

Here is the third and final section of the paper that I read at the Life of Brian conference.

The entire paper tried to argue that parody can be an effective historical method. By providing a caricature of a narrative or an alleged historical event, the film was able to highlight some very important historical realia that otherwise are too easy to miss, or that have not been given enough prominence by biblical scholars and historians.

This third part of my paper is the really controversial one (although part 2 raised some concerns as well!). Here is where I argue that Jesus was not given a decent burial, and I use the film to explain why.

I should say that in a few days I am going to be devoting a sustained thread to just this issue, of why I think the story of Joseph of Arimathea in the NT is legendary, that Jesus was almost certainly not given a decent burial on the day of his crucifixion. My thread will be a response to criticisms of that view, especially as made most systematically by Craig Evans in the response book *How God Became Jesus*. I will be conceding that Evans has made the best case possible that Jesus was buried decently; and I will be arguing that his case completely fails to convince. My posts will be written to explain why.

But before going there, we still have some Monty Python to cover! Be sure to watch the film clips at the appropriate spots, as they are crucial for my argument here.

One of the most significant parodies of the Life of Brian involves his crucifixion, but here I am not principally interested in always looking on the bright side of life or, in fact, any episode explicitly covered in the movie, either for Jesus or for Brian. I am instead interested in the question of whether a Jew crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem would have been given a decent burial.

There is a prescient but fleeting shot early in the movie, right after the famous stoning scene, when Brian and his mother are walking along outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Please watch video segment in the page as to remain in context with outline.

Notice that the victims of crucifixion have been left on the cross for their bodies to deteriorate. I don't know how Terry Jones and his colleagues knew that this in fact was the practice of the Romans, since it does not seem to be known widely among scholars of the New Testament, but in fact it was the practice, as attested in numerous ancient sources. The point of crucifixion was to torture and humiliate a person as fully as possible, and to show any bystanders what happens to someone who is a troublemaker in the eyes of Rome. Part of the humiliation and degradation was that the body was left on the cross after death, to be subject to the elements, the ravages of time, and the scavenging animals.

Dom Crossan may have gone too far in positively asserting that Jesus' body was eaten by dogs, but the reality is that the surviving references to the corpses of crucified criminals do in fact indicate that they were normally left to decompose and feed the scavengers. The Roman author Horace speaks about the carrion crows who feed off of victims; the Roman satirist Juvenal speaks of the vulture who takes off carrion for its young; that Sigmund Freud of antiquity, Artemidorus, writes in his dream book of crucified men serving to sustain many birds; the otherwise hilarious Satyricon of Petronius predicates an entire scene on the widely known practice of leaving the corpse on the cross for days.

The historical question is not whether this was the common practice – as it certainly was. The question is whether an exception was made in the case of Jesus himself – or even Brian. In the Gospels, of course, Jesus is an exception. We are not told about the post-mortem fate of the two lestai crucified with him; but it's hard to imagine, historically, why an exception would be made in his case but not the others; Pilate certainly would not have been moved by reverence to allow the Son of God to be given a decent burial, even if Christians have always thought that the Son of God must have been treated differently from everyone else.

In any event, in our accounts, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin – that is, one of those who called for Jesus' destruction the night before – takes it upon himself to request his body, and Pilate without a single hesitation cedes to the request.

Could there have been an exception made for Jesus? We have historical record of only one kind of exception being made for the Roman policy of humiliating a criminal by disallowing a decent burial and leaving their bodies as a public spectacle to show what happens to those who cross the Roman authorities. It comes in the writings of Philo. Philo indicates that in Alexandria Egypt, on the birthday of an emperor, and in order to honor the emperor, a local ruler would occasionally allow crucified victims to be given over to their family members for decent burial.

Some conservative Christian scholars have pointed to this passage in order to argue that since exceptions could be made, Jesus could have been an exception. But in my judgment that is completely misreading Philo's account. The only reason an exception was made, for Philo, was to honor the emperor's birthday. And then it was an exception made only in certain cases – one would assume that it involved victims related to someone who was highly connected – and it entailed the body being given to family members. There is nothing to suggest that Jesus was executed on the date of an emperor's birthday; he was not well-connected; and his body was not given to his family members. So what relevance does the Philo passage have for the account in the Gospels. So far as I can tell, almost precisely none.

