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Review Essay

What Have the Pythons Ever Done for Us?

Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and his Times via Monty Python's Life of Brian, edited by Joan E. Taylor
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ONE OF THE MOST beloved and oft-quoted scenes in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*¹ is the one about that long-standing question, "what have the Romans ever done for us?" A secret meeting of the People's Front of Judea is the setting for a rant from leader Reg (John Cleese) in which this negatively framed rhetorical question is answered by his revolutionary comrades with a series of benefits of Roman rule: the "aqueduct," the "roads," "public order," "sanitation," "the wine," and so on. The final offering of "peace" from Brian (Graham Chapman) receives the leader's exasperated response, "shut up!"

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¹ Terry Jones, dir. *Life of Brian* (HandMade, 1979).

In this review, I want to join with the organisers of the Jesus and Brian Conference held at King’s College London in June 2014—the source of the essays in this book—in asking a slightly different question to that of Reg: “What have the Pythons ever done for us?”² Cleese and his Python pals have, of course, entertained many of us for years, but what, if anything, have they ever done for us as biblical scholars?

This book provides some sensible responses to that question by some highly esteemed biblical scholars, the details of which I will summarise later. I am sure, however, that I won’t be alone in wondering how such a funny film came to receive such serious scholarly responses. Indeed on the back of these essays, I would like to suggest that we should try to be a bit less worthy, “give the audience a grin,” and consider answering our question with this radical thought: *the Pythons are our Brians!*

Although the irascible Cleese was apparently reluctant to allow conference attendees into the same room as him, meriting a “How should we fuck off, Oh Lord?” from me on the day as each of the speakers were led away to their separate *Python-filled* coffee space, he and his fellow Pythons have nevertheless offered biblical scholars a way to a brighter future *via* their film. Will the biblical guild decide to follow these messianic Brians? I just wish I could have gotten close enough at King’s to grab Cleese’s shoe!³

Reception History, Jesus and Brian

So what do I mean? In his foreword, Paul M. Joyce, the Samuel Davidson Professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King’s, offers us a reflection on the *Jesus and Brian* volume in the light of his views on reception history. Joyce suggests that in recent years reception history has been involved in creating “credentials” for itself, in rebutting the “biblical studies on holiday” label so prevalent in the field, and in demonstrating that it involves the same “scientific sensitivity” and “rigour” as its historical-critical counterpart (xvii). Unsurprisingly, he then opposes the tendency to polarise historical criticism and reception history, claiming that biblical scholars are capable of doing both, albeit with some adjustments made to their skills and knowledge:

² The conference programme is available online at <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/events/jandb/JPBprogWeb.pdf>.

³ For all of its flaws, the Jesus and Brian conference was a great event and kudos is due to everyone involved in organising and running it.

It is vital that biblical scholars should not define their work too narrowly and refuse to step outside the circle of their expertise, strictly defined. Interdisciplinary work requires that those who engage in it make themselves vulnerable in this way, ready to venture into territory where connections are made between biblical studies, film studies, cultural criticism, intellectual history and much besides, even though no one individual can be expert in all of these fields. (xvii)

His phrasing here suggests that the problem has never really been the *uncritical* nature of reception history. Rather it has been the question of *who* exactly should do it. Should the study of the Bible's use, influence, and impact in different times and places be left to scholars specialising in those times and places?⁴ That so many biblical scholars today answer "yes" to this question simply highlights for me the dangerous self-harming to which so many in our guild are currently addicted.

Why won't they abandon their narrow definitions, and try to move into the wider humanities and beyond? We still have enough human resource within the traditional discipline to do this—forgetting for a while our ambition of writing that "stands-out-from-the-crowd" commentary on Romans—but time is definitely running out for us in the UK. It is therefore one of the greatest pluses of the Jesus and Brian conference and this book that they show us a potential way forward. Are we willing to follow the lead of Jesus and Brian, of Cleese and Co.?

The Way of the "Shoe"

GIRL: This is His gourd!... It is His gourd! We will carry it for you, Master!

...

SHOE

FOLLOWER: He has given us... His shoe!

