Catholics, and Jews worked together to promote 'brotherhood' and no longer defined America as a Christian land but rather as one nurtured by three ennobling spiritual traditions. Even, the phrase 'Judeo-Christian' entered the lexicon as the standard liberal term for the idea that Western values rest on a religious consensus.

Apart from the effectiveness of this notion in society, in the field of cultural practice, this idea has interested the American Hollywood industry to promote the religious tradition of biblical narration through the movies. Some of them are depicted through religious movies such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923, 1956), *The King of Kings* (1927, 1961), or *Ben Hur: a Tale of the Christ* (1925, 1959). This article intends to explore the correlation between Judeo Christianity and Jews acceptance by American society as well as their representations through media, especially in *Ben-Hur* *Ben Hur: A Tale of Christ* (1959)

Connected to Jews-Christians relationship in America, the hostility between Christians and Jews had existed since the early of Christianity. According to Telford (2005) the source of the hatred itself, was the New Testament, the earliest Gospel from Mark to John. As he further mentioned, the Jewish religion was depicted in a poor light, Jewish practices are disparaged, as are other practices (cf. Mk 7.1-23). Judaism is implied to be obsolescent (cf. Mk 2.22-22). Even Jesus himself was presented as more Gentile than Jewish. These religious discrepancies, as Telford further states, lead to Jewish stereotypes and anti-Semitism for centuries. The Jewish people were depicted as hard of heart, as hypocrites, as guilty of the unforgivable sin in questioning the source of the Markan Jesus's power, and as wicked murderers for rejecting Jesus (p, 268). Similarly, Holmes (2003) also says that the humiliation of the Jews became policy as well as doctrine. The Church believed that to hate the Jews was the will of God. Jews were a people to be shunned or scorned, unworthy of association because of their presumed responsibility for decide in the death of Jesus (p, 11).

Considering this fact, the choosing of *Ben Hur: A Tale of Christ* as a research is interesting because it portrays a different relation between Jews and Christians. By portraying Jewish experiences in the early life of Jesus Christ, the movie is not only about depicting a Jew (Ben-Hur) and Jesus

Christ in one frame, but also sharing the religious teachings of Judaism and Christianity, including the Jewish identity in its relation with other religion especially Christianity.

By applying the representation theory and CDA as an approach, the analysis explore the social practice and intended messages which constitute the ideology behind the scene, especially the religious discourse which is represented through the movie. The movie shows how to see these Abrahamic religions as one, believing in the same God as well as sharing stories of the Old Testament.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Referring to Hall (2003), representation is related to the meaning of the concepts in human minds or the production of meaning through language. It is connected with how to give meaning, to describe or to depict something (p, 17). Here, the representation has never been a complete or a total reflection of things, but much more than a combination of ideas of various elements. As he further explains, in any representations there is a mixture of the thing itself, such as the opinion of the people doing the representation, the reaction of the individual to the representation and also the context of the society in which the representation is taking place. In this sense, the designs, messages, as well as how and why things are represented in the movie have intended meanings which possibly brings a broad impact to the audience

Film is a medium of contestation among different powers that have a chance to construct a certain kind of issue. The film industry makes any constructions happen, whether one might agree or not. In this regard, film is seen as a social practice, which in Fairclough's (1995) argument, has a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions. As Fairclough further insists, this form of social practice both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices. In this sense, film offers a concept of whose ideas are derived from social life that may inspire or affect society as well. Thus, the primary focus of this discourse is on the way its structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce or challenge relations of power and dominance in society.

Furthermore, Fairclough as cited by Jorgensen (2002) also emphasizes that discourse is just one among many aspects of any social practice. It is a way of the dominant power to legitimate its interest toward certain things in any field of background. It both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations including power relations, and at the same time is also shaped by other social practices and structures. Here, related to the film,

whatever presented in the movie is possibly comprehended differently by different people. Though the industry often assumes that film does not affect the viewers other than entertainment, the construction of meaning is formed through a regular presentation.

It is interesting to know more on how representation works in the films including its relationship with ideology, social practice, and power relations. This is why this research concerns on how the intervention of particular interest works and changes the film's production and orientation. The ability of this industry to broadcast particular movies regularly and globally has led the film to have a worldwide cultural impact both negatively and positively.

## METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

In analyzing the research, the writer applied the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theorized by Fairclough (1995). CDA as a method is essentially relevant in explaining the film's messages. Not only does this explanation discuss the impacts and influences of a certain medium or film towards society, but also the ideology and power working on the medium. This exploration explains why certain messages need or need not to be delivered. Furthermore, Van Dijk (1993) also defines CDA as a type of discourse analytical research that aims to offer a different 'mode' or 'perspective' of theorizing, analysis, and application throughout the whole field, including film in this sense. CDA is critical in the sense that it aims to reveal the role of discursive practice in the maintenance of the social world, including those social relations that involve unequal relation of power. It aims to contribute to social change along the lines of more equal power relations in the communication process and society in general.

Fairclough (1995) defines that what is depicted in media especially in films is indeed a text in a very broader sense, as an element of social life which is closely interconnected with other elements such as social problems and power relation. Related to this research, the analysis of the film has what Fairclough (1995) mentioned as a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions. As mentioned above, film is not only about art nor entertainment per se, but also a kind of knowledge production which is related to the social dimensions such as identity, ideology or other causal effects of the text.

Besides, according to Jorgensen (2002), like supported by Fairclough (1995) CDA tries to unite three traditions of detailed textual analysis within the field of linguistics, macro-sociological analysis of social practice and the micro-sociological, interpretative tradition within sociology. In this sense, as a theory and method, Fairclough explains that detailed analysis is to gain insight

into how discursive processes operate linguistically in specific texts. Here, an interdisciplinary perspective is needed in which one combines textual and social analysis. In this context, the discussion will be focusing on the relationship between the movies as a textual analysis (micro-level) including the form of representations, constructed ideology, as well as the definite power relations of people behind the scene (American Jews). These analyses are inter-related to social practice (macro-level) which is connected to the social changes, solidarity, and identity of American Jews. The way to analyze the data is through discursive practice (mezzo level). It involves ideas of ethnic and religious representation of American Jews in the movies, including how the Jews depicted in Hollywood and their involvement in this industry (Jurgensen 2002, p 66)

## RESULTS

### A. Religious Cinema as a Religious Discourse

The emergence of religious movies in the American film industry is not such a coincidence. Miles (1996) says that the relationship between religion and movies has already existed since the film Industry began. The photographic film itself was invented by an Episcopal priest, Hannibal Goodwin and the first photographic film shown was *The Passion Play of Oberrammergau*, on January 31, 1898. Here, religion is something personal. In John Tillich terms, it is an area of culture that involves basic beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality, our purpose in the world, and meaning in it (Leyden, 2003). For this reason, depicting a religion or religious idea in the movies is always interesting for the producers or the film industry because it is close to the audience or society that it represents.

In America, movies such as *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) by Sydney Olcott and *Judith of Bethulia* (1914) by D.W Griffith are considered as the earliest religious movies of American production. But the Jewish involvement in producing a similar genre began in 1923 when *The Ten Commandments* by Cecil B. DeMille of Paramount Picture produced and then continued by *King of the King* (1927), and *Ben-Hur* (1927) by MGM Production, etc. After the silent era, *Ben Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* were remade by the same production, but with larger budgets and production values in 1959 and *King of King* in 1961 by MGM. The most interesting point of this remake is not only about how to present the similar narratives in a different way to probably different audience, but also the ‘impact’ of those presentations, both in tangible or intangible form.



Miles (1996) explains that it is not accidental that the film's first topics were religious. Film, like the religious drama of the earlier ages, was understood to have a tremendous capacity for generating and focusing the desires not only of the individual but of societies. From this point, it is inferred that, as long as religions exist and are part of human experience, the religious themes will always interest the movie industry. This is because people or the audience prefer to see something close to them that reflect their own experiences. In this sense, the religious films under examination are not only limited to the presentation of a certain religion, the religious narratives, or religious characters in the movie, but also the religious values, point of view, and image of both in direct or indirect representation.

For the United States, the concept of America as a religiously pluralistic country was considered as an alternative to ward off the development or the infiltration of communist-atheist ideology in America. Judeo-Christianity offers a pluralist vision of what kind of faith the United States fought for. When America was involved in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, this concept became part of the national identity, namely 'diversity within unity' wherein the plurality of religion into one entity is preferred.

