

## History and Humor: How *Life of Brian* Gives Context to Christ's Story

By Amy Hinz

Edited by Komal Reddy and Alley Billings

Editors' note: Amy first produced this piece for a class which encouraged her to closely follow and unpack the argument of a particular critic. Editing her work, we honed in on changes that would expand the appeal of the original version and fully realize her goals as writer. We encouraged Amy to elaborate on her individual takeaways and to provide more context about the film's plot for readers who haven't seen it. We also gave style notes suggesting she maintain a consistent voice and consider how to establish the right tone in writing about such a significant figure as Christ. Amy enthusiastically embraced our suggestions as she prepared her work for publication, and we're very happy to see it in print.

Countless films have been made that chronicle the biblical story of Jesus Christ.

Arguably, one of the most controversial interpretations of Christ's story comes from the British comedy troupe Monty Python and their 1979 film, *Monty Python's The Life of Brian*. At the time the film was made, the Pythons were already well-known for their shrewd, satirical sense of humor, and *The Life of Brian*, which mocks the time period of Christ as well as mocking the public's admiration and obsession with messianic figures, was no exception. Embroiled in controversy upon its release, "the film predictably took criticism for its apparent mockery of the events in the life of Christ" (Blake 431). The backlash to the film was so intense, in fact, that *The Life of Brian* was actually banned from being shown in several locales in the United Kingdom, including in the towns of Harrogate, Dudley, and Swansea (Egan). However, the Pythons themselves resist the narrative that their film mocks Christ and "have consistently pointed out, the film does not actually mock Jesus Christ himself, or any of his preachings as set out in the Gospels" (Basu 180). In viewing the film, I cannot help but agree with the Pythons in their assertion that the film does not mock Christ, but rather sheds light on the potential problems of

blind messianic worship. I take a similar stance to scholars who argue “that Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* should not be regarded as blasphemous or offensive, largely because Brian and Jesus are two distinct characters in the film” (Crossley 93). This distinction between Christ and Brian is key as it reasserts the Python’s stance that the film does not mock Christ; all mockery is aimed at Brian and at the public’s blind worship of him as a messianic figure. Christ is barely a character in the film, with the central plot revolving instead around “Brian Cohen, a regular Jewish boy who was born at the same time and place as Jesus Christ and who gets mistaken for [the Messiah] with disastrous results” (Basu 179-80). Separating Christ from his own story is a stroke of genius from the Pythons that allows them to offer commentary on the larger historical aspects of the Bible through their favored lens of satire. In separating Christ and Brian into two figures, the film operates on another level, allowing viewers to experience the rise of a messianic figure through Brian as well as introducing them to the historical context of Christ’s time period. Therefore, though ostensibly not about Christ, *The Life of Brian* provides insight into the historical time period of Christ and can be beneficial for those interested in furthering their understanding of Christ’s story by immersing themselves in a story set in his historical environment.

Christ’s total screen time in *The Life of Brian* is extremely minimal, with him appearing in just two scenes, and each of those appearances lasting for only a handful of seconds. The first features Christ as a baby in a manger and the second depicts him delivering his sermon on the mount. Notably, neither of these appearances are played off for comedic purposes. Instead, “when Jesus does appear, he is played straight, and baby Jesus is even portrayed with a halo of light around him” (Basu 180). Given Christ’s minimal screen time in *The Life of Brian*, “[t]he figure bearing the name of Jesus is emphatically a stranger, and a suitably divine one” (Davies

407). The Pythons subvert expectations of making a film about the Messiah by satirizing not Christ himself, but rather the time period when Christ would have lived as well as the public search for a Christ-like figure to lead them in their everyday lives. In other words, “*Life of Brian*’s laughter is directed towards the blind following of leaders and doctrines, and its disastrous consequences” (Basu 180). Further to that point, “[m]embers of Monty Python claim that the film is not an attack on religion per-se, but ridicules blind and uncritical acceptance of any ideology or belief system, including religion” (Benko 1). The mockery of a messianic figure is focused not on Jesus, but instead on Brian, who attracts a following of people believing him to be the Messiah entirely by accident. Through Brian’s antics, including a stint with an underground anti-government group called the People’s Front of Judea that leads to his ultimate crucifixion and a memorable scene in which Brian is abducted by aliens and brought aboard a spaceship, viewers are exposed to the historical realm of Christ’s story, a facet of Christ’s story that is often ignored in lieu of focusing on the story of Jesus himself and his performance of miracles.

