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## Skyfall: The "Aliens Sequence" in Monty Python's Life of Brian

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## Skyfall: The "Aliens Sequence" in Monty Python's Life of Brian

### Abstract

Despite its brevity and science fiction genre, Terry Gilliam's "aliens sequence" in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* functions in at least three ways: It is a brilliant parody of *Star Wars* and other space epics. It addresses concerns that were of profound significance for the religion of Jesus' day and, finally, and it significantly challenges the Christian premise of a divinely ordained purpose underlying Jesus' life.

In Memoriam Terry Jones (1942-2020)

### Keywords

Life of Brian, aliens in film, parody, Star Wars

### Author Notes

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After four decades, *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979; dir. Terry Jones) has attained the accolade of all true comedy: it has begun to be taken seriously. Of course, the film has long been considered one of the best comedies ever.<sup>1</sup> It continues to garner kudos for its incisive and witty script, and its “demolition-from-the-inside on the outdated cinematic clichés and monochrome morality of the Roman epic film.”<sup>2</sup> Many of the Pythons themselves would consider it the high-water mark of their overall oeuvre.<sup>3</sup> Yet, quite apart from its success as a comedy, the film has begun to be increasingly referenced by the academic community for its insights into matters far removed from comedy. Apart from the stature it retains in the realm of film, it has been increasingly explored for its social and political implications.<sup>4</sup> James Crossley, for instance, uses it to map and highlight “a number of ideological tensions in the aftermath of the 1960s which Thatcherism would attempt to harness, hold together, reconfigure, or transform.”<sup>5</sup> A collection of essays, entitled *Monty Python and Philosophy. Nudge Nudge, Think Think*,<sup>6</sup> parses *Brian* to address topics as diverse as the existence of God and humanism, while the film has further been investigated for its contributions to theories of the grotesque.<sup>7</sup>

The film's greatest impact on the academic world, however, has arguably been in the realms of Biblical Studies and the history of the Second Temple period. Even a casual viewer would notice that the film, however funny, raises serious questions about life in first-century Judea and Galilee. The extreme factionalism plaguing the Jewish resistance to Rome, the venality of the Roman overlords, the

prevalence of pseudo-messiahs—even the question of how Jesus could effectively be heard by crowds of 5,000 or more—are all topics that do not usually appear in Jesus movies, but are integral to understanding Jesus and his world.<sup>8</sup> And the Pythons sought to do just that. To prepare for the film they immersed themselves in Jesus research and studies of the Second Temple period: Michael Palin remarks that they embarked on a “very academic approach. We read books about the Bible story and that period, the Dead Sea Scrolls and various new interpretations of the Gospels, that sort of thing, just because we all felt, well, we can’t just do silly jokes about people being knocked off donkeys, there’s got to be a kind of philosophical approach as well.”<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, the film has increasingly received serious consideration from biblical scholars and historians. After the seminal and pioneering article by Philip Davies in 1998, biblical and related scholars have increasingly come to recognize its importance.<sup>10</sup> Not only is a chapter devoted to it in a recent anthology dedicated to the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus,<sup>11</sup> but *Life of Brian* also inspired a 2014 conference at King’s College, London, with a volume based on it, featuring contributions by 16 leading biblical scholars.<sup>12</sup> This is no small achievement for a film that was infamously (and unfairly) derided by Malcolm Muggeridge and Mervyn Stockwood, the Bishop of Southwark, as “tawdry” and “tenth-rate.”<sup>13</sup> That being said, even Terry Jones was slightly taken aback by the conference: he remarks that it “is astonishing to think the *Life of Brian* is a subject that can make academics assemble to discuss it in all seriousness.”<sup>14</sup>

Since a substantial amount of academic research has already been devoted to the *Life of Brian* as a whole, the intention of this article is to concentrate on one discrete component of the film, namely the “aliens episode,” a segment that has been justly acclaimed for its innovation.<sup>15</sup> In fact, it is without doubt the film’s most jaw-droppingly Pythonesque and “completely different” segment, and it serves in various ways as a valuable lens through which to focalize some of the film’s larger concerns. Despite its brevity, the episode functions in the film in at least three different ways. First, it works as a pioneering and brilliant parody of the emergent outer-space genre typified by *Star Wars* (1977; dir. George Lucas) and *Alien* (1979; dir. Ridley Scott).<sup>16</sup> Second, the episode addresses fundamental issues about the cultural and biblical milieu of Jesus’ day. Finally, it seriously challenges presuppositions about the canonical Gospels and the narratives of the historical Jesus. Accordingly, the discussion that follows will begin with a discussion of the origins of the sequence, its function as parody, and then move to show how—intentionally or not—the episode gives expression to various biblical echoes, and raises questions about the life of Jesus.

