

Retelling and Untelling the Christmas Story: *Ben-Hur*, Uncle Midas, and the Sunday-School Movement

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Over the summer of 1894, The New York Evangelist conducted a reader survey to determine the “100 Best Sunday-school Books.” Sunday schools from across the nation submitted lists of their favorite titles to the newspaper, and the survey results were analyzed in such diverse venues as *The Washington Post* and *The Sunday-School Library Bulletin*. To no one’s surprise, *Ben-Hur* topped the final list, appearing on ninety-one percent of all submissions.¹ The Sunday-school movement’s adoption of Lew Wallace’s novel represents an important chapter in the rise of the greater Ben-Hur phenomenon. By the early 1890s, *Ben-Hur* had secured a prominent place on the shelves of the Sunday-school library, while passages from the novel appeared on lesson plans internationally well into the next century. The association between *Ben-Hur* and the Sunday school, as concurrent global developments, was particularly strong in the United States. The American Sunday-School Union, by far the largest organization of its kind in the country, numbered among the novel’s most influential endorsers. Thanks to Wallace’s scholarly energies and doctrinal minimalism—not to mention his well-publicized conversion—*Ben-Hur* dovetailed with the Union’s own pedagogical approach to biblical subject matter. The Union promoted *Ben-Hur* in teaching manuals and periodicals, while the Union’s British counterpart published its own edition of the novel in 1895.² In a reverse manner, the novel’s status as a Sunday-school classic also made it a ready target for the barbs of the literati. As a critic from *The Nation* quipped on the occasion of Wallace’s death in 1905, “Nobody who went to Sunday-school could have escaped

the story had he tried.”³ Even supporters felt compelled to rebut the charge that *Ben-Hur* was a mere “auxiliary reading book for village Sunday schools.”⁴

Wallace, for his part, embraced his position as a biblical authority for America’s youth. His cultivation of an adolescent Christian readership is evident in two publications in particular: *The First Christmas, from “Ben-Hur,”* a standalone illustrated edition of the novel’s opening nativity section, which Harper & Brothers published in 1899 and which Wallace dedicated to “all the Sunday-school scholars in the world”⁵; and *The Boyhood of Christ*, first published in the 1886 Christmas issue of Harper’s Magazine and reissued three years later in book form. These two works reveal very different sides of Wallace’s biblical fiction. The nativity section from *Ben-Hur* approaches its source material in the manner of an imaginative biblical supplement, as Wallace fleshes out the story of the Wise Men from Matthew 2 with detail-intensive descriptive sequences, from differential racial portraiture to literary landscapes of the lower Jordan. In *The Boyhood of Christ*, Uncle Midas, Wallace’s fictional surrogate, instead provides his teenage visitors on Christmas Eve with a lesson in Higher Criticism. After testing the reliability of various ancient sources concerning Christ’s early years in Egypt and Galilee, Uncle Midas reaches the surprise conclusion that “Christ had no boyhood at all”⁶—a reduction in stark contrast to the narrative expansiveness of his first and far more famous rendition of the Christmas story. Drawing on the resources of fiction, Wallace’s two works intersect in different ways with the pedagogical goals and spiritual mission of the Sunday school, a mass movement to which his own literary reputation, for better or worse, was tethered.

Lessons and Libraries

The Sunday-school movement, which was on the eve of its second century when *Ben-Hur* was published, had always been preoccupied with making books available to children and young adults. In the 1780s and 1790s, first in London and then in Philadelphia, the movement's founders sought to reach poor, working-class youth who had limited access to formal education. For the first Sunday-school managers and teachers, the unruly behavior of poor, unsupervised children—always cause for concern, but especially out of place on the Lord's Day—represented a “social problem,” one that derived from illiteracy and a concomitant lack of basic religious knowledge.⁷ The founders were themselves prominent men of society, merchants and physicians, and the first Sunday schools, housed in private homes and municipal buildings, operated independently of church control. Even as the American wing of the movement took a decidedly evangelical turn over the next few decades, the Sunday school never entirely broke with its secular roots during the nineteenth century; that is, it remained an affair of the public sphere.⁸ This is particularly true of the movement's leading publishers and authors. The American Sunday-School Union (ASSU), which had a professional, nondenominational leadership and a vast volunteer labor force, maintained a normative sway over the movement as a whole through its publishing arm,⁹ which produced and distributed books and periodicals that children and young adults could read both in lessons and—thanks to a pioneering library system—at home. In a similar manner, Protestant middle-class women, in the guise of Sunday-school authors, could exert the kind of cultural authority in matters of religion that was denied to them from within official church hierarchies. (Eighty-five of the 100 “best” books in the survey above were written by women.¹⁰) Wallace's own outsize authority, which was enhanced by his career as a war hero and statesman, was contingent on his being perceived as a Christian writer, not on any particular

church affiliation. As he emphasizes in the Preface to *The Boyhood of Christ*, “I ... am neither minister of the Gospel, nor theologian, nor churchman.”¹¹

The Bible constituted the primary text of instruction in nineteenth-century Sunday schools, with other texts serving different pedagogical functions within and beyond the classroom. The educational goals to which the Bible and its supplements could be put nevertheless varied as the mission of the Sunday school evolved. The pedagogy of the first American Sunday schools had hardly been innovative in the history of Christian education: teachers used the Bible to teach children to read. In pre-Revolutionary common schools, the Bible had likewise long served as a standard primer, a practice that survived until the 1820s in some rural areas.¹² The two school systems, weekday and Sunday, nevertheless gradually diverged in this regard. On the one hand, with the rapid growth of the public school system, the issue of juvenile illiteracy grew less pressing.¹³ On the other hand, state educators succeeded in deemphasizing and eventually banning the Bible in public schools, leading to what many perceived as a grave neglect of religious education.¹⁴ As one concerned scholar put it, “where else shall the religious instruction be imparted to the children who attend the common schools unless in the Sunday-school?”¹⁵ The Sunday-school movement indeed emerged as a mainstream, centrally administered schooling option for Protestant, Catholic, and even non-Christian families. At the National Sunday-School Convention in Indianapolis in 1872, ASSU representatives as well as representatives from major church organizations approved the “International Unified Lesson System.” For the next forty years, this curriculum was nearly universally employed in ASSU schools and widely adopted in Presbyterian, Methodist, and other denominational schools in the United States. British and Canadian Sunday-school organizations also adopted and contributed to the regularly revised Lesson System. The Lesson System consisted of a

