

This will be my last post on the conference dealing with the Life of Brian and the historical Jesus. Here I would like to summarize one paper that I thought was unusually insightful, to give you an idea of the kind of thing that could be done on a topic like this. As it turns out, it was the opening paper of the conference, and it was delivered by Martin Goodman, professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford.

I should begin by saying that scholars have their own internal ranking systems for who the really good scholars are, who the pretty good ones are, who the OK ones are, and who the rather miserable ones are. It's like most fields: outsiders have trouble knowing which is which. (I couldn't tell a mediocre physicist from a top-flight one if my life depended on it.) With that said, Professor Goodman is at the top of the heap, a world-class scholar who is unusually gifted and knowledgeable about both Jewish and Roman antiquity. He is the real item - and there aren't, frankly, that many real items out there.

His paper, "The Life of Brian and the Politics of First-Century Judaea," was short and to the point, and it wasn't until near the end that I realized just how brilliant it was. His overarching point was that the Life of Brian was remarkably on-target in its portrayal of first century Judaism as composed of various sects of highly militant Jews eager for the overthrow of the Roman empire; but this portrayal was true NOT for the days of Jesus around 30 CE, but only for the later period immediately before the Jewish uprising of 66-70CE.

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