Hollywood itself, in many ways, of course, was part of the propaganda of the state and society. Narrative epics were becoming popular because of the American public enthusiasm for religious themes. For Hollywood, these themes certainly have a lower political risk compared with the stories of wars or ethnicities. This is another reason for Hollywood to turn to religious themes.

*Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ* is directed by William Wyler (1959) and is based on a novel by Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880). This movie was a remake of the silent movie in 1925, produced by the same studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). This colossal film was nominated for twelve Academy Awards and the first film to win eleven Oscars. In 1998, this movie was selected as one of the top 100 American films of all time by the prestigious American Film Institute that ranked it the 72<sup>nd</sup> best American epic film, and placed it in the AFI's top 10. Similarly, in 2004, the National Film Preservation Board selected *Ben-Hur* for preservation by the National Film Registry for being a 'culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant motion picture' ([http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ben-Hur\\_1959\\_film](http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Ben-Hur_1959_film)).

Set in Jerusalem during the time that Jesus was born, the plot focuses on an honored Jewish man, Judah Ben-Hur, a Prince of Judea, who was betrayed by his boyhood Roman friend, Messala, and has to carry out a miserable life in exile. Finally, he comes back to defeat his enemy and reclaim

his family. Here, Ben Hur, is described as heroic, helpful, intelligent, tough, loyal, and full of confidence. He believes in his principles and would do anything he could to defend his beliefs. As mentioned by Crowther (1959) “Mr. Wyler and his studios have smartly and effectively laid stress on the powerful and meaningful personal conflicts that are strong in this old heroic tale”.

The interesting thing about this movie is not only the achievement and serious production as the most expensive film ever made during that era, but also the way to tell the story and depict the main character, Judah Ben-Hur, as the charming Prince of Judea. The heroic characteristic of Jews seems to bring a different nuance to this ethnicity that contradicts ‘the common belief’ of how people understand this people and their narratives. Related to the cinematic representation, *Ben Hur* marks the beginning of the awareness that through this narrative, it is necessary for Jews to know about themselves, as well as to share their stories with the public or Gentiles.

## **B. Promoting Jews through Christian Movies**

The representation of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* is interesting to discuss here, not only because the Jews and Christianity are depicted in the same framework of the movie, but also, the mutual relationship among the two religions and the ‘myth’ constructed to be delivered to the audience. The film itself was adapted from the novel by General Lew Wallace in 1880 with the same title. It was considered as the most influential Christian book of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The title indicates that the movie is indeed a Christian story.

The film opens with a map of Jerusalem and Judea and ‘Anno Domini XIII’, which indicates a place and time of the birth of Jesus Christ and followed by a prologue :

To begin our lord..., in Judea, for nearly a century had lain under the mastery of Rome, in the seventh year of the reign of August Caesar on imperial decree ordered every Judean each to return to his place of birth to be counted and taxed, converging ways of many of them led to their land. The old city was dominated by the fortress of Antonia, the seat of Roman power and by the great Golden Temple. The outward sign of an inward and imperishable faith, even while they obeyed the will of Caesar, the people clung proudly to their ancient heritage, always remembering the promise of their prophets that one day there would be born among them a redeemer to bring them salvation and perfect freedom (Wyler, 1959)

This prologue is clearly about the background of the story, the days in which Jerusalem was occupied by the Roman Empire and the coming of Jesus Christ who is believed as the redeemer of humankind. However, the focus of this prologue is actually about Jews. 'Imperishable faith' is indeed connected to Judaism and 'the people clung proudly to their ancient heritage' thus refers to Jews. 'Imperishable faith' here is not only related to the longest religious tradition of humankind but also the faithfulness of their people so as it is called 'imperishable', a faith which would last forever. In this sense, since the beginning of the film, the movie maker has placed a strength of these people and an eternal faith of this religion in the framework that they are worthy to be called 'the chosen' one

However, at the beginning of the movie, the moviemaker is trying to construct a Christian framework about Jesus' tale. However, it is only an incidental representation, in the early ten minutes of the movie of the three and half hours of the movie duration. Overall, the whole plot then shifts to the Prince of Judea, Judah Ben-Hur who is betrayed by his Roman boyhood friend, Messala, enslaved in exile, involved in a war, and takes revenge to win back his dignity and family. At the end of the movie, the scene about Jesus comes back when he gives a sermon on the hill and finally ends with his crucifixion by the Roman.