comprehensive course of Bible study, both Old and New Testaments, spread over seven-year cycles. Emphasis was placed on uniformity: on each Sunday in a given year of the cycle children from schools in different countries and from all grade levels (with some exceptions for infant and advanced classes) would learn about the same biblical story.¹⁶ Despite the limitations of a volunteer workforce and a once-a-week schedule, Sunday schools thus offered a common educational experience for millions of children by the end of the century¹⁷: Sunday-school “scholars,” from novice to advanced “grades,” learned in a setting modeled on the public school about subject matter that they would not otherwise ever encounter during the week.

The International Unified Lesson System did not permit much flexibility in terms of core biblical readings, a problem that contributed to its eventual overhaul. Yet Sunday-school teachers could integrate supplemental readings into their lessons in any number of ways. In the evangelical spirit of the Second Great Awakening, many early ASSU leaders hoped that primary contact with scriptures—unadorned with catechisms, rote interpretations, and other sectarian overlays—would provoke deep emotional responses in children and ultimately prepare them for conversion; annual statistics on conversions were in fact scrupulously compiled.¹⁸ In practice, texts backed by the authority of churches yielded on balance to a modern network of supplements produced by professional writers and scholars. These “lessons-helps” ranged from children’s stories, including a large body of tales devoted to missionary work overseas, to modern biographies of Jesus and the latest research of biblical archeologists.¹⁹ Within the context of the Lesson System, teachers also turned to *Ben-Hur* for scholarly and morally stimulating passages related to specific incidents from biblical history. For senior classes devoted to the crucifixion, a subject for the first week of June, the author of one teacher’s manual endorses the description in *Ben-Hur* as the best “in fiction,” just as the accounts in Edersheim’s, Geikie’s, and

Hanna's lives of Christ are "the best in Christological literature."²⁰ The authors of another manual recommend Wallace's "vivid" account of leprosy for a November lesson—Lesson VII of the Fourth Quarter, to be precise—on the healing of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11–19). In addition to Wallace's novel, the authors point teachers toward the relevant entry on leprosy from William McClure Thomson's *The Land and the Book* (1859), a staple Sunday-school resource, as well as to a contemporary account of the disease in South Africa.²¹ In an anthology of "Sunday-school stories" by different authors, Edward Everett Hale, a celebrated writer in his own right, provides a glowing endorsement of *Ben-Hur*. Hale incorporates lengthy excerpts from the same leprosy subplot for a lesson on the third Sunday of January; aside from the ten canonical lepers, Hale remarks notes that there are two extra lepers in *Ben-Hur* "whom the Saviour cures" and who are not among "the ungrateful."²²

In his loose reworking of such gospel episodes, Wallace thus not only renders the Christian themes of compassion and gratitude accessible to impressionable young readers by incorporating fictional lepers—Ben-Hur's mother and sister—alongside their biblical models; he also provides a historically and medically sound portrait of leprosy and its stigmatization in ancient Jewish society. From the standpoint of Sunday-school pedagogy, Wallace's treatment of lepers thus contributes to the development of both a child's moral character and knowledge base. As Anne Boylan writes, the adoption of the Lesson System coincided with a shift of emphasis away from sudden conversion experiences to a gradual, multiyear process of religious growth in line with leading theories of education from the common school.²³

In many cases, *Ben-Hur* did not even need to enter the classroom for its influence to be felt there. The writers of Sunday-school manuals frequently advised teachers to consult *Ben-Hur* in preparing for their classes. In a manual for "Kindergarten lessons," for example, one writer

suggests Wallace's "word-picture" of the wise men's journey as an "inspiration" for teachers as they compose their own renditions of the story.²⁴ Wallace's word-pictures proved even more valuable for their scholarly underpinnings than for their aesthetic appeal. Paul Gutjahr justly singles out the high esteem in which Sunday-school teachers held Wallace's descriptions of the Holy Land.²⁵ The proper training of such volunteer teachers, who were often blessed with more "heart-power" than "head-power," proved a perennial issue for the movement's leaders.²⁶ The renowned Chautauqua Assemblies in upstate New York—at which Wallace was a frequent guest lecturer, and where tableaux from his novel were staged—were initially designed as a summer training session for Sunday-school teachers.²⁷ For national leaders and teachers-in-training, as well as for students in advanced and adult classes, *Ben-Hur* served as a sort of literary atlas of biblical geography.²⁸ Wallace's legendary researches were held up for Sunday-school teachers to emulate. As the authors of one manual explain, Wallace had not needed to travel to the Orient to produce his "accurate and realistic descriptions"; "he had nothing but the printed page and the map."²⁹

For Sunday-school scholars, the influence of *Ben-Hur* was arguably even stronger outside the classroom than during lessons. Like other popular works of religious fiction, such as *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Wallace's novel earned the "Sunday-school" moniker on entering the movement's libraries, not through its lesson plans per se. In 1820s and 1830s, when books were still prohibitively expensive for many American households, the Sunday-school library developed into an essential aspect of the movement's mission. Libraries enabled teachers to promote and regulate the reading habits of children and young adults, thus extending the process of learning from Sunday through the rest of the week. Books were lent to young readers usually for two weeks, initially as rewards for good attendance but eventually under a