The most important of all *Life of Brian* questions now arises for us: Should we follow the "gourd" or should we follow the "shoe"? A source of division and ultimately of violence between Brian's numerous instant followers, it also

⁴ This question is discussed further in my article, "Some Thoughts on Defining Reception History and the Future of Biblical Studies," *The Bible and Interpretation*, August 2015, esp. section 7 (<http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2015/08/ly0398005.shtml>).

offers biblical scholars the opportunity to adopt two different hopefully non-violent and cooperative responses to their film, that of the “shoe” or that of the “gourd.” A third response to Brian—modelled in the film by Spike Milligan’s cameo appearance, when, unable to gain the attention of either set of followers, he walks off the screen without ever following Brian—may stand for the exclusionary practices of our discipline’s many “gate-keepers.”⁵ It is they who are the sustainers of the “violence inherent in the system” as Dennis the peasant so eloquently puts it in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.⁶ As we will see, however, the followers of the “shoe” and the followers of the “gourd” should be united against that particular hegemony.

Joyce introduces a relatively unfamiliar term into his discussion, “reception exegesis.” It is a term which the book’s editor, Joan E. Taylor, expands further in her “Introduction” (xxi–xxvii, esp. xxvii) and in her chapter, “The Historical Brian: Reception Exegesis in Practice” (93–106). Joyce writes,

the contributors to the present volume not only explore the many ways in which the *Life of Brian* uses, adapts and is influenced by the gospels, but also frequently engage in what has been called “reception exegesis,” which is driven by the insight that how the Bible has been received may provide invaluable assistance in the exegetical task. (xviii)

This activity, I suggest, forms the key identity marker of the *Shoe-sians*.

As Joyce himself acknowledges, reception history’s terminology is rather fluid. I do not expect a resolution anytime soon and am more interested in the pragmatics of doing it. But his and Taylor’s use of “reception exegesis” intrigues me. No synonym for reception history, it refers instead to a specific type of that approach, one in which the study of an item influenced by biblical materials is then reflected back by the Shoe-sian onto the historical

⁵ Cf. Jon Morgan, “Visions, Gatekeepers, and Receptionists: Reflections on the shape of Biblical Studies and the Role of Reception History,” in Emma England and William John Lyons, ed., *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: T&T Clark International, 2015), 61–76. Morgan notes that the sense he gets from reading the traditional critics with whom he is interacting is that “as they pause from gazing proudly down the long and noble history of biblical studies and swivel around, they see a similarly long and glorious future rolling out ahead” (74). Until they relinquish this notion, little or nothing will be “allowed” to change in their areas of influence.

⁶ Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones, dir., *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Python Pictures, 1975).

origins of those materials. Clearly this is a revival of Larry Kreitzer's idea of "reversing the hermeneutical flow,"⁷ referenced by both Joyce (xix) and Taylor (xxvii) as a precursor to their work and the aim of which was described by Kreitzer in his own scholarly context as being "to reverse the flow of influence within the hermeneutical process and examine select NT passages or themes in light of some of the enduring expressions of our own culture, namely great literary works and their film adaptations."⁸ Joyce writes:

The point is that biblical scholars bent on interpretation of the Bible in traditional scholarly ways do not have a monopoly on explicating the ancient text. Illumination can also be derived from textual and other media that are better characterized as responding to or using the biblical text, rather than exegeting it. Use of the Bible in later times can thus shine a spotlight on biblical verses that have been dulled by familiarity; it can foreground biblical concepts and concerns that have faded over time into the background; and it can even give rise to new readings of difficult Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek terms. (xviii)⁹

The importance of "reception exegesis" in Taylor's selecting of the conference participants is emphasised on its website and in her Introduction to the book.

[Website] This conference opens up *Life of Brian* to renewed investigation, using it in an innovative way to sharpen our view. Papers presented by some of the world's most eminent biblical scholars and historians will discuss the film's relevance to history, biblical studies and Life of Jesus research.... There will be

⁷ E.g., Larry Kreitzer, *The New Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); *The Old Testament in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); *Pauline Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); and *Gospel Images in Fiction and Film: On Reversing the Hermeneutical Flow* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

⁸ Larry Kreitzer, *New Testament*, 19; and quoted on page 13 of his *Old Testament*.