As Christ's tale, this seems to be a key idea that wraps up the story as a Christian story. Though depicted in a minor portrayal, the movie successfully describes the social and political background from the birth to the death of Christ, including his followers. Besides, the director was also smart enough to insert 'Christian messages' that regularly appear at the second half the movie, especially from Esther (Judah girl's friend) and Balthazar like: 'Love your enemy', 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God', etc. Thus, although the story is mostly about a Jew, the film itself is accepted by the two communities, in which both of them would feel represented.

Likewise, the plot is very much concerned with the depiction of Judah Ben-Hur and his sufferings and the way he gets his dignity and family back. The interesting thing is, as part of the title 'A Tale of Christ', Jesus appears incidental in the movie. Though one might relate Jesus and Ben-Hur to have a similarity- where both are suffering and then having a fulfillment, the story of the two is different. As is acknowledged by Wallace (1880) the purpose of the book is only to prove that Jesus is not a myth anymore. It is through Judah Ben-Hur, that people would understand more about Jesus and his teaching.

The depiction of Jews and Christian on one side and the Roman on the other side has explicitly been planted from the beginning. The suffering of

Jews started soon after the Roman troops conquer Jerusalem and arrest Jews and the followers of Jesus who are considered against the Roman. The arresting of Judah Ben-Hur is also related to his connection with the people who follow this new religion. That is why, as depicted in a prologue above for Roman, Jews and Jesus (followers) are considered as one and the man (Jesus Crist) who is believed to be a redeemer of humankind was born among Jewish people. Thus, it implies that Jews and Christians are 'one', sharing similar ancestors, narratives, and beliefs. A new religion is born among Jews, and Jews are the first followers of Jesus and his teachings. For example, after his arrival to Judea, a new tribune of Roman in Jerusalem, Mesala discusses with a previous tribune, Sexus about the condition in Jerusalem, as follows:

Sexus: ...and then there's religion. I tell you they're drunk with religion, they smash the status of our gods even those of the emperor

Mesala: Punish them

Sexus: We do, when we can find them

Mesala: Find the leader

Sexus: You don't know, there's nothing you can put your finger on, there are strange forces at work here. This 'messiah' business

Mesala: I know there was one predicted when I was a boy

Sexus: A king of the Jews, who will lead them into some sort of anti-Roman paradise, ah.. makes your head spin. There's a wild man into the desert named John. John who drowns people in the water and the carpenters' son who does magic tricks 'miracles' they call them

Mesala: there's always rebel – rouser string up trouble.

Sexus: No..no..no this man is different. He teaches that God is near in every man. It's quite profound, some of it.

As expressively mentioned in the dialog above, 'a religion' here refers to Christianity, and 'a king of Jew' is related to Jesus. However, the text does not explicitly state that Jesus is a messiah. Instead, it prefers to relate this kind of movement as 'messiah business', a prediction that one day among the Jews, there would be born a redeemer to bring them salvation and perfect freedom (Wylar, 1959).

Over the centuries, a notion of the Messiah<sup>1</sup> has been conflicting between these two religions. In many ways, the concept of the Messiah has been interpreted differently in Christianity and Judaism. Thus, in this movie, the moviemaker seemed to be careful in presenting such sensitive issues including the Messiah, besides, the movie itself is intended for Christian and Jewish audiences. Hiding or manipulating a certain notion seems to be the best choice as a way to be accepted in the pluralistic community, so, in this sense, considering the religious messages constructed through the movie, it is interesting to find out how the moviemaker is trying to stand between the two religions - Christianity and Judaism - by presenting the scenes which are acceptable by both.

### C. Jew as a Hero

When most Jews were involved in the film industry in the early of the century, these imported stereotypical images were often found in the silent movies since most of the industry only reproduced the story based on their preconception. As Friedman (1988) explains, the two most popular works, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* alone account for at least eleven adaptation during the silent period, not including film such as *Female Fagin* (1913) that draws its inspiration from Dickens. In brief, he further explains that in the earlier movies, Jews usually appeared as hapless victims of society, clever/ sneaky Jews, Jewish- gentiles relationship, Jews as butts/ creators of humor, ghetto life, and foreign Jews.