free lending system, complete with card catalogs, date-due slips, and overdue notices.³⁰ Books entered library collections in a somewhat less democratic spirit than they were loaned out, however. In *How to Conduct a Sunday School* (1905), Marion Lawrance, reflecting on his long career as a superintendent, recalls once offering his pupils the chance to pick the first two books for a new class library: “They selected *Ben-Hur* for the first book.”³¹ In fact, from the start, the selection of books was a major subject of concern among leaders of the Sunday-school movement. In addition to the Bible, tracts, sermons, and hymn books, libraries made available a range of secular material, especially biographies and histories, where the lives of great men and women could be studied and imitated. In keeping with the increasing centralization of the movement over the last decades of the century, manuals and journals devoted to the Sunday-School library were established, while regional and national committees formed to compile lists of approved books. In an 1896 article in *The Sunday-School Library Bulletin*, one writer recommends that superintendents divide their collections according to grade levels. Significantly, *Ben-Hur* is the first work of fiction assigned to the “senior grade,” where it sits alongside such multi-tome behemoths as Irving’s *Life of Washington*, Kurtz’s *History of the Christian Church*, and Macauley’s *History of England*.³² As for selection committees, the Ladies’ Commission of the American Unitarian Association, based in Boston, published an influential list annually, while the ASSU issued regular amendments to its own lists through *The Sunday-School Times*, one of the organization’s leading periodicals.³³ Needless to say, books and children’s magazines from the ASSU publishing house in Philadelphia filled thousands of libraries across the nation.³⁴

Crucially, libraries formed a large part of the Sunday school’s early appeal at a time when school libraries were still rudimentary and free public ones virtually non-existent. As one of the movement’s historian writes, a school’s library once served as its “principal attraction” for new

recruits, so much so that some children joined “two Sunday schools in order to obtain each week two library books.”³⁵ The priority that selection committees continued to assign to nonfiction belies the appeal that fiction enjoyed in the Sunday school. As late as midcentury, objections to the publication of fiction for Sunday-school use were not uncommon. Fiction was inherently untrue and thus “injurious” to the young mind, and any book of otherwise true narratives that demeaned itself with the occasional imaginary one was no better than a “novel”: “If it is known that a Sabbath-school Society has published one such [novel], what security have the churches that all its publications are not mere religious fictions.”³⁶ Yet early libraries tended to make room for at least some works of imaginative literature, not just popular children’s tales but even such novels as *Robinson Crusoe*.³⁷ That *Ben-Hur* was given out as a reward for attendance³⁸ derives from a tradition of recruitment almost as old as the Sunday-school library itself. This is not to underestimate the sea change in attitudes toward fiction that occurred from the origins of the evangelical Sunday school. As the 1894 survey suggests, religious fiction was at last becoming openly acknowledged as far-and-away the most popular fare of the Sunday-school library.

There has been a long line of commentary on the success with which *Ben-Hur* overcome an age-old resistance to fiction among certain kinds of rural and Protestant readerships, thus entering “the homes of Hard-Shell Baptists and Methodists and other non-novel-reading sects.”³⁹ This commentary, which is valid yet somewhat overstated, can be rendered more precise by emphasizing that *Ben-Hur* was a late and decisive blow in a protracted and insidious offensive, one in which Sunday schools had assumed a leading role for more than half a century. *Ben-Hur* itself reached many rural, Protestant homes on loan from the Sunday-school library. At the same time, while the broad endorsement of the Sunday-school movement had been a boon for the novel in the 1880s, this association with its libraries also exacted a certain cost in terms of

literary reputation, and all the more so with the passage of time. Faced with the low purchase price for books and insurmountable competition from the burgeoning public library system—which commanded far greater resources and reached a far wider readership—the Sunday-school library was fast becoming obsolete by the turn of the century. A sense of crisis over the library’s fallen reputation pervades the writings of the movement’s leaders: the Sunday-school library, which had once filled “many homes with most of [their] reading material,” had “lost its much of its importance”; its books had sunk to the level of a “caricature” in popular imagination, which dismisses them with a “contemptuous sneer as synonymous with literary trash.”⁴⁰ It is in this context that the recurrence of “Sunday school” allusions in obituaries of Wallace can be fully appreciated. As Meredith Nicholson writes of his late friend’s masterpiece, the “sneer” has been “repeated since his death” that *Ben-Hur* is “a classic only for the provincial church-goer,—the village class leader and Sunday-school superintendent.”⁴¹

The Jesus Novel

The rationale behind conservative resistance to religious fiction is not difficult to understand. Authors of Jesus novels in particular—works of historical fiction in which Jesus appears as a character—planned unauthorized, crowd-pleasing adventures for the holiest of figures to embark on. In portraying Jesus, Wallace and other novelists intervened directly in the realm of the sacred, a protected space over which professional writers had no more inherent claims than their readers and critics did. Most novelists were acutely aware that their biblical fictions risked incurring charges of blasphemy. Unlike many others in this tradition, Wallace did not resort to a prefatory note to explain his purpose in writing *Ben-Hur*.⁴² Yet in conversations with Joseph Harper during the publication process, he did address the possibility that his novel might offend Christian

readers, going so far as to offer to pull it rather than chance such an outcome. For their part, Harper and his first reviewers were alike struck by the “bold” nature of his undertaking.⁴³ A reviewer for the *New York Times*, for example, comments on how “daring” Wallace had been in deciding to tackle “sacred narrative.” Gospel paraphrases, the reviewer observes, were traditionally written with a “devotional character” in mind. Yet *Ben-Hur* appeared to serve “no religious purpose”: “the point . . . to be considered is apparently whether propriety is not offended . . . by the intermingling of so many chapters of fiction with the sacred history.”⁴⁴