Regarding the film, one question that often arises is whether “[i]n the context of Bible films . . . [if] *Life of Brian* is a Jesus film. Parallels with earlier Jesus films are obvious, as are the parodies of Gospel stories. Nonetheless, Brian is clearly not Jesus [and] Brian’s replacement of Jesus opens a space for amusing riffs” (Reinhartz 189). Within Reinhartz’s words lies the key to *The Life of Brian*: Brian is not Jesus. Instead, the way the Pythons approach the idea of the Christ figure is done by “split[ting] the figure of Jesus in two, separat[ing] the divine Jesus from the historical Jesus, and explor[ing] the historical aspect through the character of Brian” (Basu 182). In this way, the film can be a beneficial text for those who are interested in expanding their historical knowledge of Jesus’s time period and allows viewers to engage with the historical

landscape of Judea alongside the character of Brian. Brian encapsulates the character archetype of the every man, and through him viewers are able to experience everyday life in Judea. Brian and his mother live in a modest home, attend large public events like Christ's sermon on the mount, and live their day-to-day lives under the influence of the Roman soldiers occupying their town. These things are somewhat mundane, but that is the point; Brian's life is not exciting, and he only gains acclaim after he is mistakenly named a Messiah. However, in the mundanity of Brian's everyday life, viewers witness historical aspects of life for an ostensibly normal member of the public in the Christ's time period. Overall, the historical aspects of Christ's story are well-handled throughout the film, with "[t]he nature of the film's relationship to historical research and to the New Testament offer[ing] an adequate pretext for exploring Monty Python's *Life of Brian* as a theological text" (Davies 406).

Notably, a key scene providing significant historical context within the film is also "[o]ne of the most controversial scenes" (Basu 182). The scene ultimately "demonstrates the historical research involved in making the film . . . [and] depicts Brian's crucifixion" (Basu 182). Depicting crucifixion as an everyday occurrence, *The Life of Brian* culminates with its titular character being crucified among a pantheon of his peers after a series of unfortunate mix-ups. Dr. Laura Basu offers excellent insight into this controversial scene, saying:

Those who objected to the film claimed that it mocks the suffering Jesus Christ endured for our sins. The Pythons meanwhile explain that crucifixion was in fact a routine - though horrific - punishment carried out by the Romans at that time, and it is likely that Jesus would have had company on the cross. Through Brian, Jesus is thereby humanised, and some of the mysticism is taken out of his life story. (182)

In depicting Brian's crucifixion, the Pythons are again exhibiting their knowledge of and staying true to the historical time period they are depicting in *The Life of Brian*. Crucifixion was not unique to Christ's story. In fact, people under Roman control in the time of Christ were crucified regularly, not just if they were a messianic figure whose very presence threatened the upheaval of Roman rule. In following the theme of Brian's story up to that point, his crucifixion is just as mundane as the majority of his life. Brian is not rescued from his unfortunate end, instead, he meets the same end as the biblical Christ, thus completing their twinned narratives through Brian's crucifixion.

Ultimately, *The Life of Brian* is "not an attack on the Bible but rather offers a thoughtful historical and philosophical reflection" (Basu 180). *The Life of Brian* is undoubtedly a divisive film, however, there still are "serious Bible scholars [who] find the film enriching for their own work" (Blake 431). The satirical lens of the Pythons is beneficial in so far as it offers many insights into the historical world of Jesus, the power dynamics of Roman influence in the historical landscape of Judea, and the zealous followers of religious Messiahs. By viewing the story of the historical Jesus, encompassed in the character of Brian, through the lens of comedy, viewers can find much to enhance their own theological understanding in watching the film, and "[a]s such, it deserves a place in the cultural canon of Christian and post-Christian theology as much as it does in the canon of cult films" (Davies 414).

## Works Cited

- Basu, Laura. "Who Can Take a Joke? *Life of Brian*, *Four Lions*, and the Religious "Humour Scandals"." *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 177-206, [https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/69323/1/Basu\\_Who%20can%20take%20a%20joke.pdf](https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/69323/1/Basu_Who%20can%20take%20a%20joke.pdf).
- Benko, Steven. "Ironic Faith in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*." *Journal of Religion & Film*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2012, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=jrf>.
- Blake, Richard. "Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and His Times via Monty Python's *Life of Brian*., Edited by Taylor, Joan E." *Religion and the Arts (Chestnut Hill, Mass.)*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2017, pp. 431-33, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685292-02103012>.
- Crossley, J. G. "Life of Brian or Life of Jesus? Uses of Critical Biblical Scholarship and Non-Orthodox Views of Jesus in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*". *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception*, vol. 1, no. 1, July 2011, pp. 93-114, doi:10.11157/rsrr1-1-10.
- Davies, Philip R. "Life of Brian Research." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 1998, pp. 400-414.
- Egan, Kate. "'The Film That's Banned in Harrogate': Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979), Local Censorship, Comedy and Local Resistance." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2020, pp. 152-71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2020.1815363>.
- Reinhartz, Adele. *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*. Routledge, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203083260>.