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Teasing Out Clues, Not Kooks

THE MAN NOBODY KNOWS AND BEN-HUR

BARBARA RYAN

Fan mail research has made significant strides in the last decade. Having grown alert, however, to the provenance of mail caches, researchers who consult letters of long ago face a brainteaser: as we acknowledge cache collectors' effect on the mail that we can examine, we must wonder if our findings reveal more of the mail's recipient than of fans who sent the mail. A neat way to address this puzzle is to tease out concerns so sensitive that letter writers found them hard to avow or even admit to themselves. This recourse prioritizes clues so small that there is scant cause to suppose they were noticed by a given cache maker. Adding heft to this approach can be a search for clues so scattered that they require study of letters in more than one cache.¹ None of this sounds pertinent to *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925). However, the 300-plus letters that Bruce Barton saved about his best seller turn out to yield clues so small they were missed by earlier researchers who consulted this cache. What those researchers emphasize is well worth knowing: although some readers enthused about Barton's energetic and ally-attracting Jesus of Nazareth, others disliked his hail-fellow exemplification of managerial precepts that, effectively, boost capitalism. Broached delicately in contrast, in this cache, is interest in Jesus' Jewishness. The fullest indication of this interest is

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found in a note sent from Aberdeen, Mississippi. A researcher with limited respect for fans could dismiss this note on the grounds that inept typing and spelling errors reveal lack of intelligence, thought, or care. Too, the decision to consult Barton could seem foolish, since he was an advertising executive with no formal training to answer such questions as, “Can you inform me what nationality Christ belonged to. Was he Jew? Was his Mother a jewes [sic]?”² However, by learning to tease out small clues, students of fan mail can secure insights that others have passed by.

If the charge that insights have been missed by researchers with limited respect for fans sounds like a straw man, evidence to the contrary is the scholarship that keeps alive a notion that ardent enthusiasts are kooks rather than analysts’ best, and sometimes unique, guides to aspects of reception. Trying to quash that notion in 2007, with specific reference to readers who liked *Man*, Erin A. Smith emphasized Barton’s ability to offer a certain kind of seeker a “practical, popular religion.” Though she went too far in the direction of celebrating fans uncritically, she was right to stand up to Edrene S. Montgomery’s charge, twenty years earlier, that *Man* fans were duped by a pitchman’s illusion.³ Combating this indictment of the Jesus whom a fan in South Carolina found “so real, so near, and so lovable” is the note from Mississippi that takes an interrogative attitude. Its questions are not best served, however, by Smith’s attention to “lived religion.” Though that tool could shed light on Judaism, the note’s question about Jewishness—articulated in terms of nationality—is better served by Joke Hermes’s observation that “consumption of popular culture . . . entails the production of hopes, fantasies, and utopias” that do not just reflect but also inform civic identities owing to how avidly fans deploy favorite films, sports, and other media as “a means of bonding and of reflecting on [bonding], sometimes critically and inventively, sometimes uncritically or by discriminating against those perceived as belonging to other groups.”⁴ So full an articulation reminds analysts that we cannot tell from the Mississippian’s questions what he wanted to hear; that is, he may have favored a Jewish Jesus. Declarative in contrast is a letter from St. Paul, Minnesota. This letter compares Barton’s Jesus to the one in Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* (1880).

This letter lies ahead. Be it noted now that it is not the only one that compares *Man* to another book; for example, a mortician compared *Man* to Charles M. Sheldon’s *In His Steps* (1897). The St. Paul fan’s comparison is odd, nonetheless, since the Jesus character in *Ben-Hur* appears on fewer than 15 of the book’s 500 pages, whereas in *Man* Jesus is, as a girl in Michigan noted, “the main character.”⁵ Peculiar too is comparison of characters with nothing in common but their names since Barton’s Jesus is heartily social, whereas Wallace’s emblemizes “Jesus meek and mild.” Analysts could decide, on this basis, that the St. Paul fan was a kook. Lost, however, by that decision would be

what his comparison reveals about a reading experience that is unlikely to have been shared by all fans (e.g., readers who compared *Man* to *In His Steps*, a novel in which Jesus does not appear, likely focused on different matters) but which need not be thought kooky, on that basis, if other reactions affirm it. That the Aberdeen note does affirm the St. Paul fan's comparison of *Man* to *Ben-Hur* is not glaringly obvious. The common ground, though, is mutability in this sense: though Bible readers agree that Jesus was born to a Jewish woman and educated in Jewish ways, they can feel unsure whether that means the Christian Messiah was a Jew. This may sound thoroughly religious. But in Jazz Age America, it could rouse most interest—and worry—in relation to Jews who were growing wealthy from their vigor and charm. Probing this aspect of the extant fan mail requires study not just of one letter and one note but also of other fans' mail, book reviews and blurbs, and *Man* and *Ben-Hur*. The hopes, fantasies, and utopic yearnings recovered by probing all this material reveal a facet of the meaning of *Man* in a largely Christian (and post-Christian) *civitas*: whether Jews could assimilate.