⁹ This description makes it obvious that the notion of the original text being illuminated by the readings and significances of the present is hardly new. Disciplines such as Classics have long investigated the influence of later periods on their exegetical readings on their texts and we could also note the emphasis on contemporary contexts and interpretations in areas such as liberation exegesis or canonical approaches to the biblical texts.

discussion of the socio-political context and Josephus; costuming and setting; and other topics. The aim is to use the film to reflect on history, interpretation and meaning, as a tool that can help us consider our assumptions and the historical evidence: a “reception exegesis” approach.¹⁰

[Book] I [Taylor] invited scholars I knew to be cutting edge in the field, not only locally within the United Kingdom and Ireland, but also internationally, and only wish I could have invited more, since once word of the event got out I was written to by many who supported the project.... In the recent work of my colleague, Paul Joyce, with my former colleague Diana Lipton, in their study of Lamentations,¹¹ they talk about “reception exegesis”.... [I]n the conference and for this book, I asked eminent scholars to reflect on the film’s reception, and to use the *Life of Brian* as a hermeneutical tool, a means of reflecting not only on our texts, but on the Jesus of history and on his context in first-century Judea.¹²

The impact of this selection process can be seen in the subtitle of the *Jesus and Brian* book—*Exploring the Historical Jesus and his Times via Monty Python’s Life of Brian*—and in its Part 2 title—“History and Interpretation via Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*”—a section which contains ten of its sixteen essays and takes up 145 of its 237 essay pages. The first of these, Taylor’s discussion of reception exegesis has already been mentioned; the rest offer detailed examinations of a diverse array of ancient concepts as seen through the lens of the *Life of Brian*. Identity is a prominent theme, bound up in resistance/anti-Roman sentiment (Guy Stiebel, Steve Mason), Jewishness (Adele Reinhartz), Gender and Sexuality (Amy-Jill Levine), with other essays focused upon Parody (Bart Ehrman) and Laughter (Helen K. Bond), the Invention of Tradition (Paula Fredriksen), the Teacher of Righteousness (George J. Brooke), and First-century Dress (Katie Turner). Given the strong lead from both editor and foreword author on the importance of “reception exegesis,” the question of whether or not these ten authors’ interactions with

¹⁰ King’s College London, *Jesus and Brian*, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/evens/jandb/about.aspx>.

¹¹ Paul Joyce and Diana Lipton, *Lamentations through the Centuries* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 1–25.

¹² Taylor, “Introduction,” xxii, xxvii.

the film are judged to have produced new insights into “Jesus and his Times” will likely become the greatest measure of the book’s success.

The Way of the “Gourd”

I will let others decide about the successfulness or otherwise of the Part 2 essays, however. For I myself am no follower of the “shoe”! I read Larry Kreitzer’s books as they were published and I often thought that he never really got around to reversing the hermeneutical flow. But I cared not a jot. For, I—pauses for dramatic effect—am a follower of the “gourd”!

Concluding his thoughts on Shoe-sian analysis, Joyce writes:

This does not mean, of course, that examples of reception history that do not enrich our understanding of the core biblical text are less valuable than those that do. In other words, the legitimacy of reception history as an enterprise by no means depends upon its having to “pay its way” by yielding exegetical fruit; it is valuable in its own right in multiple ways. That it sometimes, indeed often—as in the present volume—yields new insights that can be shared at the exegetical table is a serendipitous bonus, which offers an additional dimension to reception history as usually understood. (xviii)