Such questions had haunted the Jesus novel from its origins. Dozens of Jesus novels were written in Europe and the United States over the course of the nineteenth century. Harriet Martineau’s *Traditions of Palestine*—which was published in London in 1830 and which the author herself deemed “audacious”—can be identified as the first of a handful of independent French, British, and American works in the 1830s and 1840s that together mark the emergence of this particular genre, one that continues to enjoy a worldwide readership.⁴⁵ By the close of the nineteenth century—thanks in no small part to *Ben-Hur*’s international success—Jesus novels were also being published in Germany, Spain, Sweden, and Poland.⁴⁶ That novelists were authorized to represent Christ was not a given in any of these national literatures; rather, the authority of novelists was established, or countermanded, only in the act. Authors of Jesus novels had to engage publishers, mollify censors, please critics, and gain audiences. Church officials, the traditional guardians of the Christ figure, were often outsiders to this process. With the singular and important exception of denominational Sunday schools, the Jesus novel had no sanctioned function within the major churches of Europe or the United States. Clergymen and theologians could and did write Jesus novels, notably William Ware’s *Julian; or Scenes in Judea* (1841), Joseph Ingraham’s *The Prince of the House of David* (1855), Franz Delitzsch’s *One Day*

in Capernaum (1871),⁴⁷ and Edwin A. Abbott's *Philochristus: Memoirs of a Disciple of the Lord* (1878). Yet so did Jews, socialists, and atheists. In *As Others Saw Him* (1895), the Anglo-Jewish writer Joseph Jacobs portrays the "rabbi of Nazareth" from the perspective of a fictional Pharisee, one who casts his vote for crucifixion in the Sanhedrim with a clear conscience. Two of the most successful French examples of the genre—Eugene Sue's *The Silver Cross* (1850) and Ferdinando Petruccelli's *The Memoires of Judas* (1867)⁴⁸—likewise reach pointedly non-Christian conclusions, the first with the humiliating death of a misunderstood champion of the proletariat, the second with a botched execution (Judas saves his "friend" from the cross, only to watch him die, a broken man, three years later in Rome). State churches, depending on the country in question, had varying means to influence each step in the chain of a given novel's production, distribution, and consumption. Censorship proved especially effective in Orthodox Russia, for example; while *Ben-Hur* was permitted to appear in translation in 1888, the first Russian Jesus novels were not published until after a 1905 decree permitting freedom of worship in the empire.

By contrast, more Jesus novels were published in the United States, which lacked a state church, than in any other country during the nineteenth century. Certain broad differences can be observed between American Jesus novels and their European counterparts. Whereas the Jesus novel on both sides of the Atlantic drew on common and often heterodox sources for their biblical geography, historiography, and ethnography, American authors on the whole were more prone to harmonize such scholarship with mainstream doctrine on the divinity of Christ. They were also more likely to target their novels at adolescent audiences. In an 1894 article on "The Sunday-School and Modern Biblical Criticism," Charles Briggs, a Presbyterian theologian, argues that the textual methods of High Criticism should be taught to American youth through the International Lessons, including the study of ancient manuscripts and the laws of their

transmission, even if this meant that the “truths and facts” of Holy Scripture would be put to the test.⁴⁹ The views of Briggs, whose church had recently tried him for heresy, represent an outlier among Sunday-school educators. Yet cutting-edge biblical scholarship from Germany and England did reach American readers, albeit in an attenuated form, through *Ben-Hur* and similar novels, a popular byproduct of the scholars’ quest of the historical Jesus.

The stakes surrounding Jesus novels were high no matter where they were published in Christendom, with authors potentially extolled as defenders of the faith, denounced for their blasphemy, or both. A number of novelists, writing in the wake of *Ben-Hur*’s spectacular rise in popularity, managed to strike a deep evangelical nerve among audiences, and in a much quicker manner than even Wallace had. In 1894, the Detroit Free Press asked its readers to submit fictional “lives of Christ” for a contest, with the winner to be awarded a \$1,000 prize. The editors received 377 manuscripts. Florence Morse Kingsley’s *Titus, A Comrade of the Cross* (1895)—the winning entry, which was published in an inexpensive edition for “Sunday-school use”—sold two hundred thousand copies within weeks. Not unlike the use to which Sunday-school teachers put *Ben-Hur* at the time, Kingsley wrote her novel for the instruction of “young readers” who were already “believers in Christ.” In other words, her novel was not designed to convert. Rather, its role in their continuing religious growth was to “make the life and teachings of Christ as real . . . as if he lived and taught in our streets at the present day.”⁵⁰ Across the Atlantic, the reception of Marie Corelli’s *Barabbas: A Dream of the World’s Tragedy* (1893) was as polarizing as that of such later Jesus films as Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) or Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2003). Corelli’s novel incorporates the most graphic (and prolix) descriptions of the crucifixion in nineteenth-century historical fiction. So appalled was her longtime publisher in London that he turned down her book outright. The novel was

nevertheless destined to become a sensational bestseller, going through seven editions in its first seven months alone and fifty-four by the time of Corelli's death in 1924. The novel's opponents were as fervid and organized as her supporters. The outraged board members of one city library voted to remove all of Corelli's books from the shelves, deeming them "cheap and sensational," a decision over which the chairman resigned in protest. So hostile were literary critics to *Barabbas* that Corelli instructed her new publisher not to send them review copies for any of her subsequent novels.⁵¹ Among her defenders, Corelli received the enthusiastic backing of Prime Minister William Gladstone, a moral crusader then in his fourth term in office, while more than one Anglican clergyman saw in her book a recipe for England's salvation.⁵²

Within this literary tradition, Wallace's *Ben-Hur* achieved a higher and more enduring level of success than did any of its competition at home or abroad. In terms of form, Wallace did not so much revolutionize the Jesus novel as exploit its conventions for maximal rhetorical effect. Like most Christian Jesus novels, *Ben-Hur* is structured as a conversion narrative, one in which the Nazarene makes dramatic yet ephemeral appearances before potential followers, the genre's true protagonists. Here novelists adapted one of Walter Scott's key innovations: the protagonist of history is a secondary character of fiction, and vice versa. With the Nazarene in the background, novelists were free to develop subplots beyond the limits of sacred narrative, mixing events from profane history with episodes of their own imagination. Wallace gambled correctly that even a small number of encounters between Ben-Hur and Christ, his eponymous heroes, would suffice to consecrate the novel as a whole with the latter's presence. Some shadow of this presence is felt even in Antioch, a place not named in the gospels, where Ben-Hur's conflict with Messala reaches its famous climax in an orgy of pagan spectacle and violence. One Sunday-school manual recommends Wallace's portrayal of the Grove of Daphne in Antioch for a

lesson on the rampant idolatry that led to the captivity of Israel under Hoshea's reign (2 Kings 17:6–18)—a biblical event four hundred miles and seven centuries removed from Wallace's setting.⁵³ As for "The Race," it may well have been the most read chapter from *Ben-Hur* in Sunday schools during Wallace's lifetime. As one contemporary detractor scoffed, "from 1885 to 1900 no church entertainment was complete unless the local amateur elocutionist let herself go on the chariot race."⁵⁴