The premise of *The Man That Nobody Knows* is that much Christian tutelage fosters a false impression of Jesus as frail and retiring. Barton teaches that the Bible paints a different picture, since no man raised in a carpenter's home would lack brawn. Moreover, a man able to roust money changers from a temple was no mollycoddle. This early twentieth-century neologism reminds us that *Man* debuted at a certain time, in a specific place. All Barton scholars identify this time as a period of crisis within U.S. Christianity. But they also acknowledge, as uniformly, fans' delight in the manhood of Barton's Jesus. They are right to do so, owing to the prevalence, in *Man* letters, of effusions from readers such as one in New Jersey who said *Man* offers "a conception of Jesus that I can be proud of" and another in California who "like[d]" Barton's Jesus for his "strong vigorous character."⁶ Neither of these fans mentioned *Ben-Hur*; the only *Man* mail that does is the letter from St. Paul. The Californian, though, as much as the New Jerseyite, had grown up on *Ben-Hur*, whether she had read it or not, owing to its popularity in print and as a thrilling stage show between 1899 and 1920. Barton was five years old when Wallace's book debuted and twenty-four when the show opened. He thus grew up, as much as the first readers of *Man* had, on the quest-saga in which a meek and mild Jesus transforms a muscular Jew, whose dynamic leadership draws manly allies. Barton referenced Wallace's sort of Jesus in the scene at the start of *Man* in which he recalls being bored as a lad in Sunday school because he found the New Testament's putative hero so much duller than David and Samson. Scholars disagree whether this memory was candid or calculated. Yet none has realized that *Ben-Hur* was a staple in Sunday-school lessons during Barton's boyhood. Given this prevalence, it is fair to ask whether a full account of Barton's lack of interest in the Lamb

would have set a manly charioteer alongside David and Samson. Further cause to think so is an article in a Chicago paper in 1888 that finds Wallace's eponym watching, in the New Testament, as Jesus drags his cross to Calvary, and one from 1912, in a different Chicago paper, that lauds Judah Ben-Hur alongside Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.⁷

Uncertainty whether Wallace's fictive Jew fits better in the Old Testament or the New is another hint of concern about Jews' mutability. Scholars such as Ania Loomba have found evidence, as far back as medieval times, of disbelief that Jews could leave Judaism behind.⁸ That was olden days, though, to Barton's contemporaries; moreover, those ideas were separable from the concept of Jewishness, understood nationalistically. Roiling this *gemish*, however, was the Aberdeen reader's uncertainty where matrilineality fit: Did it trump the melting pot? These are new concerns in *Man* scholarship and *Ben-Hur* studies. They come to light when small clues in fan mail are not just heeded but also tracked. As is probably apparent by now, this inquiry will not answer the questions raised in Aberdeen or iron out the mismatch in the St. Paul fan's comparison of *Man* to *Ben-Hur*. Revealed, however, will be a tighter connection between these books than scholars have recognized to date, glue for which could be found in enactments on stage and screen that blurred Judah Ben-Hur into Jesus ben-Joseph, vividly.

That Barton blurred too can be inferred from the ways in which his memory of boyhood boredom recalls a cynic's summary in 2005 of one of America's favorite tales as "a novel about the origins of Christianity that ended with a chariot race." This summary brackets, for laughs, the postrace part of *Ben-Hur* that describes the Crucifixion. By doing so, it points up the relative attractions—for some readers, not all—of Judah and Jesus. Adding to the charms of the action man whose name recalls the Lion of Judah and a Maccabee leader was the dramatic transmutation of his vengeful masculinity into manliness through Jesus' influence, especially through his grace. That this charm was not felt by all readers can be seen in a postcard signed with a name that suggests a Jewish detractor.⁹ Less impressed readers noted that Judah does not kneel to Jesus until he has exacted crippling vengeance on a friend turned foe. Capturing the charm that some felt, though, is a letter to Wallace extolling his eponym as "a man we shall never cease to love" because, being a superior sort of Jew, he accepts Jesus' teachings so humbly. Delighted with a character blessed by repeated close encounters with the Son of God were fans who said their faith was revitalized: "More than once," attested a Presbyterian elder, "have I stopped and asked, was the writer inspired?"¹⁰ Analysis of a later fan's comparison of *Man* to *Ben-Hur* could stop here if analysts decide that it reflects a similar desire to feel faith being given new vigor. Cause to probe further is found, though, in a review of *Man* that made the same comparison, to a distinct end.

