

I have decided to give, in three installments, the paper that I read for the Life of Brian conference. It was written for a general audience, even though scholars were in the crowd as well. It includes some short clips from the movie, which I showed by way of Power point, and which my computer assistant on the Blog, Steve Ray, managed to load up here for us. What I have to say makes better sense with the clips (there is one in this installment and two in the third), so I recommend looking at them at the proper time in the paper. The rest is self-explanatory: so here is the opening bit of the paper.

When the Life of Brian came out in 1979, I was an earnest and devout 23-year old student at Princeton Theological Seminary, studying for ministry. Even though Princeton Seminary at the time was not, on the whole, strongly conservative in its theological orientation, I was. I had come to the school from Wheaton, an evangelical Christian liberal arts college; and before that I had studied at Moody Bible Institute, a bastion of fundamentalism in Chicago. By the time I was at Princeton Seminary, I was moving away from my evangelicalism, but I was still a sincere and committed conservative Christian, and even though I knew very little about the Life of Brian before seeing it - apart from the ghastly rumors that had been floating around in evangelical circles - I was certain that I would find it offensive to my religious sensibilities.

And sure enough, I was right. As a result, I felt deeply guilty at laughing when I knew that as a committed Christian I was supposed to be scowling. But afterward I combatted this moral failing by telling everyone I knew the theological shortcomings of the film.

The one scene that I found particularly offensive at the time is not one that would immediately occur to most viewers as particularly troubling to conservative Christian sensibilities. It is the scene where we find a group of apocalyptic preachers of doom in the midst of Jerusalem.

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

The reason I found the scene offensive was that I knew full well that Jesus himself was reputed to have delivered some rather graphic apocalyptic discourses (as in Mark 13); moreover, at this transitional stage of my theological thinking, I had already begun to see that the majority of biblical scholars outside the ranks of the conservative evangelicals had good reason to think that Jesus' overarching message was in fact one of coming apocalyptic doom. By suggesting that a Jewish apocalyptic preacher from Galilee was simply regurgitating the kind of fluff and nonsense that could be found on any street corner in Jerusalem, the film - I thought - was completely undercutting the powerful and distinctive message of Jesus himself. The scene was not as obviously offensive as, say, Always look on the Bright Side of Life, but in many ways for me it was the most dangerous scene of them all. In a far more subtle way it undercut the very core of Jesus' message and mission. And it made him, by implication, a complete crazy like these other apocalyptic wackos.

And so I assured everyone I knew - including my three seminary friends who went with me to see it, while we were still in the parking lot - that it wasn't like that at all. Jesus' message was distinct, a revelation from God. He was not simply mouthing typical visionary mumbo-jumbo.

A few years after that I had calmed down a bit; my views of Jesus had begun to alter significantly, and my knowledge of first century Palestinian Judaism had developed significantly. It's not that I came to think that Jesus too was a loony set loose on the curious crowds of Jerusalem. But I had come to see that Jesus' message really was thoroughly apocalyptic, and that it was not entirely unique. It participated much more broadly in the apocalyptic stream of tradition of his day and time.

In Jesus' day this apocalyptic stream of tradition was not usually propagated by the likes of those crazies of the film clip we have just seen. The scene is a parody. But as with all good parody, it embodies a kind of historical truth, and by providing a caricature of historical reality it highlights a certain aspect of that reality, allowing us to look beyond the incidentals - in this case the spoofed preachers themselves - to the heart of the matter, the apocalyptic fervor of the time. The parody, in other words, has a solid historical basis that is exploited through manipulation of the peripheral matters in order to emphasize a central point.

With the exception of the fourth figure in the scene, who really is an idiot, the reason these apocalyptic preachers seem so funny in the film is not only because of their gloom and doom predictions and physical appearance, but also because of their absurd context. Brian joins them, after all, after taking a Star Wars inspired trip through space, and crash landing in the heart of Jerusalem, only to emerge unscathed. One could argue that this is a particularly appropriate context to introduce our eschatological doomsayers, as what is apocalyptic eschatology if not a kind of ancient science fiction involving greater heavenly powers, bizarre supra-human creatures from space, cosmic battles beyond the ken of mere mortals, fantastic flights of fancy concerning ultimate reality that cannot be experienced, sensed, or even comprehended by the normal person walking down the dusty streets of first century Jerusalem?

But if you would remove these street preachers from their absurd context in the film and place them instead in known contexts of antiquity, would their preaching really seem all that disjunctive with what we know of that world otherwise? To answer the question, simply imagine someone from the Monty Python crew mouthing the words of John the Baptist: "The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree that does not produce fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."

Or the words of Jesus the son of Ananias, from Josephus (Jewish War 6.5.3): "Woe, woe to Jerusalem.... A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides, and a voice against this whole people!." We should not forget that Josephus tells us that the Jewish rulers thought that this Jesus spoke "with a kind of divine fury", and that Jesus "did not leave off his melancholy ditty," until finally the Roman procurator Alvinus "took him to be a mad man."

Or imagine one of Monty Python's cast intoning the words from the Qumran War Scroll: "During the remaining 33 years of the war the men of renown, those called of the Congregation, and all the heads of the congregation's clans shall choose for themselves men of war for all the lands of the nations (col. 2).... The first division shall heave into the enemy battle line seven battle darts. On the blade of the first dart they shall write, "Flash of a spear for the strength of God." On the second weapon they shall write, "Missiles of blood to fell the slain by the wrath of God." and so on. (col 6) ...

Any of these apocalyptic preachings from roughly the time of Jesus could easily be parodied. To parody them is not necessarily to mock them. It is to concentrate on a key topic by caricaturing the peripherals. The key topic of all these declarations – those of Monty Python’s street preachers, of John the Baptist, of Jesus son of Ananias, of the War Scroll, and of Jesus of Nazareth – the key topic is that the end of the current order of things is imminent, disaster is soon to strike, God is soon to intervene, and people need to repent in order to be ready.

I will pick up at this point of my paper in the next point, as I move on to talk about how the film caricatures the “biblical epics” (especially the sermon on the mount), and about what this parody should alert us to as those interested in the narratives of the Bible — especially the Gospels.



[Brian and the Apocalyptic Jesus Part 2](#)
[Day Two of Jesus and Brian](#)