Like the authors of scholarly lives of Jesus, a closely related literary genre, novelists supplemented core gospel events with a wealth of materials from noncanonical sources. The Christmas story represents one of the most venerable genres of the traditional gospel paraphrase, and the nativity section of *Ben-Hur*, the first part of the novel that Wallace wrote, was originally intended as a separate story.⁵⁵ Yet even in the 1899 standalone edition, Wallace's "First Christmas" is clearly a modern work of historical fiction. In the novel's opening section, Wallace transforms seven verses from Matthew into a novella-length narrative through the aid of biblical geography, ethnography, astronomy, and comparative religion, among other academic disciplines. From his first words, the narrator displays an extrabiblical erudition, employing a contemporary Arabic name—"Jebel es Zubleh"—for a mountain near the base of the Jordan River. In the process, he reverses the efforts of such biblical archeologists as Edward Robinson, an authority cited in the prefaces to more than one Jesus novel. Through modern excavation techniques and the etymological analysis of Arabic place names, Robinson, in 1838 and again in 1852, uncovered long-lost biblical sites across modern-day Palestine. Having established his setting with geographic specificity, Wallace proceeds to introduce his first characters with literary portraits that accentuate ethnic and creedal differences: thus the "Egyptian" wears a "kufiyeh" and "the Hindoo" a "turban," while "the Greek" is "bareheaded."⁵⁶ The names of these

characters—Balthazar, Melchior, and Gaspar, respectively—derive from Latin Church tradition.

The curtailed presence of the Nazarene also enabled novelists to be very selective in choosing which stories from the gospels to subject to such novelistic expansion. Unlike the authors of scholarly lives, novelists were not under any obligation to gauge the historical reliability of individual gospel events or to harmonize all four gospels into a unified and comprehensive biography. The principal criteria for the inclusion of a gospel event in a Jesus novel is not whether it may have ever happened but whether it can be plausibly told and persuasively pictured. Novelists relied less on the purging of mythic elements from gospel narrative than on a proliferation of supplemental *realia*. The omissions of novelists nevertheless did at times reflect the controversial excisions of Higher Criticism, that is, the critical study of the Bible using modern methods of textual analysis. Among the first casualties of the quest of the historical Jesus were all gospel claims about his Judean birth and genealogy. Matthew and Luke open with patrilineal genealogies revealing his direct descent from David, a king of the tribe of Judah, while his birthplace in both gospels is Bethlehem, the city of David. By contrast, such nineteenth-century biblical scholars as David Strauss exposed the mythic underpinnings of the gospel accounts of Jesus' infancy. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1836) was widely read and hotly debated in the English-speaking world thanks to an 1846 translation by none other than a young George Eliot, who was then still writing under her given name Marian Evans. In *Vie de Jésus* (1863)—perhaps the only scholarly life during the century that could match *Ben-Hur* in terms of international sales—the French historian Ernest Renan states outright that “Jesus was born at Nazareth, a small town of Galilee.”⁵⁷ Writing in the wake of Strauss and Renan, Wallace thus lavishes his formidable erudition over a biblical episode that was under increasing critical pressure. A number of novelists instead followed the lead of Higher Criticism by eliding Jesus'

Bethlehem birth. Karl Heumann's *Jeshua of Nazara* (1888), aptly subtitled "A Novel Grounded on the Result of Historical Research," begins in Nazareth, while such novelists as Martineau and Delitzsch open with exhaustive descriptions of the hills of nearby Capernaum, the presumed center of Jesus' early ministry and a site of great interest among nineteenth-century archeologists.⁵⁸

Wallace adopts a more critical approach to the project of narrating Jesus' early years in *The Boyhood of Christ*, which was published in 1889 by Harper's and reissued in an 1892 London edition.⁵⁹ Wallace's biographers understandably reserve little space for discussion of this work, as it does not appear to have garnered much critical attention at the time of its publication. As a piece of metafiction, *The Boyhood of Christ* nevertheless offers valuable insights not only into Wallace's creative process but also into his evolving public persona. In his second "tale of the Christ," Wallace recenters his narrative emphasis from the fictional to the historical, a shift that coincides with his emerging status as an internationally recognized biblical authority. The triumph of *Ben-Hur* in Sunday schools throughout the English-speaking world attests to the depth and scope of this authority, as do his appointment as Ambassador to Turkey as well as his traveling lectures across the United States. In a sociological sense, Wallace's professional stature cannot be reduced to the formal innovations of his fiction any more than can, for example, Tolstoy's or Zola's from theirs, two contemporaries who also took advantage of the novel's climb up the hierarchy of literary genres to become cultural authorities on a global scale. Yet analysis of the form of *Ben-Hur* and *The Boyhood of Christ* can provide clues into how Wallace managed to surmount the ostensible shortcomings of fiction as a vehicle for truth, particularly those truths of interest to religious audiences.

In *A Boyhood of Christ*, Uncle Midas, the story's protagonist and Wallace's fictional

surrogate, receives two unexpected visitors on Christmas Eve, Nan and Puss, whom the narrator describes as “more than girls, yet not quite young women” (16). They arrive from a neighboring dance in order “to hear Uncle Midas talk” (23), and others follow in their tread one by one, so that by the end of the evening the old storyteller has unwittingly won over the entire dance party for his audience. Yet rather than retelling the Christmas story (or reading aloud the relevant section from *Ben-Hur*), as would seem fitting for the occasion, Uncle Midas settles on the question of what Christ had been like as a boy. He focuses in particular on a ten-year period—from the holy family’s flight into Egypt to Christ’s precocity at the temple in Jerusalem—over which the gospels pass in silence. Such gaps in the gospel record were popular subjects of speculative narrative among historians, novelists, and even literary forgers. In *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (1894), for example, a major work of modern apocrypha, Nicholas Notovitch “translates” an allegedly ancient Tibetan account of “Issa,” a Jewish prophet who wanders through India between the ages of thirteen and twenty-nine before returning, fatefully, to his homeland.