This comparison returns us to kookiness in that although a glaring mismatch in one document may be reckoned a dismissible anomaly, when the same mismatch recurs, a shared view is indicated. It is possible, of course, that the reader in St. Paul saw the comparison in the *Overland Monthly* and copied it. If that were true, we would expect the St. Paul fan to have used this comparison to make much the same point the *Overland Monthly* had. What we find, however, is that where the St. Paul fan told Barton that *Man*'s "portrayal of the real character of our Lord Jesus" is "equal to that of Gen. Lew Wallace's 'Ben-Hur'," the nationally marketed magazine announced that Barton "writes as a business man to business men. 'Ben-Hur' was written by Lew Wallace in answer to agnosticism of his time," the *Overland Monthly* added without pause, whereas *Man* offers Barton's "personal, intimate and original view of the foremost character of all history in answer to present day indifference." One implication of this no-pause add-on is obvious: this reviewer thought *Man* marched on the trail *Ben-Hur* blazed. A second implication is less clear, yet of signal interest: the reviewer's interest in agnosticism raises the possibility that the reader in St. Paul also thought Christianity under attack. Whom then would *Man* have been defending it against? The answer could be agnostics or agnosticism. But as we will see, when we learn more of how Barton portrayed Jesus, it could also be Jews. Suffice it to say now that although praise of *Man*'s ability to portray the real character of Jesus, and make him real to businessmen, can be conflated, inasmuch as these forms of praise diverge, researchers have firmer reason to believe that *Ben-Hur* did not occur anomalously in commentary about *Man*. Contra-indicated, however, is Barton's decision to leave these clues in his papers to tell posterity something he wanted us to know. More plausibly, these small clues, combined with another reader's decision to consult Barton about Jesus' Jewishness, gain from T. J. Jackson Lears's charge that Barton was one of the non-Jewish Americans who fretted about U.S. Jews' advances. His charge builds on Leo P. Ribuffo's sense that Barton upheld "genteel anti-semitism." Richard M. Fried tried to counter this view by claiming that Barton's opinion of Jews "ranks toward the high end of tolerance" for his era.¹¹ He may be right. Left unanswered, however, is the question of where the high end fell and what tolerance entailed.

Indicating Barton's position are the glaring differences between a Jesus so "sociable," as Barton put it, that he was "the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem" and the Jesus whom Wallace crafted in such a way that the breezy references to dinner-party popularity sound disrespectful. Analysts who focus on disrespect, though, are likely to miss an insight made possible by Hermes's attention to hopes, fantasies, and utopic yearnings: the reader in St. Paul liked the vision of grace meshing with popularity and dinner parties. It cannot be incidental that an important scene in *Ben-Hur* depicts a meeting, which

includes dinner, at which men of varied faiths interact amicably. What *Man* intimated, though, was different: a Jesus so sociable—and so modern—he would not quibble about dietary laws. This intimation pulls attention to another snippet in Barton’s papers; a letter from New York City said that *Man* described Jesus “in such a delightful and reverent spirit that it may be this book will be a great help to our Jewish friends.” Though this fan did not explain why “our Jewish friends” needed help, a Los Angeles man of Jewish and Christian parentage agreed that *Man* could bring people of these faiths closer.¹² These gleanings suggest that what the St. Paul fan liked about Barton’s Jesus was a quality hinted at by Wallace’s Jesus but exemplified by his Judah: open-minded acceptance of others that betokened flexibility with regard to practices that more shell-backed Jews treated as sacrosanct. The inference there is that though Jesus merits all reverence, he is unchanging, whereas the man to keep one’s eye on is the transformed Jew who bespeaks the future. Offering much the same message was the eye-popping Broadway show, produced by Jewish theater pros Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger, made from Wallace’s tale. Its most riveting episode, a thrilling re-creation of the chariot race in which horses galloped on stage, codified that the star of the show was Judah Ben-Hur. Accentuating this takeaway was a change made in the name of right reverence: Wallace’s Jesus character was replaced with a sparkly light beam. This change charmed audiences. An effect of it, however, was to rework the balance Wallace had poised between a vigorous charioteer and a Jesus so tender that the Nazarene who was meant to be thought powerful could be seen as feminine or limp.¹³

The Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* was a memory when *Man* debuted, serially, in a women’s magazine in 1924. Yet even before the last curtain rang down, Hollywood was bidding for the film rights. *Man* scholars have never commented on this show or the film made from it in 1925. The letter from St. Paul and the *Overland Monthly* review supply cause to do so. But so does the note from Mississippi if analysts tie its concern about Jesus’ nationality to the growing popularity of Jews as dashing as Hollywood’s highest-paid star, Douglas Fairbanks; as beloved as comedians Fanny Brice and Eddie Cantor; and as well known as second baseman Andy Cohen and pugilist Jack “Kid” Berg. This list of visibly vigorous Jews is a sampling only. It prioritizes successful and heroized Jews to recover a United States in which an adman, who said that citizens who had arrived recently, by steerage, were outperforming exhausted Yankee stock, could think it well to transfer one Jew’s dynamic physicality to another. This is Lears’s account of Barton. Hinting at the ardor, however, with which some *Man* fans embraced a vigorous Jesus is a letter reporting how college boys enthused that Barton’s Nazarene “would probably have been Captain of the Princeton Football [*sic*] Team, and just the man that they would ‘root’ for.” Princeton’s admissions policy for Jewish undergraduates at this time makes this