### **Terry Gilliam and the Background to the “Aliens Episode”**

The “aliens episode” opens with Brian, hotly pursued by the Romans, climbing to the top of a tower. He falls off, but before he hits the ground he is whisked aboard

a spaceship piloted by two bizarre aliens, who are being pursued and attacked by another spaceship. A *Star Wars*-style, intergalactic dogfight ensues, where Brian's spaceship is hit, and it crash-lands in Jerusalem right next to the tower where he'd been rescued. The spaceship and its aliens are destroyed, but Brian is able to pick himself up, dust himself off, and continue his flight from Romans. The episode closes with a bystander exclaiming, "You lucky bastard!"

At its most straightforward level the intervention by the aliens serves as a *deus ex machina*. How does Brian get safely from the top of the tower to the ground? Simple—an alien spaceship! The idea for this sequence is sometimes attributed to Graham Chapman, who reportedly asked, "Why isn't Brian rescued by a flying saucer at this point?"<sup>17</sup> Terry Gilliam then developed the "live action, special effects sequence," which represents a departure from previous Monty Python productions, where Gilliam's primary contribution was the animations that served as a linking device between the various sketches.<sup>18</sup> In *Life of Brian*, however, apart from the opening credits, this was the only (partly-) animated sequence to figure in the film. The absence of animation was due to Gilliam's emergent role as film designer, but also because the Pythons agreed that the film's narrative was strong enough not to require linking material.<sup>19</sup> As Gilliam noted at the time, "The closer we come to doing real stories in Python, like this one is, the less room there is for animation."<sup>20</sup> But because the Pythons felt that it would not be a Python film without his animations, they all concluded that "We can't have a Python film

without Terry having something in there apart from performing.”<sup>21</sup> Gilliam, therefore, became responsible for the opening credits.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, however, he was growing increasingly fascinated with the prospects of directing: “After a while, I just started to get bored with animation...I decided that I wanted to do the things on film that I was doing in animation.”<sup>23</sup>

The alien sequence was part of this deliberate change in focus. He recollects the episode as follows:

I honestly don't remember whether it was my idea or not, the idea of the spaceship for getting Brian from the top of the tower to the ground safely. Does anybody else claim credit for that? Because if they don't, I will! It might have been Graham for all I know, but the reason I think it might have been me was because I was very much impressed with a lot of what was going on in *Star Wars* at the time, the scale of that; all I wanted to do was play around with that. So once we decided on the spaceship, then I was on my own and just did my spaceship sequence, invented my little creatures. I think it was my desperate bid to escape from being the animator, escape from that role. It was my first chance to play around with model shooting. We'd done some very basic stuff on *Holy Grail*, like using little cows from train sets thrown in the air, but this is me and my interest in special effects moving forward...I got my own little film group, a good crew, and we did all that in a room about twenty-five feet by twenty-five feet, got Graham to come in and look frightened for a bit, and that was it!<sup>24</sup>

To develop the *Star Wars* sequence, he paid a visit to the studio where the filming of *Alien* (1979; dir. Ridley Scott) had just been completed, and acquired a number of set-pieces to construct his own aliens montage. As is apparent from a recent interview, that Gilliam had seen a screening of *Alien* prior to its release:

There are some great moments in it [*Alien*], but the shot that should've never been in the film is the one at the end showing the alien getting blown out of the airlock. You see the alien, and it's just a guy in a rubber suit. Up until then, you only saw bits of the alien, and it seemed to be huge and vast and terrifying. That was so clever. It was like the shark in 'Jaws.' I told Ridley, 'You don't want that shot of the alien at the end. Cut it!'<sup>25</sup>

