

Here I give the second of three installments of the paper I read at the Life of Brian and the Historical Jesus conference. In this portion I deal with an issue that I have been spending a lot of time reading and thinking about over the past couple of months: the value of eyewitness testimony for establishing what really happened in the past. The reflections here are inspired by the first episode of Brian's adulthood in the film, where he is present, at a distance, at Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, and the people around Brian cannot make out exactly what Jesus is saying since they are so far away from him. Rather than "Blessed are the Peacemakers," Jesus is thought to have said "Blessed are the Cheesemakers"; and it was the Greek, not the meek, who will inherit the earth. And so it goes. It's the sort of scene that is both funny and insightful — what \*was\* it like to hear a public speaker back in the days before there were microphones??? To deal with this question I again talk about how the film uses parody in order to make its points.

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One of the most brilliant ways parody works in the Life of Brian is by highlighting the complete implausibility of the biblical narratives, or at least the implausibility of widespread and common understandings of the historicity of the events described in the biblical narratives. For some reason, avid Bible readers - at least in my part of the world, the American South - do not seem to ask common-sensical questions about whether a narrative in Scripture actually makes any sense if taken literally. The Life of Brian manages to ask these questions by parodying the literal sense.

This happens right off the bat in the opening scene, Brian's infancy narrative. The cinematography and music, in case you have never noticed, is not simply a riff on the biblical epics of Hollywood in general; it is a hilarious and virtually plagiaristic replay of the infancy narrative of Ben Hur, and the arrival of the wisemen to worship the child Jesus.

Neither biblical account of Jesus' infancy - the one in Matthew or the one in Luke — can be taken as a description of anything like historical reality. One of the many problems with Matthew, on which Brian's infancy is based, involves that implausible star that allegedly leads the wise men to the baby Jesus. In order to illustrate the problem, I tell my students to go outside on a clear evening, look up in the sky, and figure out which star is standing over their own house. In Brian's opening parodic scene, the point is made much more convincingly, as the three wise men start out in the wrong house to worship the wrong Capricorn with gold, frankincense, and a balm.

Nowhere are the logistics of the biblical narrative lampooned more famously than in arguably the best known line of the movie, Blessed are the Cheesemakers. I take this parody of the Sermon on the Mount to be making a not-so-serious but important point about the implausibility of eyewitnesses guaranteeing the historical accuracy of the Gospel narratives.

For a very long time now we have heard a lot from scholars who have wanted to emphasize the existence of eyewitnesses and their value as guarantors of the surviving traditions about Jesus. This perspective is so wrong on so many levels that it is very hard to know even where to begin considering it.

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