effusion vertiginous.¹⁴ Since enthusiasm of this sort was unlikely (if it were even possible) in relation to Wallace's Jesus, analysts have cause to wonder if Barton's was designed specifically to counteract *Ben-Hur*'s. Pursuing that possibility is as tricky, however, as figuring out what the Mississippian meant by *Jewishness*, in that by the time Barton crafted a vigorous and ally-attracting Jesus, the name "Ben-Hur" denoted a book, a show, and items as varied as a luxury auto and racing bicycle; perfume, whiskey, coffee, and gasoline; several U.S. towns and assorted forms of livestock; a woman's blouse and a man's watchband; a children's board game and a sewing machine; and quite a few boys and men.

All of these cultural phenomena could have been brushed off by an advertising executive who knew the ways of marketing. Disturbing, however, if that executive loved Jesus, would have been the substitution made by Klaw and Erlanger's show: in Wallace's book, Jesus is characterized, whereas on stage, he was disembodied. Show goers brought enough expectation with them that most saw in the light beam's sparkly glow a way to picture God's grace. However, since the glow was voiceless and thus unable to speak the lines from scripture that Wallace had afforded his Jesus character, the light beam was open to interpretation as anything from Y-H-W-H to Baal or Belial. Barton stood up to so vague a Jesus by crafting an unusually vigorous and social one. Admittedly, *Man* never shows Jesus speaking. But because his most vibrant quality is people management, he obviously speaks, and speaks well. Was this trait a sure-fire crowd pleaser? Not necessarily, since America felt no need for this sort of Jesus when Barton debuted it in *A Young Man's Jesus* in 1914. Eleven years later, though, this Jesus sat atop the best-seller list for almost two years. That he was the same character is borne out by Ribuffo's demonstration that *Man* lifts passages verbatim from *A Young Man's Jesus*. One is the description that all *Man* scholars quote, sometimes to snicker at Barton's crassness and sometimes to mock his fans: Jesus as a sociable dinner guest. Ribuffo explains the cool reception given *Young Man's Jesus*, and the warm one given *Man*, in terms of marketing and a characterological tweak: the later book "presented Christ as an advertising executive."¹⁵ This claim should be handled carefully since it rushes past the Jesus/Christ distinction on which Barton insisted. Rather than delve into that theological issue (for the fan-respecting reason that their letters are relaxed about it), I remark that Ribuffo's use of italics suggests that though Barton said his Jesus modeled an ethics for captains of industry, he situated Jesus in his own line of work: as a product promoter. This conflation of subject with author recalls a household name that was part of Barton's youth: "Ben Hur Wallace." If Barton received any fan mail addressed to "Jesus Barton," he did not save it. Though he was liberal in his Congregationalist views, such a discard needs no explication. Rather than rush past it, however, reception researchers should pause to recall where this inquiry started: having learned to ponder the

provenance of letter caches, researchers understand the danger we run of acting as cache-collectors' mouthpieces unless we find ways in which to find more in a given cache, or caches, than was left there for us purposefully. Why recall this now? Because Ribuffo's explanation of the popularity of *Man* leaves control with Barton: Barton did such and such, and fans were delighted. The same is true of Montgomery's and Smith's arguments (which, be it noted, ignore Ribuffo's discoveries about *A Young Man's Jesus*). The result is that all three projects credit Barton for the success of *Man*. This tunnel vision can be widened by attention to lack of interest in *Young Man's Jesus*. Two questions arise by such widening that wrest control from Barton: What *was* interesting in 1914, and what developments made *Man* so attractive later?

Although, obviously, a great deal was interesting in 1914, the letter from St. Paul and the review in the *Overland Monthly* direct attention to *Ben-Hur*. It is sheer coincidence that this is the year on the last letter from a fan in Wallace's papers. The "German Preacher" in Oklahoma obviously had not heard about Wallace's death nine years earlier. Our interest in this letter is not this fan's ignorance, however; it is that he gave Wallace permission to use his praise of *Ben-Hur* as a testimonial. This was not a kooky idea, since Klaw and Erlanger's public-relations team deployed other ministers' enthusiasm for the show's sermon-like impact.¹⁶ This preacher's offer was, however, rather crass, from a genteel point of view. A Bible lover who prized gentility could feel the same about the news that the Sears, Roebuck catalog had ordered a million copies of *Ben-Hur*—an extraordinary sales coup—although an advertising executive would have to pause at this example of a publisher making money from publicity for a show. Worrisome, too, might be learning that this tale of the Christ scored high when schoolchildren were asked about their favorite reading, if the Bible-loving advertising executive thought this an effect of the show that was packing theaters nationwide. Between 1902 and 1907, packing them tighter was the handsome and athletic actor William Farnum, who was "worshipped" as Judah Ben-Hur "in nearly every city in the U.S."¹⁷ After Farnum left the show, however, the chariot race grew more thrilling to take up the slack, as the horses on stage multiplied from eight to twelve, then sixteen, then twenty. The feeling of benediction many experienced at the show stayed powerful for some, judging by reports from theaters across the land and enthusiasm from evangelical exhorter Billy Sunday. Others, however, made this *Ben-Hur* a comic butt in burlesque, while others again looked askance at the money it was spinning for its Jewish producers.