Gilliam's "aliens sequence" was not filmed in Monastir, Tunisia, but two months afterward in London, where Graham Chapman, by now a British tax exile, made a lightning visit to London to complete the episode. The whole sequence was deliberately done on the cheap. When George Lucas later raved about it, Gilliam dismissively replied, "Yeah. OK. We did it for a fiver."<sup>26</sup> His success was such that he was later sounded out about directing an *Alien* film of his own: "I got offered an 'Alien' sequel because I was hot at that time, as a result of 'Time Bandits' and 'Fisher King,' and I just don't want to do films like that. They are factory jobs, working for a studio."<sup>27</sup>

### **The "Aliens Episode" as Parody**

As Gilliam's offhand response to Lucas indicates, an elaborate and costly tribute to *Star Wars* was very far from his intentions. Rather, given *Star Wars*'s extraordinary popularity, it formed an ideal target for the Pythons' satire. The result is that Gilliam and the Python crew were among the very first to parody modern space epics—nearly a decade in advance of Mel Brooks' 1987 *Spaceballs*, and two in advance of



*Galaxy Quest* (1999; dir. Dean Parisot). Of course, parodies of space travel are almost as old as film itself; one need only mention Georges Méliès's 1902 anti-colonial satire, *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le Voyage dans la Lune*).<sup>28</sup> Gilliam's distinction was to shift this emphasis to a post-*Star Wars* context and to situate it in a "Jesus film." So, just as the rest of Brian brilliantly skewers the 50's sword-and-sandal spectacle, the aliens sequence satirizes the emergent genre of space films.<sup>29</sup> Gilliam revels in the possibilities afforded by lo-tech: a cardboard box is transformed into a spaceship, ridiculously fitted out with motorcycle parts and intravenous drips. Terrifying aliens are absent. Instead we are faced with ludicrous one-eyed, lipsticked, corpulent foam "creatures," (to use Gilliam's term), shoehorned into a spaceship console reminiscent of a 1950's Austin. The spaceship's engine even goes through a series of motorcycle gear changes as it is pursued by its enemies.<sup>30</sup> But where the *Millennial Falcon* successfully outmaneuvers its enemies, no such luck attends the alien spaceship that rescues Brian. It is outgunned and destroyed when it crash-lands next to the tower.

The parody works, first of all, by shattering plot conventions. Gilliam remarks that Brian is deliberately delivered from one impossible situation by being thrust into another. Brian is unexpectedly saved by a *deus ex machina*, but, shockingly, it is a "*deus*" that it is not the film's *deus* ("Jehovah") and, in fact, not a *deus* at all, but two aliens. The spaceship's irruption is one that is totally alien (as it were) to the film's conceptual world. Standard generic conventions are entirely

subverted and upended, whether they be those of Jesus biopics or outer-space Westerns, by introducing incongruous elements of both genres in the very same film and in the very same time-frame. While a similar gambit was employed at the end of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975; dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones), with King Arthur and his knights blundering onto a modern film set very like that of Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* television show, the disjunction in *Brian* is more shocking. The clash of settings does not merely break down the fourth wall or cascade the viewer through a multiplicity of sets à la *Blazing Saddles* (1974; dir. Mel Brooks), it thrusts her into a completely different reality. As Peter Marks acutely notes, the episode "detonates the rules of narrative logic, and in a film notable for its stylistic and generic consistency (in terms of Python), it rips the film into a parallel universe that marries the mannerisms of *Star Wars* with the crummy effects of *Dr. Who*."<sup>31</sup>

This conjunction and resulting disjunction of genres cannot but bring the viewer to ask how these two discrete world views can be reconciled. What does Luke Skywalker have to do with Luke the Evangelist? Or Jesus' ascension with Brian's ascent with aliens? Contemporary moviegoers are suddenly confounded with a juxtaposition of the history of first-century Palestine with the realities of space travel and asked to consider which is the more credible. Gilliam's parody does not simply call into question the conventions of both film genres, but also

brings world views that are usually distinct and compartmentalized in most people's minds into a profound collision.<sup>32</sup>

This conceptual collision anticipates Gilliam's later account of his directorial practice: "I feel there's a responsibility to not just entertain people, but to actually inform them and make them think, make them perceive things differently. It's not so much always a message, but at least it's trying to make people look at life and the world with fresh eyes."<sup>33</sup> As will be explored more fully below, there is little doubt that Gilliam's radical disjunction of genres did challenge his audience to view the world differently. Yet, despite its radical incongruity with the rest of the film, the "aliens episode" actually addresses concerns that are more intimately concerned with the Gospels and Second Temple Judaism than one would initially suppose.