Uncle Midas, by contrast, proves reticent to tell a tale that does not stand up to critical scrutiny. He instead provides his teenage audience a lesson in Higher Criticism. To transpose this into a Sunday-school context, Nan, Puss, and their peers resemble senior-grade scholars, with Uncle Midas as their eccentric and entertaining teacher. As the latter explains, the “authors of the four canonical Gospels were not biographers in the modern sense of the word”: “In their great anxiety to get large facts set down imperishably they overlooked the small.” Thus they elided such trivial details as “whether [Christ] had blue eyes or black, or was fair or dark, or tall or short, or lean or fat” (35–36). In the early church, certain “men of sanctity,” having enough time at their disposal to round out Christ’s terse official biography, attempted to supply such “missing

data” (36). Such guesswork was in fact the *modus operandi* that virtually all nineteenth-century historians and novelists—not least Wallace himself in *Ben-Hur*—adopted in their lives of Jesus. Renan notoriously likened his *Vie de Jésus* to a “fifth gospel,” as if it could somehow supersede the canonical four; yet even he admitted that his task was of necessity part “divination” and part “conjecture.”⁶⁰ Uncle Midas is more circumspect in his own biblical revisionism. Thus he confines himself to two apocryphal texts, the Infancy Gospel of Matthew and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas.⁶¹ These two non-canonical gospels, both of which relate the marvelous deeds of Jesus in Egypt, are among the oldest extant accounts of his boyhood. After a close reading of several representative episodes from each infancy gospel, Uncle Midas rejects their portrayals of the boy Christ as improbable and even impious. Such early-Christian apocrypha represent no more than “religious literary curiosities”; as such, they belong on the same shelf as the “Koran and the Mormon Bible” (70). The author of neither infancy gospel provides insight into Christ’s character, although Uncle Midas concedes that the first one, a “devout old romancer” (47), does at times spin a good yarn.

After this withering exercise in Higher Criticism, Uncle Midas is left with nothing to retell. Lest his audience should leave disappointed, he embarks on a different task: how best to picture Christ as a boy. Throughout *The Boyhood of Christ*, Uncle Midas provides extended ekphrases of his favorite Renaissance paintings, including Carlo Dolce’s *Ecce Homo*, a work renowned for the kind of humanism to which Wallace himself aspired in his literary portraits of sacred figures. In the deluxe edition issued by Harper & Brothers in 1889, reproductions of these paintings appear alongside the words with which Uncle Midas lovingly recreates them. Two years previously, Wallace had himself served as the illustrator of a modern “Christmas story,” namely, his wife Susan’s *Ginèvra: or, The Old Oak Chest*.⁶² The task of picturing Christ

nevertheless poses challenges of its own, and Uncle Midas criticizes the supernatural flourishes of certain image traditions from the same modern vantage point that he adopts in relation to the infancy gospels: “The old painters, called upon to render this childish figure on canvas, would have insisted upon distinguishing it with a nimbus at least; some of them would have filled the air over his head with cherubs” (90). Yet whereas Uncle Midas refrained from telling a story where the infancy gospels had failed, he does attempt a literary portrait of the boy Christ, even permitting himself the luxury of a few “outside facts” and “permissible touches of fancy”:

The boy’s face comes to me very clearly. I imagine him by the roadside on a rock which he has climbed.... His head is raised in an effort at far sight. The light of an intensely brilliant sun is upon his countenance, which in general cast is oval and delicate. Under the folds of the handkerchief I see the forehead, covered by a mass of sunburnt blond hair, which the wind has taken liberties with and tossed into tufts. (90–93)

As the opening lines of this protracted portrait suggest, Uncle Midas, unlike the gospel authors, does commit himself on such issues as the color of Jesus’ hair. As I have argued elsewhere, Uncle Midas’s “delicate” and “blond” boy corresponds with Wallace’s portrait of a half-Jewish, half-Greek Jesus in *Ben-Hur*.⁶³

More importantly here, Uncle Midas, at the end of his impromptu Christmas Eve talk, foregoes telling a story and instead paints a word picture. In *Ben-Hur*, of course, Wallace had done both to a superlative degree. Thus he integrates lengthy pictorial sequences into plotlines across the Eastern Roman Empire, from the wise men’s journey along the lower Jordan to Ben-Hur’s chariot race in Antioch. In *The Boyhood of Christ*, Wallace’s conspicuous resistance to fiction can be most readily explained by his choice of subject matter; whereas the Christmas story that he retells in *Ben-Hur* is canonical, the tales that Uncle Midas untells are not, however

unreliable Higher Criticism may have deemed all these infancy myths to be as a group. Yet Wallace's preference for pictures over stories in the later work may also reflect, at least in some small way, the increased burden of truth-telling that accompanied his rising cultural authority. Uncle Midas, a neighborhood sage, does not wish to mislead his young guests. In contrast to the suspect accounts of the infancy gospels, the "handkerchief" on the young Christ's head, a pictorial detail, has a plausible basis in the ethnography of first-century Palestine. In the works of such contemporary biblical historians as Frederick Farrar and Franz Delitzsch, for example, the historical Jesus likewise wears an ancient Hebrew equivalent of the modern Arabic keffiyeh.⁶⁴ In the context of nineteenth-century literary styles, moreover, the perceived truth value of pictures had long been central to the rhetorical strategies of Realism. In the Realist novel, plotlines that bear no direct relation to extraliterary events gain a semblance of the real in being set in geographically specific and pictorially simulated locations. Thus in *Ben-Hur*, Messala imprisons the hero's mother and sister in the Tower of Antonia in Jerusalem, where over the years they both contract leprosy. Not only does Wallace depict this Tower in an exhaustive pictorial sequence; in the deluxe 1892 Garfield Edition of the novel, which incorporates dozens of photogravures and hundreds of hand-drawn illustrations of sites from the Holy Land, a photograph of the Tower of Antonia appears alongside Wallace word picture.⁶⁵ Even where the story is sheer fiction (*Ben-Hur*) or debunked apocrypha (*The Boyhood of Christ*), Wallace's pictures remain faithful documents of the real.