**Picture 1:** Fagin in *Oliver Twist*      **Picture 2:** Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*

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<sup>1</sup> In Judaism teaching, the messiah itself is actually the third element in the trilogy of Creation, Revelation and Redemption. This term is used in biblical Hebrew as ‘an anointed priest’ first encountered in the Leviticus 4: 3-5, used for anyone with Divine mission such as prophets, priests, and king. He was believed as the savior and the redeemer at the end of the Days.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the term signified the king of Davidic dynasty, and in particular the future ‘Son of David’ who would deliver Israel from foreign bondage, restore the glories of a former golden age, and inaugurated the ingathering of Israel and God’s kingdom of righteousness and peace<sup>1</sup>.

Fagin (see in picture 1) is an antagonist character in the work of Charles Dickens. In the novel, he is portrayed as an evil Jew, cunning, who took advantage of employing abandoned children to steal, including Oliver. When this work was later adapted into a movie, the visualization of this character completed with a typical cunning face, big nose, slovenly, even with long fingernails. Thus, he is described in a very negative Jewish stereotypes both physical and behavioral.

Another Jewish popular character can be seen in Tevye (SEE picture 2) from the Jewish contemporary literary works *Fiddler on the Roof*. This film is originally a musical theater script and has been very popular among the Jewish community. This work was also adopted to several versions and later stage it into a movie. Tevye is a lovely gentleman, friendly, humanist, who maintains his ancestral traditions well. Though in the characterization presented, this figure is very much different from Fagin, in other aspects, people will see them both characters as a Jewish common representation.



**Picture 3: Judah Ben-Hur  
in Ben-Hur**

In Judah Ben Hur ( see picture 3) the audience could see a different picture of Jew. Supported by a muscular, tall, and good-looking white man, a real gentleman Jew depicted here is a real hero. As a remake of the similar movie of the silent era, *Ben-Hur* depicted here is much more interesting and remarkable. The heroic, wise, and nobleman is embodied in the character of Judah Ben-Hur, a Prince of Judea who lived in the same era as Jesus of Nazareth. This depiction is indeed contradictory to the image of Jews in the later centuries, especially since the Middle Age in which Jews' stereotype was depicted in such derogatory way, both in physique and characterization.

In depicting the character on the screen or photograph, Leeuwen (2008) argues that two dimensions are always co-present, realizing both ' how are the people in the picture represented' and 'how the viewer's relation to the

people in the picture represented'. In the case of 'Fagin and Tevey' and 'Ben-Hur' above, it indicates that there are two opposite constructed relation, exclusion, and inclusion, which is understood by the audiences. Fagin is an exclusion one, with the long and dirty nail, messy hair and shifty eyes, he represents a complete package of the antagonist both physically and behaviorally. Thus his presence is not acknowledged in the community, though, in reality, they are present. The similar with Tevey in his tradition. Though he is not an antagonist and depicted as a friendly, his tradition is seen as an 'uncommon' Jew. On the contrary, the director depicts Ben-Hur, in Leeuwen's words, as a social agent, a doer, to whom people or viewers entrust their agency. Though the setting was in the early years of Jesus Christ, the director has constructed his heroic character like the reality found in our immediated. Thus, he is accepted. In this sense, to see a Jew differently is reversing the lens because the audience recognizes a different world of Jews

The interesting thing here is that the choosing of the actor, Charles Heston, who appeared as Judah Ben Hur. The new face of Jew's figure is significant, not only will it lead to an altering image of Jew but also create a certain kind of media discourse as to how to perceive Jews differently. Heston himself was not a Jew, though he acts well as a Jew both in *The Ten Commandment* and *Ben-Hur*. Born in Illinois from a Scottish descendant, Heston can represent himself as a classic figure of Israeli, who was believed as the chosen people, both from Jews and the Christian community. However, since the Jews' characterization of both movies is very strong, it is not necessary anymore, even probably for the Jews themselves, whether he is a real Jew or not. People believe what they see. They believe that Judah Benhur is a Jew, and his heroic and noble personality represents the Jews as a whole. It is this character of a movie which makes it strong as visual art