### **The "Aliens Episode" and the Biblical Milieu of Jesus' Day**

As noted above, the *Life of Brian* has been increasingly and fruitfully scrutinized by biblical scholars and, somewhat unexpectedly, the "aliens episode" appears to offer several significant echoes of the Gospels and the religious milieu of Jesus' day. For instance, the episode has some suggestive affinities with the Temptation narratives of Jesus in Matthew and Luke (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13).<sup>34</sup> While Mark's Gospel also includes a brief account of Jesus' temptation (Mark 1:12-13), the versions found in Matthew and Luke is generally thought to be derived from the

hypothetical Q source.<sup>35</sup> Here, in one of the three temptations Satan takes Jesus up to the “pinnacle” of the Jerusalem Temple (Matt 4:5-7; Luke 4:9) and challenges him: ““If you are God’s Son, throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels about you and on their hands they will bear you, so that you do not strike your foot against a stone. And Jesus [in reply] told him: ‘It is written: Do not put to the test the Lord your God’” (Q 4:9-12).<sup>36</sup> While scholars have offered very different suggestions about precisely what the “pinnacle” (*pterugion*) of the temple refers to, the basic idea is relatively clear—a high point that would result in a deadly fall.<sup>37</sup>

Brian differs from Jesus in not being confronted with a test—in his eagerness to escape the pursuing Romans he fails to notice that the top of the tower was still under construction and suddenly finds himself plummeting earthward. Precisely at this moment the aliens’ spaceship swoops down next to the tower and does indeed prevent Brian’s feet from striking the ground. Here, however, the angels are replaced by aliens, a replacement that works on a now well-established parallel between gods or angels and aliens. At the time of the filming of *Brian*, the impact of Erich von Däniken’s pseudoscientific book, *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968), was very much alive, even though the identification between angels and aliens was already almost a cliché. As was true for the contents of most of the book, von Däniken merely popularized the idea. Consequently, having aliens rather than

angels swoop to Brian's rescue would have been a natural—and amusing—substitution for a late-1970's audience.

It is also possible that the episode is also referencing the sword-and-sandal spectacular, *The Silver Chalice* (1954; dir. Victor Saville), based on a popular historical novel by Thomas B. Costain.<sup>38</sup> The Pythons mention that their research extended to genre of bible and film, where they immersed themselves in films such as *Quo Vadis* (1951; dir. Mervyn LeRoy and Anthony Mann), and *Solomon and Sheba* (1959; dir. King Vidor), *Ben Hur* (1951; dir. William Wyler) and *Barabbas* (1961; dir. Richard Fleischer).<sup>39</sup> *The Silver Chalice* fits with these films, as it offers a vivid example of a 'false messiah' on a tower, namely the arch-heretic, Simon Magus. The figure of Simon first appears in the book of Acts, where he tries to buy divine power from the apostle Peter, and is rebuffed for his "Simony" (Acts 8.9-24), but subsequently he has a long and notorious history in Christian tradition.<sup>40</sup> Over the centuries, Simon's infamy deepens, and by the time of the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, Costain's source, Simon is able to fly:

And Simon addressed the people and said with a shrill voice, 'On the following day about the seventh hour you shall see me fly over the gate of the city in the same form in which I now speak to you.' ...About the seventh hour there suddenly appeared afar off a dust-cloud in the sky, looking like smoke shining with a glare of fire. And when it reached the gate it suddenly disappeared. Then he appeared standing in the midst of the people. They all worshipped him and knew that it was he whom they had seen the day before (*The Acts of Peter* 4)<sup>41</sup>

When Peter arrives, Simon boasts: “‘I am about to ascend in the presence of all the onlookers...I ascend and will show myself to this people what kind of being I am.’ And, behold, he was lifted up and they saw him ascending over Rome and over its temples and hills.” Peter retaliates against Simon by praying, ‘Make haste, O Lord, show your mercy and let him fall down and become crippled but not die; let him be disabled and break his leg in three places.’ And he fell down and broke his leg in three places” (*The Acts of Peter* 32).