Wallace's pictorialism was on full display in the lesson plans of Sunday schools no less than in Harper's numerous illustrated editions of his biblical fiction. Indeed, the gap between *Ben-Hur*'s popular success and the lukewarm response of its critics finds a potential formal correlation in the shifting fortunes of literary pictorialism. By the turn of the twentieth century,

the supposed realism of word pictures had lost its persuasiveness for literati on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet among the faithful, Wallace's pictures of Palestine continued to ground his otherwise fanciful plotlines in historical and even sacred reality. The picture compensates for the license of fiction, and thus Wallace met the traditional evangelical objection to the novel as a narrative of falsehoods by fortifying *Ben-Hur* with truths of a non-narrative kind. Wallace himself was convinced that his word pictures were fully adequate to their referents. While writing *Ben-Hur*, Wallace, having never seen the Holy Land firsthand, labored to become "familiar with its history and geography": "I must be able to paint it, water, land, sky, in actual colors." When he finally did reach the Holy Land years later, he traced the path of Ben-Hur, his fictional hero, all the way to Jerusalem, testing the accuracy of his descriptions at every step. He was pleased to observe that he everything was as he had pictured it, and thus there was no need "to make a single change to the text of the book."⁶⁶

¹ Unsigned notice, *Washington Post*, 8 August 1894. Reprinted in *Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture*, University of Virginia, 2006, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu>; *The Sunday-School Library Bulletin* 3, no. 3 (1894), 13.

² *Literary World* 52, 13 September 1895, 185.

³ "The Winner in the Chariot Race," *The Nation* 80, no. 2069, 23 February 1905, 149.

⁴ Meredith Nicholson, "Lew Wallace," *The Reader: An Illustrated Monthly* 5, no. 5 (1905): 572.

⁵ Lew Wallace, *The First Christmas, from "Ben-Hur"* (New York: Harper, 1889), iv.

⁶ Wallace, *The Boyhood of Christ* (New York: Harper, 1889), 101. Hereafter cited in the text.

⁷ Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790–1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 6–9.

⁸ The dominance of denominational Sunday schools is a twentieth-century phenomenon. See Robert H. Canary, “The Sunday School as Popular Culture,” *American Studies* 9, no. 2 (1968): 10–12.

⁹ See Boylan, *Sunday School*, 68–73.

¹⁰ *Washington Post*, 8 August 1894. Books by women authors on the list include Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Elizabeth Rundell Charles’s *The Chronicles of the Schönberg-Cotta Family* (1862), Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877), as well as twenty works by Isabella Macdonald Alden, a prolific Sunday-scholar author who wrote several young-adult series for Presbyterian periodicals under the penname “Pansy.”

¹¹ Wallace, *The Boyhood of Christ*, 9.

¹² Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 118–9.

¹³ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 19.

¹⁴ Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 120.

¹⁵ Charles A. Briggs, “The Sunday-School and Modern Biblical Criticism,” *The North American Review* 158, no. 446 (1894): 65.

¹⁶ On the development of the Lesson System, see Henry Frederick Cope, *The Evolution of the Sunday School* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1911), 101–28; Edwin Wilbur Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement and the American Sunday-School Union* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1917), 294–317; Boylan, *Sunday School*, 98–99.

¹⁷ Reliable numbers for Sunday-school attendance, including ASSU and denominational schools, are difficult to find for the nineteenth century. For region-by-region estimates of total Sunday-

school participation in the United States for the year 1917, see Rice, *The Sunday-School Movement*, 388–433.

¹⁸ On conversion in Sunday schools, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 133–46.

¹⁹ On Sunday-school stories about missionary work, see Karen Sánchez-Eppler, “Raising Empires like Children: Race, Nation, and Religious Education,” *American Literary History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 399–425.

²⁰ S. G. Atres, “Library References,” *Sunday School Journal* 30 (4 June 1898): 342.

²¹ P. N. Peloubet and M. A. Peloubet, *Select Notes. A Commentary on the International Lessons for 1900* (Boston: Wilde, 1900), 325.

²² Edward Everett Hale, *Sunday-School Stories on the Golden Texts of the International Lessons of 1889* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889), 29–31.

²³ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 150.

²⁴ Frederica Beard, *The Kindergarten Sunday-School* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1895), 55.

²⁵ Gutjahr, “‘To the Heart of Solid Puritans’: Historicizing the Popularity of *Ben-Hur*,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 26, no. 3 (1993): 61.

²⁶ Boylan, *Sunday School*, 130. The quoted terms were introduced by a delegate at the first Chautauqua Assembly of Sunday-school teachers in 1874.

²⁷ Lee Scott Theisen, “‘My God, Did I Set All This in Motion?’ General Lew Wallace and *Ben-Hur*,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (1984): 35; Margaret Malamud, *Ancient Rome and Modern America* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 140.

²⁸ On *Ben-Hur* in adult classes, see Amos R. Wells, *The Ideal Adult Class in the Sunday-School* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1912), 27.

²⁹ Philip E. Howard et al., *The Sunday School at Work* (London: Westminster Press, 1915), 237.

³⁰ For more organizational details, see Elizabeth Louisa Foote, *The Librarian of the Sunday School* (New York: Eaton, 1897).

³¹ Marion Lawrance, *How To Conduct a Sunday School: or, Thirty-One Years a Superintendent* (New York: Revel, 1905), 279.