Other aspects of the entertainment world changed over these years too. Although Mary Pickford was as big a Hollywood star in 1925 as she had been in 1914, so much had changed around her that a few milestones say it all: the dream factory had been so primitive in 1914 that this year is remembered as the

one in which the first custard pie was thrown, America kept coming back for all twenty episodes of “The Perils of Pauline,” and Charlie Chaplin debuted, in a bit part, his Little Tramp character. Eleven years later, Pickford was married to Fairbanks, “Pauline” was kid stuff, and Chaplin was at the height of his popularity (although, interestingly, many thought he was Jewish). It is no small matter that, when it came time to cast the film version of *Ben-Hur*, a Catholic Mexican immigrant, Ramon Novarro, was chosen for the title role, rather than a Jew. Meanwhile, back in New York (Barton’s stomping grounds), a comedy titled *Abie’s Irish Rose* pleased so wildly between 1922 and 1927 that H. L. Mencken called it America’s “third largest industry.” Pertinent to concerns over Jewishness was the love of the play’s young American, born to Jews who named him “Abraham,” for Catholic Rosemary, an American of Irish descent. George M. Fredrickson has explained that where “anti-semitism” denotes racialized hatred that can grow violent, “anti-Judaism” denotes opposition to a religious creed.¹⁸ Emblematizing the latter could be a Jew so sociable that he marries a Catholic. More genteel, however, would be a Jew transformed by Jesus.

These are new topics in *Man* research. Each draws, though, from Erin Smith’s insight that “letters from readers to Barton demonstrate . . . that ordinary believers read differently than intellectuals and theologians” as “they found in Barton’s work not second-rate theology but, instead, a pragmatic, lived religion that helped them make sense of modernity and their place within it.” This insight opens the door to inquiry that pursues hints in *Man* mail that some of the appreciation for Barton’s Jesus—no telling how much or from which readers—traverses Jews’ unprecedentedly visible role in the *civitas* while “covenant” agreements restricted the sociabilities mapped by restrictions on where specific citizens could live, the schools their children could attend, the golf courses on which they could tee up, and more. Analysts who walk through this door will wish the hints were clearer, the traverses bolder. If inquiry be enlarged, however, in line with Hermes’s interest in hopes, fantasies, and utopic yearnings, much can be learned from letters that say Barton made Jesus closer, more lovable, more real, “vivid,” and manly. The results bear out Charles Johanningsmeier’s advice that fan mail “can serve as a refreshing and important corrective to scholars’ often obtuse interpretations of the ‘meaning’” of a given artifact.¹⁹ Though such inquiry can end up more suggestive than fact producing, the suggestions can spur keener research and signal a means for making fan mail a more respected source of information, which touches on more topics than scholars have realized.

Returning on this thought to Barton and *Ben-Hur*, analysts see now how the note from Mississippi shines a spotlight on the explicit (and determined) manner in which Barton set his sociable Jesus apart from the dynamic Jews he called Old Testament “thunderers.” Equally to the point, *Man* teaches that Jesus

drew loyal followers by speaking of a God “supremely better than anybody had ever dared to believe. Not a petulant Creator. . . . Not a stern Judge. . . . Not a vain King.” This claim echoes the names of three books in the Old Testament, setting a negator before each, incantationally. Again, researchers who track small clues will wish the hints were clearer, the traverses bolder. Perhaps though, they *were* clearer and bolder before Barton revised *Man* in 1956, since that would be a point at which a savvy impression manager might cull his fan mail. Back in the 1920s, however, the fan who thought *Man* could edify Jews surely noted the passage that said the “Jewish prophets” in the Old Testament were a “stern-faced” lot, rather than the sort “you would choose as companions on a fishing trip.” Analysts can only wonder whether Barton had seen the article, while he was a lad, that judged *Ben-Hur* a good book to bring on a trip of this kind. Certain, however, is this: a *Man* fan shared her delight in the book that let her imagine Jesus smiling. Persuasive in its wake is Jackson Lears’s point that the main traits of Barton’s sociable Jesus are sincerity, refusal of dogma, and holistic healing that enabled “a happier, more satisfying way of life.” Lears’s insights are cogent as a means to recover Barton’s strategizing. Item: Jews are devious? The Jesus in *Man* is sincere. Item: Jews are close-minded? *Man*’s Jesus is antidogmatic. Item: Jews, especially Jewish men, are weak, though they also transmit noxious germs widely? *Man*’s Jesus is a tonic who heals by his vivid health—a modern analogue of the Christian quality, grace.²⁰