The film of *The Silver Chalice* recasts this narrative by situating Simon (Jack Palance) on a tower in front of Nero and the assembled multitudes. Simon, like Brian, climbs the interior of the tower, chased in this instance by a retainer, proclaiming at the top, “I am no longer a man; I am God” and projects himself from the tower into space. However, as Nero succinctly observes, “He didn’t fly.”<sup>42</sup> Rather, Simon plummets just as Brian did (or the famous flying sheep in the Monty Python’s sketch), but he is rescued by no alien, and dies from his fall. If a comparison is intended between Brian and Simon, it may be that Brian’s humility is meant to contrast with Simon’s arrogance. Unlike Brian, who is emphatic that he is *not* the Messiah, and wants no followers whatever, Simon is the very type of messiah-figure that the Pythons set out to satirize—the would-be savior who seeks only his own glory.<sup>43</sup> Whatever the reason, it is clear that Brian gets a special dispensation. What makes this dispensation even more special is that his descent is transformed into its opposite—a heavenly ascent.

The ascent theme dominates the apocalyptic mindsets of early Christianity and Judaism. Accounts of mystical heavenly ascents, divine chariots, and extraordinary heavenly worlds, peopled by composite creatures, are widespread in Second Temple literature.<sup>44</sup> The New Testament hints at these heavenly realms with Jesus' transfiguration, but its clearest instance comes from St. Paul: "I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Cor. 12.2-5 NRSV).

Paul does not mention any conveyance to the third heaven, but in other cases, the heavenly ascent involves being taken up by a cherubim chariot. The *Testament of Abraham* describes how Abraham is gifted with a heavenly ascent.: "And the archangel Michael went down and took Abraham on a chariot of cherubim and lifted him up into the air of heaven...And on the carriage Abraham soared over the entire inhabited world" (*Testament of Abraham* 10.1).<sup>45</sup> The chariot proceeds to penetrate further into the heavens, where Abraham encounters other wondrous beings. Typically, the divine realms are populated by awe-inspiring beings such the seraphim and cherubim, who stand before God on his heavenly throne (*merkabah*) and worship him. These beings are composite creatures in which eyes and wings predominate. Their multiple eyes symbolize divine knowledge, while their multiple

wings signify divine power—the ability to act and respond to all eventualities (Cf. Ezek 1: 18; 10:12; Zech 4:10; Rev 4:6,8 NRSV).

The mystical ascent of a human to the divine realms would commonly elicit sheer terror on the part of the visionary (e.g. Apocalypse of Abraham 16), but would also equip them with divine knowledge. He (since the mystic was typically a male) would not only experience meteorological and astronomical mysteries, he would also benefit from the tutelage of an *angelus interpres*, an angelic guide, who would explain other divine secrets, such as God's plan of salvation and what would transpire at the end of days. Once the mystic descended back to earth, he would be able to impart these revealed mysteries and divine secrets to those with eyes to see.

Not all of the visionaries of late Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic have precisely Abraham's experience and nor does Brian. Nevertheless, his experiences have some definite points of overlap with the experiences of these visionaries. Brian is taken up by a flying chariot occupied by heavenly beings. He is absolutely terrified, not least by the appearance of these heavenly creatures, who, given their composite nature, appear monstrous to him (and us). But while the creatures do not possess multiple eyes and wings, the prominence given to their hands and eyes would seem to suggest knowledge and power (a suggestion already imparted by their flying chariot). Brian is with them too briefly to ask them anything, but he is nevertheless gifted with a vision of the heavenly cosmos, the earth as seen from the heavens, a meteor shower and hostile heavenly powers bent on destruction. He



returns to earth having seen all of these things. As Walsh has perceptively noted, it is only after his heavenly sojourn that Brian is depicted as (albeit unwillingly) engaging in teaching, teaching that seemingly galvanizes his audience into becoming his followers (Walsh 2013).<sup>46</sup>