³² W. F. Walker, *Sunday-School Library Bulletin* 5, no. 3 (September 1896): 10.

³³ Foote, *Strengthening the Sunday-School Library: Hints from a Practical Librarian* (Philadelphia: The Sunday-School times, 1901), 8.

³⁴ For more on Sunday-school libraries, see Boylan, *Sunday School*, 48–52;

³⁵ Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *Organizing and Building up the Sunday School* (Chicago: Pilgrim Press, 1910), 81.

³⁶ Report of the Board of Managers of the Massachusetts Sabbath-School Society, quoted in A. E. Dunning, *The Sunday-School Library* (Boston: Congregational Sunday-School and Publishing Society), 1883.

³⁷ Cope, *The Evolution of the Sunday School*, 195.

³⁸ David Mayer, ed. and intro., *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, by Lew Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xix.

³⁹ Stewart Holbrook, “Gen. Wallace and *Ben-Hur*,” *New York Times Book Review*, 6 August 1944, 7. See also “The Winner in the Chariot Race,” 148–9; Carl Van Doren, *The American Novel: 1789–1939* (New York: MacMillan, 1940), 113–14.

⁴⁰ Hurlbut, *Organizing and Building up the Sunday School*, 81, 82; Foote, *Strengthening the Sunday-School Library*, 3; Earnest DeWitt Burton and Shailer Mathews, *Principles and Ideals for the Sunday School: An Essay in Religious Pedagogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), 172.

⁴¹ Nicholson, “Lew Wallace,” 572.

⁴² Among American Jesus novels, prefaces occur, for example, in Sarah Pogson Smith’s *Zerah*, *The Believing Jew* (1837), William Ware’s *Julian; or, Scenes in Judea* (1841), Joseph Ingraham’s *The Prince of the House of David* (1855), and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Herbert B Ward’s *Come Forth!* (1890). Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote the “introductory essay” for her brother Charles’s *Incarnation: Pictures of the Virgin and Her Son* (1849). On these prefaces, see Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, *The Real and the Sacred: Picturing Jesus in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming), chapter 3; Barbara Hochman, “Little Known Documents: Introductory Essay: Harriet Beecher Stowe.” *PMLA* 118.5 (2003): 1320–24.

⁴³ Joseph Henry Harper, quoted in Irving McKee, “*Ben-Hur*” *Wallace: The Life of General Lew Wallace*, 169.

⁴⁴ “A Story of the East,” *The New York Times*, 14 November 1880.

⁴⁵ Harriet Martineau, vol. 1 of *Autobiography of Harriet Martineau* (London: Virago, 1983), 103. Her novel was published in the United States under the title *The Times of the Saviour* (Boston: Bowles, 1831). On Martineau’s priority, see Gatrall, “The Color of His Hair: Nineteenth-Century Literary Portraits of the Historical Jesus,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 1 (2008): 109.

⁴⁶ On the origins and development of the Jesus novel, see Gatrall, *The Real and the Sacred*, chapter 1.

⁴⁷ *Ein Tag in Capernaum* was published in English translation in 1887.

⁴⁸ “La Croix d’argent; ou, le charpentier de Nazareth” appeared originally in Sue’s twelve-volume *Les Mystères du peuple; ou, Histoire d’une famille de prolétaire à travers les ages*. It was released separately in English translation in 1899. Petruccelli’s *Les Mémoires de Judas* has been translated into Italian, German, and Portuguese, but not English.

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- ⁴⁹ Briggs, “The Sunday-School and Modern Biblical Criticism,” 65, 67.
- ⁵⁰ Florence Morse Kingsley, *Titus, a Comrade of the Cross* (Chicago: Cook, 1895), iii.
- ⁵¹ Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Robber: The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli* (London: Hodder, 1974), 3, 8, 130.
- ⁵² R. B. Kersher, “Modernism’s Mirror: The Sorrow’s of Marie Corelli,” in Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson, eds., *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), 68. See also Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean, “Barabbas, the Scapegoat Ritual, and the Development of the Passion Narrative,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, 100, no. 3 (2007): 309–34.
- ⁵³ Peloubet and Peloubet, *Select Notes. A Commentary on the International Lessons for 1904*, 338.
- ⁵⁴ “The Winner in the Chariot Race,” 149.
- ⁵⁵ McKee, “*Ben-Hur*” Wallace, 164–65.
- ⁵⁶ Wallace, *Ben-Hur*, 9, 13, 15, 16.
- ⁵⁷ Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Lévy frères, 1863), 19.
- ⁵⁸ Heumann’s *Jeschua von Nazara: Roman, auf die Ergebnisse der historischen Forschung begründet*, written under the penname Paul Ador, has not been translated into English. It should be noted that Martineau wrote before Strauss’s and Renan’s lives of Jesus were published.
- ⁵⁹ Wallace, *The Boyhood of Christ* (London: Osgood, 1892).
- ⁶⁰ Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, liii, lv.
- ⁶¹ Thomas Hone’s *The Apocryphal New Testament*, originally published in London in 1824 and frequently reissued, was a popular source for such non-canonical early Christian and medieval gospels in the nineteenth century. For Mark Twain’s reading of the same infancy gospels to

which Uncle Midas refers, see Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 198–215.

⁶² Susan E. Wallace, *Ginèvra; or, The Old Oak Chest: A Christmas Story*, illustrated by Lew Wallace (New York: Worthington, 1887).

⁶³ Gatrall, “The Color of His Hair,” 116–23.

⁶⁴ See Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, 2 vols. (New York: Dutton, [1877]), 1: 312; Franz Delitzsch, *Ein Tag in Kapernaum* (Leipzig: Naumann, 1871), 31.

⁶⁵ Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, illustrated by William Martin Johnson (New York: Harper, 1892), 322. The most obvious precedent for such lush illustrations of the Holy Land is found in the 1846 Harper & Brothers illuminated Bible, which, like the Garfield edition of *Ben-Hur*, represented one of the biggest coups in the publisher’s history.

⁶⁶ Wallace, *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, 2 vols (New York: Harper, 1906), 932, 937.