These gleanings reveal how scraps in Barton’s papers, which may appear kooky on their own, give researchers cause to reframe *Man* as a book that helped some Americans relax, regarding Jews, as long as the Jews did their best to assimilate like the sociable Abie, sweet Mary Pickford’s charming husband, and those welcome guests at a party: Brice and Cantor. Since, for most U.S. gentiles, striving of this kind would have meant adapting to a Christian nation, debates may ensue whether *Man* did more harm than good among non-Jews who enjoyed watching Jews on stage and screen and in sports arenas but were not keen to have them as neighbors. Even harder to pin down, though, is the awareness tokened, in the note from Mississippi, of rabbinical wisdom, which taught that Jewishness, being matrilineal, is ineradicably inborn—especially since this teaching was being controverted, to wild applause on the Great White Way, by the implication that Abie’s children with Rosemary would not be Jews but *would* be Americans. This article is not the spot in which to ravel all this without losing sight of the fact that Judah Ben-Hur marries a Jew with whom, inferentially, he will raise Christian children. Worth noting, all the same, is Millette Shamir’s observation that the Broadway *Ben-Hur*, like the film made from it in 1925 (by a film studio under Jewish management), ends with Judah’s reunion with his Jewish sister and their widowed Jewish mother: no child rearing, in other words, nor any depiction of Judah converting to Christianity.²¹

This transmedial gesture sketches, only, how much more can be learned from small clues in fan mail if analysts track such clues to recover concerns that fans might not state outright or that fan mail recipients had cause to discard. Suffice it to say, therefore, that the civic concern this essay recovers makes new sense of a letter from Michigan that thanked Barton for having “the mental stamina to wade through the begats and road blocks in the old testament and give me the real story.” What we have learned about Jews making the most of promises extended to all U.S. citizens makes new sense also of a letter from a man in Ohio who appears to have been a business acquaintance: after professing agnosticism, he proclaimed, “You’ve done a big job, in de-bunking the New Testament.” Noting that some of the most ineradicably Jewish elements in the Old Testament are resisted by the first letter, and that the entire New Testament is rejected by the second, analysts will discern what is risked by uncritical celebration of the practical, popular religion that *Man* offered. Cherished all the same by fans who sought Jesus was Barton’s ability to draw this vital figure nearer. A minister in Texas was thrilled, for instance, by Barton’s “fine portrait of the Friend, by whose side we would be happy to sit at a dinner, or with whom we would be glad to walk and talk on a sunny vacation day.” This response is significantly more sociable than those in Wallace’s papers in which fans described *Ben-Hur*’s Jesus character. It is true that a fan in Illinois claimed, while Barton was growing up in that state, that *Ben-Hur* “seemed to bring Christ home to me as nothing else could—he became *mine*.”²² Significantly different, though, is the letter from a minister in Massachusetts who offered a striking image: he said Barton’s rethink of Jesus “made the Son of Man *real* to people” rather than a “conventional figure in a stained glass window.” With detractors charging that *Man* diminished the Christian Messiah, Barton had cause to save mail that suggested otherwise.²³ The image of a Friend, though, who felt real enough to dine with and sufficiently relaxed about dietary laws, is less possessive (“*mine*”) than amicable. This inference supplies cause to probe what fans meant when they said *Man* drew Jesus closer. The image of Jesus stepping down from a stained-glass window suggests the stage but, even more, the screen that enlarged actors who would have looked small when they performed “live.” The fact that the filmed *Ben-Hur* used an actor (seen from the back only) rather than a sparkly light beam can be factored into thanks and praise for a book that drew Jesus nearer. Experts in cinematic technique may ponder whether the film-from-behind tactic eroticized Jesus. *Ben-Hur* researchers, though, regardless whether they study the book, show, or films, will ask whether *Man* encouraged hopes or fantasies of a Jesus who looked like the dashing Fairbanks, the boyish athlete Farnum, the heart-throb Novarro, or even the brilliantine’d Barton. Amid these outgrowths of the dream factory and its theatrical antecedents, the St. Paul fan’s emphasis, not on the features of Barton’s and Wallace’s Jesuses, but on their true characters returns us to the passage in *Man* that all scholars quote.

The idea that Jesus was Jerusalem's most popular dinner guest can be thought crass. But a reviewer enthused, Barton had "done a strikingly human thing—he brings Jesus into your home."²⁴ How had he done this? We have seen several tactics, the most obvious of which distinguished *Man's* Jesus from Old Testament thunderers. The dinner guest image is another, owing to its proffering of a Jesus who was no trouble to feed, since he was too sociable to keep kosher. Do such inferences seem too long a stretch? It depends what analysts think the task is: to recover the issues a reader, or set of readers, would have admitted to or, instead, to tease out hopes, fantasies, and utopic yearnings which, though potentially powerful and/or of much consequence (in a range of registers), were hard to speak or even admit to oneself.