***Brian, the “Lucky Bastard”***

Other features of the “aliens episode” also draw attention to the perspectives of first-century CE Palestine, most notably in its spoken coda. As noted above, except for the standard repertoire of space sound effects, the entire sequence is without dialogue. Brian cowers in the back of the spaceship and does not utter a word. The only comment comes from the bystander (Alfonso), who exclaims “Ooh, You lucky bastard!” at Brian’s fortuitous escape. These words constitute a summary to the entire episode, nor is it the first time that this phrase is applied to Brian. For instance, when Brian is captured after the abortive attempt to kidnap Pilate’s wife, he is incarcerated in a shared cell with the pro-Roman prisoner, Ben. As the jailer (Terry Gilliam) throws Brian into the cell, he spits in his face, and Ben exclaims, “You lucky bastard! You lucky, lucky, bastard” because Brian is getting such “preferential” treatment from the jailer. The irony, as Brian makes clear in his exchange with Ben, is that he is not lucky. On the other hand, Brian’s surviving the crash of the spaceship is emphatically lucky. Given the prominence the film accords

to the phrase, “Lucky Bastard,” the following discussion propose to unpack both elements of the phrase, beginning with the term bastard.

As the film makes evident, the description of Brian as a “bastard” is not simply irreverent abuse, but a technical description of his paternity. In spite of Brian’s vigorous protests about his Jewish paternity, his mother Mandy demonstrates that the appellation is technically correct: “Well, Brian... your father isn’t Mr. Cohen... He was a Roman, Brian. He was a centurion in the Roman army.” The Roman’s name was Naughtius Maximus, which, as another centurion later tells Pilate is “a joke name.” Mandy, therefore, was deceived and seduced by a Roman soldier and had an illegitimate child—Brian—by him. This means that in Palestinian society Brian would have been regarded as a *mamzer*—someone who was socially marginalized and scorned.<sup>47</sup> He would have been doubly a pariah, not only because he was illegitimate, but also because he was a child of the despised Roman overlords.

The Pythons seem to have done their homework about Jesus because this depiction of Brian has some suggestive affinities with the figure of the historical Jesus.<sup>48</sup> One is the charge of illegitimacy. As is apparent from the infancy narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, Mary’s pregnancy out-of-wedlock caused serious consternation, and Joseph was on the point of breaking off the marriage until he was divinely counselled to take her (Matthew 2). Luke describes a similar scenario. These details have prompted some modern scholars to address the possibility of

Jesus' illegitimacy, not least because it became a feature of anti-Christian invective. One of the most telling accounts is found in the anti-Christian polemic by Celsus (ca. 177-80 CE), who took on the persona of a Jew to debunk the Christian account of the virgin birth and create his own "birther scandal." He maintains that Jesus "fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin... he came from a Jewish village and from a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning...she was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery...after she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wandering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus" (Origen, *Cels.* 1.29).<sup>49</sup> This child was by "a certain soldier named Panthera" (Origen, *Cels.* 1.32). Actual Jewish accusations about Jesus as ben Pandara (Pandera/Pandiri) are also found in the later texts of the Tosefta and Talmud (b. Sabb 104b; y. Sabb. 14d; t. Hull. 2.22-23), but probably date from the second century or even earlier. It has been questioned whether the name Panthera, "the Panther" is also a joke name or just a standard nickname among soldiers, so the centurion's (John Cleese's) remark to Pilate that it was a "joke name" is remarkably apt.<sup>50</sup> But son of a Roman or not, being a bastard was no lucky happenstance for Brian.