And so more commonly it is argued by Christian apologists that an exception was made not just in the case of Jesus, but for Jews more broadly. And why is that? Because in the Torah it is decreed that a corpse is not to be left unburied after sundown. This was Jewish law. And since it was Jewish law, it must have been practiced. And since it was practiced, Romans must have taken Jews off their crosses and allowed them to have decent burials.

That's the argument that is sometimes made, but in my opinion, it is more romantic than historical, and completely naïve about the brute force exercised by the Romans over their subjects in cowing them into submission and forcing them to realize through graphic realism in public places that the power of Rome was not to be opposed.

The reality is that Jews, who may have wanted to follow Jewish law, did not crucify Jesus. Romans crucified Jesus. And when it came to sedition Romans did not have any reason or inclination to rule their subjects in a way that would be inoffensive to local sensibilities, religious or otherwise.

Once more, a parody in the Life of Brian highlights the historical reality so well – much better than the conservative apologists intent on vindicating the Gospel accounts of Jesus' decent burial. Here then is a final clip from the movie.

Please watch video segment in the page as to remain in context with outline.

In this case a Jewish sensitivity is invented for the purpose: the Jews do not want to be mingled with the Samaritans in their crucifixions, any more than they would want mixed cemeteries or mixed neighborhoods. And how much do the Romans care? They don't care a bit. The local sensibilities are mocked and have precisely zero effect on the Romans who are doing what they want to do and are accustomed to doing. After Brian, the Samaritan Big Nose, and everyone else is crucified, they will be left on their crosses for some days, exposed to the elements, the scavengers, and the passing of time as a further humiliation and defilement and as a demonstration of Roman power. Eventually whatever remains of their bodies will be taken from their crosses and tossed into a common grave. To that extent, of course, they will be buried, probably in some kind of pit, just as Jesus himself in some sense must have been buried. But they would not be allowed decent burial, let alone immediately upon death.

That an exception would not have been made in the case of Jesus is further supported by what we know about the character of Pontius Pilate, the prefect of Judea who ordered his crucifixion. Christian readers throughout much of history have seen Pilate in a much milder light than is justified by the historical record. If all one knows is the New Testament Gospels, which increasingly exonerate Pilate over time, or the later Christian legends where Pilate converts to the Christian faith and in some regions comes to be canonized as a Christian saint, the historical Pilate could not have been such a bad fellow. And so it makes sense that he would violate Roman practices of crucifixion, especially in the case of Jesus, for whom he must have harbored a soft spot in his heart.

But, of course, this portrayal of Pilate is completely at odds with what we find in the rest of the written record, whether we read in Luke's Gospel of his mingling of the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices, or in Josephus of his complete insensitivity to Jewish laws and practices, for example in the incident of the standards at the beginning of his reign — when he orders the protesting Jews to accept the images of Caesar in the holy city or be slaughtered; or in the incident of the riots caused by the building of the Jerusalem aqueduct later — when he commissioned his thugs to quell the crowds by beating them into submission. And so Philo speaks of Pilate's "venality, his violence, his thefts, his assaults, his abusive behavior, his frequent executions of untried prisoner, and his endless savage ferocity" (Embassy to Gaius 302). Pilate was not an exception to the brutal expression of Roman power in the face of possible opposition; he was the embodiment of it. As in the crucifixion scene in the Life of Brian, so too in reality, when it comes to allowing crucified victims a decent burial, there is little reason to think that Romans would make an exception to their brutal suppression of opposition if someone would just ask nicely.

Let me conclude with a couple of remarks on the value of parody as a historical method. Parody is a kind of humorous but insightful caricature. Everyone enjoys the humor of parody, but the insights that it provides should not be overlooked or undervalued. By caricaturing its topic, parody is able to reveal aspects of reality that are otherwise far too easy to miss.

Parody is not the same as mockery, even humorous mockery. Parodic humor is witty, sharp, perceptive, and, most important, generative of ideas. The Life of Brian is parody at its best — creative, thoughtful, thought-provoking, and hilarious enough even to make some fundamentalists laugh and, as a result, reflect, at least a bit, on their own tradition.

Sometimes shocked discomfiture can be a very good thing indeed.



[Violent Opposition to the Romans in the Days of Jesus \(or Brian\)?
Brian and the Apocalyptic Jesus Part 2](#)