The precise method outlined in this article may not often be replicable, since researchers rarely find fan mail in one cache referencing an artifact about which fan mail exists in another. The basics of this method do not depend, however, on findings so rare; rather, they rest on fame that endures for decades and ubiquity in popular realms, as both shape reading horizons. This method has roved far from existing *Man* (and *Ben-Hur*) research by leading us to race, nation, faith, mothers, Judaism, Jewishness, sociability, vigor, grace, and notions about inheritance that owe little to DNA. Nonetheless, the more general consequence, which is applicable to other sorts of fans and fan mail, is how small clues can be probed to unearth concerns that (putting this thought into historical terms, though it is as true of the present) may have been widespread yet can be glimpsed now only in fans' suggestive effusions about culturally sensitive issues. The goal of the sort of research I have sketched here is respect for receptors—even the very avid, those with whom analysts disagree, and possible kooks. Respect does not mandate agreement with such receptors, of course: researchers are not celebrators. We are instead the sort who strive to learn maximally from letters that constitute data which, though tricky, is rich.

NOTES

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1. On fan mail's provenance see Marsha Orgeron, "'You Are Invited to Participate': Interactive Fandom in the Age of the Movie Magazine," *Journal of Film and Video* 61 (Fall 2009): 3; Charles Johanningsmeier, "What Fan Mail Can—and Can't—Tell Us about Historical Reader Response: The Case of Willa Cather," paper presented at the biennial conference of the Reception Study Society, West Lafayette, Indiana, September 12, 2009. Clarence Karr pioneered the study of comparative fan mail caches in chap. 10 in *Authors and Audiences: Popular Canadian Fiction in the Early Twentieth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000). On fans' tendency to report less than they have

experienced, which would affect what analysts can learn from fan mail about sensitive issues, see William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

2. Letter to Barton from Aberdeen, Mississippi, May 3, 1926; *Wikipedia* reports that in 1910 Aberdeen's population was just under 4,000; by 1950, the town had grown to nearly 6,000 but was still a small place. It is as well to acknowledge that the poor typing and spelling of this note may reveal limited education. Yet other possibilities should be considered: e.g., the letterhead on this note indicating a lawyer in a small town, who may have felt shy about his question, this note writer could have hesitated to ask a secretary to type this letter for him. If so, a man forced to type for himself might have done so clumsily. Pursuing possibilities a step further, a boy could have nicked letterhead from his father's office and written to Barton on the sly. More generally, even if it could be proved that this note's writer was ignorant, that would not prevent his letter from being able to reveal that the Jewishness of Barton's Jesus intrigued some readers.

To indicate geographical range, yet protect readers' privacy, I identify letters by the information provided in each about where the letter writer lived. When a reaction was published, I identify it in the usual manner, by the writer's surname. All *Man* letters excerpted in this article are in the Bruce Barton Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

3. Erin A. Smith, "'Jesus, My Pal': Reading and Religion in Middlebrow America," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 37 (2007): 150; Edrene S. Montgomery, "Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*: A Popular Advertising Illusion," *Journal of Popular Culture* 19, no. 3 (1985): 21–34. For recent scholarship that disparages a fan as a kook, consult Barbara Ryan, "A Letter, a Prayer: Susan Garnet Smith Writes to Walt Whitman," paper presented at the biennial Australia/New Zealand American Studies Conference, Adelaide, Australia, July 2, 2010.
4. The fan's remarks are found in a letter sent by a resident of Oconee County, South Carolina, to the *Progressive Farmer and Farm Woman* in 1927. A member of that paper's advertising department sent the relevant issue of the journal to Barton; the clipping, along with an explanatory letter, are in the Bruce Barton Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society. For Hermes's observation, which helps justify nation-restricted analysis, see *Re-reading Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 141. Although *Man* found admirers outside the United States, research on it has tended to come from U.S. historians and American studies scholars.
5. The mortician wrote to Barton from Newark, New Jersey, in 1960, whereas the girl reviewed *Man* for her local paper in Adrian, Michigan, in 1928.
6. Letters to Barton from Wildwood, New Jersey, January 8, 1927; and Newcastle, California, November 23, 1924.
7. "Ben-Hur in the Bible and the Crucifixion Panorama," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 17, 1888, 3; "The Curse of Non-Commercialism," *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1912, 8.
8. Ania Loomba, "Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique," *New Literary History* 40 (2009): 501–22; cf. Sander Gilman, "Dangerous Liaisons: Black Jews, Jewish Blacks, and the Vagaries of Racial Definition," *Transition* 64 (1994): 41–52.