Furthermore, the Jewish history records that for centuries, anti-Jewish sentiment was found among the Christian teachings and societies. Concerning the *Ben-Hur* production, for example, it was an era when hiding self-identity behind Christians is much secured. Thus, it was common for gentile actors/actresses to play as Jewish roles. The Jewish Moguls were indeed dominant in this industry, but as they said 'too many Jews' in certain productions was quite risky, especially in the era when the social and political change in America was unsecured for Jews. It was an era when being a minority was not widely accepted in the public sphere. This is probably realized by William Wyler, the director, and MGM as well. The film was necessary to share the similar narratives of both religions since the story is indeed about Christian and Jews.

Related to this, though it belongs to the religious genre, *Ben Hur* is indeed a popular culture which according to Turner (1999, p.3) takes place in

the arena where the audience's pleasure is the most important thing– both for the audience and for the film's producers. Thus, as he further mentions the pleasure here is connected to the spectacle of film's representations on the screen, in the recognition of stars, styles, and genre and in our enjoyment of the event itself. As seen in *Ben-Hur*, the most important thing is what it appears on the screen. In his heroic tale and charisma, *Ben-Hur* interest audiences in which they feel represented and amused. In this sense, the performance of a good-looking hero must be a primary consideration rather than ethnicity background or religious affiliation. Besides, characterization in the movie is much more important than the representation of ethnicity. Before the sixties, it was common for gentile actors/actresses to play as a Jewish role. The Jewish Moguls were indeed dominant in this industry, but as they say 'too many Jews' in certain productions was quite risky, especially in the era when the social and political change in America was unsecured for Jews. This is probably realized by William Wyler, the directors, and MGM as well. The film was necessary to share the representatives of both religions since the story is indeed about Christians and Jews. As cited by Erens (1984) from John Stone Report, No 127 ( Nov 12, 1959), Jewish reaction to the film was enthusiastic. Finally, there was an epic to equal all the screen version of the life of Christ. As Erens further says,

Never before in the history of motion pictures have critical and timely changes in scripts paid off so handsomely as in *the Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*, both of which are certain to break all existing records in worldwide viewing. What is the most important in *Ben-Hur*, is the steadfastness with which the Jewish characters clung in their faith (p. 226).

As a colossal popular movie, this film is very entertaining. The chariot race (see picture 4) that becomes the climax of the rivalry between Judah and Messala depicts the classical fight between virtue and evil, the battle between black and white.



**Picture 4:**  
**the Chariot race between Judah Ben-Hur and Messala**



As represented through the horses of Judah and Messala, the white hero finally defeats the black villain. In this sense, it represents the Jew as the hero, especially among the Christian spectators, it is indeed a very rare representation. Jews, who were previously seen as 'outsiders' and even as an enemy of Christian followers, are constructed in the film as their ally to defeat Rome.

#### D. Jesus as the King of Jews

Considering the religious messages constructed through the movie, it is interesting to find out how the movie maker was trying to stand between the two religions - Christianity and Judaism- by presenting the scenes which are acceptable by both. First, it is depicted that, the Christians and Jews are on one side opposing the Roman Empire. Jesus himself was called 'the King of Jews'. His death brings salvation for his people, including Judah and his family. Thus, from the beginning of the story, the film is trying to say that the death of Jesus has nothing to do with Jews since both religions were, in fact, the victims of the Roman occupation. Thus, the film is noteworthy for its avoidance of the old myth of Jews as Christ-killers.

Concerning the notion of 'The King of Israel', it is interesting to note how movie makers emphasize it in addressing Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is the Messiah, who before his birth was foretold by Israelites prophets. At the beginning of the story, it is also described how three *Mages*, which may be considered as spiritual leaders, follow the birth process and then prostrate. Then, the story about the 'new religion' extended quickly by word of mouth which also become a rumor among the Roman rulers.

