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Synopsis

In 26 AD, Judah Ben-Hur, a wealthy Jewish prince and merchant, lived in Jerusalem with his mother, Miriam, his sister, Tirzah and their maidservant, Amrah. The merchant Simonides, a loyal slave of the Hur family, comes to visit with his daughter, Esther Judah and Esther falls in love at first sight, but Esther is already betrothed to someone else. Judah's childhood friend, a citizen of the Roman Empire named Messala, was already a tribune at that time. After years of leaving Jerusalem, Messala returned to assume the post of head of the Roman garrison at Fort Antonia. Messala greatly extolled the glory of Rome with its vast territory, while Judah held fast to his faith and the ideals of Jewish independence. This difference in attitude resulted in the two fighting each other and eventually becoming enemies after Messala forced Judah to report citizens who had the potential to rebel against the Roman government.

While marching into Jerusalem, the new Mayor of Judea, Valerius Gratus, was involved in an accident that nearly cost him his life. Valerius Gratus was thrown from the back of his horse which suddenly jumped up because he was startled by the tiles that fell from the roof of Judah's house. Despite knowing full well that this incident was just an ordinary accident, Messala blamed Judah for the accident and made him a galley slave as punishment. Messala also threw Miriam and Tirzah into prison because they were still angry that Judah had refused their request. By punishing a

man known as his own friend and a public figure, Messala hoped to intimidate the Jewish community. Judah vows to avenge Messala's actions. On the way to herding Judah and the other slaves to their place of punishment, the Romans stopped at Nazareth to water their horses. Judah asked for water because he was very thirsty, but was not granted by the army chief. Judah collapses from exhaustion, but regains strength after being given a drink by Jesus of Nazareth. After three years as a galley slave, Judah is placed on the flag galley of Consul Quintus Arrius, who is on the task of eradicating the Macedonian pirate fleet. Arrius is impressed by Judah's tenacity and self-discipline, and offers him the opportunity to be trained as a gladiator or chariot racer. Judah rebuffed Arrius's offer, saying that God would help fulfill his desire for revenge. When the Roman fleet confronted the Macedonian pirate fleet, Arrius ordered that all the galleys be chained to their oars except Judah. Arrius' galley is run over by an enemy galley and sunk, but Judah manages to free the chained oarsmen and help Arrius not to drown. Arrius, desperate because he thought he had been defeated by the enemy, attempted to kill himself with his own sword as was the custom of the Romans, but was prevented by Judah. The two were eventually rescued by the Roman galley, and Arrius was hailed as the commander in chief who had been instrumental in leading the Roman fleet to annihilate the Macedonian pirate fleet. Arrius succeeded in obtaining Judah's gift of freedom from Emperor Tiberius, and later adopted Judah as his son.