9. Ron Powers recapped *Ben-Hur* in this truncated way in *Mark Twain: A Life* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 444. The postcard from a name that appears to be “Liebschutz” and dated May 22, 1904, is in the Lew Wallace Papers, the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. I thank Jannik Müller (through the kind offices of Hannah Heidi Bull) and John Richardson for helping me decipher, and assign meaning to, this handwritten name. I discuss this postcard in “One Reader, Two Votes: Retooling Fan Mail Scholarship,” *The History of Reading*, vol. 3, ed. Rosalind Crone and Shafquat Towheed (London: Palgrave, 2011), 66–79. All quotations used in this article from the Lew Wallace Papers are courtesy of the Lilly Library, Indiana University.
10. Letter to Wallace from Indianapolis, Indiana, December 21, 1880, in the Lew Wallace Papers, the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana; S. C. de Soissons, “Still ‘Quo Vadis’,” *New York Times*, April 9, 1898, RB244; the letter from a Presbyterian elder in Lafayette, Indiana, March 26, 1887, excerpted in Robert F. and Katharine M. Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 310.
11. Letter to Barton from St. Paul, Minnesota, February 5, 1927; “Distinct Contribution,” *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, October 1925, 383; Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of Consumer Culture, 1880–1930,” in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 18; Ribuffo, “Jesus Christ as Business Statesman: Bruce Barton and the Selling of Corporate Capitalism,” *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 226; Richard M. Fried, *The Man Everybody Knew: Bruce Barton and the Making of Modern America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 95.
12. John A. Goodell is quoted discussing Jewish friends in a blurb collection in Barton’s papers that was compiled, presumably, for booksellers’ and/or reviewers’ use; for the man of mixed-faith parentage, see the letter to Barton from Los Angeles, California, July 9, 1956. For “sociable,” see Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 4.
13. Howard Miller prioritizes this balance in “The Charioteer and the Christ: *Ben-Hur* in America from the Gilded Age to the Culture Wars,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 104 (2008): 153–75.
14. On steerage and Yankee stock, see Lears, “From Salvation,” 17. If the college boys were Jews, or anti-anti-semites, they could have been enthusing about the sort of football team they would like to root for; if not, they were enthusing about a Jesus who was not Jewish. This letter, sent from the *S.S. George Washington*, August 12, 1925, was forwarded to Bruce Barton by its recipient.
15. Ribuffo, “Jesus Christ as Business Statesman,” 219.
16. Letter to Wallace from Duncan, Oklahoma, January 5, 1914, in the Lew Wallace Papers, the Lilly Library; Howard Miller, “‘In the Service of Christianity: ‘Ben-Hur’ and the ‘Redemption’ of the American Theatre, 1899–1920” (working paper for an essay collection in preparation).

17. Joseph B. Gilder, "Americans Are Becoming Small Buyers of Books," *New York Times*, January 25, 1914, 50; Carolyn Lowrey, *The First 100 Noted Men and Women of the Screen* (New York: Moffatt, Yard, 1920), 56.
18. The Jew who loved a Catholic girl was never played (on Broadway, at least, in the 1920s) by a Jew; Mencken qtd. in Ted Merwin, *In Their Own Image: New York Jews in Jazz Age Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 61; Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 18–19. Holly Pearse discusses popular impressions of Chaplin's faith in "Charlie Chaplin: Jewish or Goyish?" *Jewish Quarterly*, 216 (November 2010), <http://jewishquarterly.org/2010/11/charlie-chaplin-jewish-or-goyish>.
19. Smith, "'Jesus, My Pal,'" 150; Johanningsmeier, "What Fan Mail Can—and Can't—Tell Us about Historical Reader Response." For fans who thought *Man*'s Jesus "vivid," see the blurbs from John W. Davis and the Rev. Miles H. Krumbine in the blurb collection in the Bruce Barton Papers.
20. Barton, *Man*, 42, 34; Alex Starbuck, "On the North Shore—IV," *Forest and Stream*, February 2, 1893, 98; for a smiling Jesus, see the letter to Barton's publisher, Bobbs-Merrill, from San Pedro, California, excerpted in the blurb collection, Bruce Barton Papers; Lears, "From Salvation," 18.
21. Shamir, "Ben-Hur's Mother; or, Modernity without Disenchantment" (working paper for an essay collection in preparation).
22. Letters to Barton from Clark Lake, Michigan, January 14, 1955; Cleveland, Ohio, October 10, 1925; and Houston, Texas, April 6, 1925. Letter to Wallace from Kewanee, Illinois, January 1, 1887. The blurb collection in Barton's papers reveals that the enthusiast in Houston reviewed *Man* for the *Baptist Standard*.
23. The Rev. Kenneth C. McArthur wrote from Cambridge, Massachusetts; his remark is part of the blurb collection, Bruce Barton Papers. Cf. an acquisition editor's excitement that Barton's book pulled "Jesus out of the stained glass window and made him a man" (qtd. in Fried, 90–91). All Barton scholars review the diminution charge; see, e.g., Fried, 94, 99–100.
24. Walter Hickman's review of *Man* for the *Indianapolis Times* is excerpted in the blurb collection, Bruce Barton Papers.