However, for Jews themselves, the notion itself has another implication. By saying that Jesus is a 'King of Israel' which is mentioned two times during the movie, the film itself is trying to say that when Jesus himself is Jewish, why should there be anti-Semitism among Christians? This emphasizes that the early Gospel (Mark), which according to Telford (2002), tried to negate the fact that Jesus was a Jew, is not true. Apart from different opinions about the concept of the Messiah from the two religions, the most fundamental thing here is that Christians and Jews are actually in the same group, siblings of the Abrahamic ancient faith. If Jesus himself was a member of Israel, and even regarded as the King of Israel, why does then Christian hate the Jews?

The choosing of the name 'Judah' in this sense is interesting. At a glance, it reminds the audience to 'Judas', an Israel who was believed as a betrayal of Jesus and caused him to be redeemed. But, Judah portrayed in the film is a faithful, nobleman, who represents a trustworthy Jew. Since the root of religious disputes between Jews and Christians was about trust, particularly 'Judas' who for hundreds of years was seemingly 'cursed' as betrayal,

derogatory, and negative; in 'Judah' people get their trust, and loyalty, from a gracious man. This is possibly the way the director 'redeems' Judas. The real novel was based on the Christian perspective, but as a film, the director has constructed scenes that are a little bit different from the original novel without losing the essential message of the story. For example, different from the novel in which Judah transforms into a Christian and finally devotes his wealth to the new religion, in the film the director avoids the conversion and ends the movie as soon as Judah realizes that he should release his revenge and anger in him, and reunite with his family. Likewise, the director indeed provides another interpretation of the movie which possibly omits the religious disputes among the Jews themselves. This shows the power of the movie makers, who have a significant role in producing, controlling, or even manipulating a certain meaning as it is constructed in the movie. Moreover, for the Jew, Jesus himself was regarded as a young rabbi in that era. Thus, Jews who followed Jesus, including Esther and Balthazar, who were depicted in the movies as Jesus followers were pursued by Messala and Romans, and are thus, considered as unfaithful to the Roman Empire. This becomes the reason why in the film these people need to be slaughtered.

Regardless of various controversies and representations of the Jews and Christian in this movie, the interesting thing in this analysis is that the film is accepted by viewers of both religions. However, the movie is just a movie, besides the religious issue, therefore, the entertainment is indeed the primary focus of the moviemakers. With a significant budget at that time, including the chariot race which is considered very outstanding, the film did not function solely as religious myth. The battle between good and evil, where good will always win, is the classical model of many genres, thus satisfaction of the audience is the primary intention. As a colossally popular movie, this film is very entertaining. This is why in the chariot race between the horses of Judah and Mesalla, the black villain is finally defeated by the white hero.

## CONCLUSION

Jews' trajectory in the film industry is part of Hollywood's history, and it is more than a success story. Their involvement in this industry does not only give different colors of Hollywood but also contribute to shaping the American popular culture. Although a minority in numbers, Jewish strength in film and media industry is, however, very significant.

The rise of religious films which was generally taken from the Biblical narratives gave a distinct advantage for American Jews who since the beginning was in this realm. Strengthened by the Judeo-Christian tradition

which reached its understanding after World War 2, then came the stories which deconstruct the old myth which was previously believed by most Christians and taught in the churches, such as Jews as the Jesus killer, etc. However, in *Ben-Hur*, this old myth is later altered into a different way of presentation. For example, instead of implying Jews as a Christ killer, that has been the sources of anti-Semitism, Jesus himself is called a King of Jews in this movie. The notion of Jesus as the King of Israel has indeed a wide implication for the Judeo-Christian relation. In line with choosing the hero's name Judah that is almost similar to 'Judas', the director can construct scenes that are not only seen from the Christian perspectives but also Jews. In this sense, as a movie construction, it implies a hidden Jewish ideology in the framework of Christian presentation. Related to the ideology of Althusser, this notion is conceptualized within the context of social-cultural changes, especially the relationship between Jews and Christian.

Concerning this heroic presentation, this movie also alters the Jews' image on the screen. Depicted as a muscular, tall and good-looking white man, Judah Ben Hur represents a real Jew, who is representative of the gentile people. Thus, in Leuween's words, he is seen as a social agent, to whom people or viewer entrust their agency. The heroic image presented in the film is not merely about the physical shape of the actor, but also the characteristic. The strength of Ben Hur's character is on his personality, the way he defends and protects his people, by showing his bravery bravery, and coping with his problems which includes his salvation toward the ones he loves.

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