I am happy to see a “serendipitous bonus” or two emerge, but they do not really float my boat; the book’s first six essays under the Part 1 heading of “The Film in its Cinematic Context, Its Reception and Its Challenges” are much more my cup of tea. To ask the obvious question with William R. Telford as to the place of the *Life of Brian* in the genre of the Jesus film is, well, obvious. The reception of the film in the infamous televised interview of Cleese, Michael Palin, Malcolm Muggeridge, and Mervyn Stockwood (Bishop of Southwark), is ripe for critical re-examination on the 25th anniversary of the film—a BBC dramatisation of that event, *Holy Flying Circus* (2014) was broadcast the same month as the King’s conference—and here Richard Burridge steps up to the plate. David Sheppard examines the successes and failures of biblical parody, setting the *Life of Brian* against the dreadful *Wholly Moses* of 1980; Wikipedia succinctly summarises the latter’s reception as: “The movie received poor reviews.”¹³ For David Tollerton, it is

¹³ “Wholly Moses!”, Wikipedia.org, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wholly_Moses!

contemporary discussion of blasphemy that provides the heuristic setting for an examination of the Python film. James G. Crossley and Philip R. Davies, both of whom are veterans who have already published on Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, each offer their own inimitable take on Brian's relevance to discussion about Jesus and the Bible today. Sadly, as Taylor notes (xxv), one presentation from the conference is missing from the book, with the non-Python imagery contained in Aaron Rosen's hugely entertaining "Sonofagod: Images of Jesus in Contemporary Art" being subsumed into his 2015 volume *Art and Religion in the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson). An essay by Rosen based on that presentation would surely have fitted into Part 1, but the relevance of his material to Python will unfortunately remain somewhat hidden for now.

Given the book's dualism, it is interesting to note that a tension between the two ways appears in David Tollerton's chapter. In his conclusion, he writes that,

despite its merits, a fundamental risk reception exegesis must guard against is treating post-biblical material superficially. The most meaningful interaction between *Life of Brian* and study of the ancient world, it is hoped, engages with the reality that Monty Python's film is in so many ways a rich and complex cultural artefact in its own right. *Life of Brian*, in other words, deserves not to be used as simply an entertaining pit-stop on the way to antiquity (67).

Tollerton concludes that in trying to avoid this trap in his chapter, he "perhaps ultimately ended up breaking away from the primary ambitions of reception exegesis" (67), and hence his essay appears in Part 1 rather than Part 2. Joan Taylor then begins her own chapter on reception exegesis with a nod to Tollerton's comments (93). It will be interesting to see how many readers fault the Part 2 authors for treating the film in a superficial way (a failure in doing reception history) rather than for their failing to illuminate the source texts in any new way (a failure in doing reception exegesis).

Conclusion

Despite my own favouring of the "Gourd-ian" way, I want to agree with Paul Joyce that biblical scholars are much more adaptable than they are usually given credit for and to say that I consider the book a success already

precisely because of the ten authors in Part 2 of the book—including some very significant figures within the guild—who worked happily with a subject far outside their specialisms in search of a “serendipitous bonus.” The way of the “shoe”—the enticing of the wary, skittish, biblical scholar into the wilds of Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* in search of exegetical insight—is a useful thing, it seems to me, not least because there is always a chance that they might find the quest worth repeating for its own sake.

What worries me most about the biblical guild in the UK—others more competent to judge can comment on other situations world-wide—is that it is currently beset by serious troubles that are increasingly making their presence felt. Departments are closing or appear to be heading that way, posts are being lost or transferred; I, for example, moved from Theology and Religious Studies into the University of Bristol’s Department of History on August 1st of this year (2015). To my mind, the value of *Jesus and Brian* is that it offers us the way of the “shoe,” the way of doing biblical studies *via* Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*. If biblical scholars do not accept the way of the “gourd”—and I accept that it is not for everyone—then they would do well to grasp the way of the “shoe.” Following the model of Spike Milligan in walking away from Brian without a backward glance—the predisposition of the discipline’s “gate-keepers”—runs the risk of leaving many of us with little or nothing to follow at all. The discipline of biblical studies is in grave danger of becoming an ever-shrinking minority area of narrowly defined study set within a largely uncaring and under-pressure Humanities. That is the reason why the call to follow the “shoe” should not be ignored by biblical scholars; it is their very discipline that is at stake.¹⁴

¹⁴ Many questions could be asked about the hermeneutical relationship between the way of the “shoe” and the way of the “gourd.” All I will say here is, all in good time, all in good time...