As already noted, Ben's description of Brian as a "lucky, lucky, bastard" is more than a little ironic, and the sequence of mishaps that Brian experiences confirms this impression. In fact, the designation "lucky" is an oxymoron. Though Brian escapes death several times, his ultimate fate is decidedly unlucky. His

identity as a Roman bastard impels him to wage guerilla warfare against the Romans and hastens his demise. And although the film teases viewers with multiple occasions where Brian might have been spared death, Brian's ill luck is to miss all of them. Thus, in a reversal of the Gospels' Barabbas scene (where, of course, Jesus is not released), Pilate actually does agree to release Brian on Passover, his pardon fails through a series of unfortunate events. The centurion with the pardon is delayed by the inarticulate jailers, and when he finally does bring the reprieve to the crucified prisoners, they all (in a parodic nod to Stanley Kubrick's 1960 film, *Spartacus*) claim to be Brian, and prevent Brian's rescue. Moreover, the prospect of an easy rescue from the cross, promised by another crucified prisoner (Eric Idle), fails to materialize, and everyone who might have rescued him—the Peoples' Front of Judaea, the suicide squad of the Judaeen People's Front, Judith, even his mother Mandy—all fail him and leave him to his death. The false hopes conjured up for him are merely a mirage that serve to amplify his position as an "unlucky bastard".

### **The "Aliens Episode" and its Challenge to the Gospel Narratives of Jesus**

The unlucky and unfortunate circumstances of Brian's life appear to contrast profoundly with the events of Jesus' life. But as was just shown, the film intentionally juxtaposes the lives of both. Like Brian, Jesus may also have been illegitimate. Is it equally possible, then, that Jesus may also have been similarly unlucky? There is no doubting that the events of his final days were unfortunately

horrific. He was betrayed and abandoned by his closest followers, condemned, tortured, and crucified. His death was violent in the extreme.

The theology of the Gospels, however, does not dispute these details, but situates them within the plan of God. Jesus knows that he will be abandoned by his disciples (Matt. 26:31-35 pars.), an abandonment prefigured by Isaiah 53. In the canonical Gospels, Jesus' passion and death are likewise foretold by the prophets. As Matthew puts it, "All this has taken place, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (Matt 26:56). Everything that happens to Jesus was foreordained by God and conforms to his master plan. Luck does not enter into it. Over the course of the canonical Gospels, passages from the Hebrew Bible are continually and consistently adduced to demonstrate that the hand of God was at work in the day-to-day events of Jesus' life. His life constitutes the definitive outworking of *Heilsgeschichte*—God's plan of salvation for humankind.

In contrast, the *Life of Brian* challenges the worldview of the canonical Gospels and of many standard Jesus biopics by consistently querying divine providence and the existence of any sort of divine economy at work in the world. Brian does not inhabit the ordered and orderly world of the Judeo-Christian God, but a universe wholly determined by meaningless chance. Luck and contingency entirely dominate the *Life of Brian*.<sup>51</sup>

Here, in particular, the "aliens episode" functions to suggest that everything that happens to Brian has *not* been ordained and does *not* conform to a master plan.

The rescue of Brian is ultimately absurd. His impossible good fortune in being rescued by aliens is complemented by the unremittingly unfortunate circumstances of his arrest and crucifixion. Yet neither the positive or negative outcomes are ultimately probative because there is no master plan. This realization emerges as one of the central themes of the “aliens episode” and of the film as a whole. Brian does not inhabit a world of *Heilsgeschichte*. For him, salvation history does not exist. Any salvation, like that of the aliens who saved him, is totally arbitrary and just as readily ends in destruction—as it does, in fact, for the unfortunate and (seemingly) altruistic aliens themselves. It is all chance, fortune, or absurd happenstance. The ascent and descent motifs that characterize the “aliens sequence” signify the rise and fall of fortune. Brian is bound to the wheel of chance and experiences its vicissitudes, ascending and descending with every turn of the wheel.

In these respects, the episode expresses the illogicality underlying existence. In answer to the question: “Why aliens?” the film’s simple answer is “Why not?” The episode has as much—and as little—significance as the other events that transpire in Brian’s life, with the result that this juxtaposition of genres is ultimately corrosive of meaning. Brian’s rescue by the aliens is initially meaningful, but the episode ends up being entirely inexplicable. No rationale is provided for Brian’s rescue, for the aliens’ cosmic battle, for the aliens’ subsequent demise or any of its other features. The episode’s very arbitrariness necessarily informs all of the other events in Brian’s narrative, which appear to be no less arbitrary. Perhaps further

information would have made them more intelligible, but the film implies that an ultimate regression is at work. Meaning and explanation diminish into the void until they become meaningless in their turn.

If the aliens' rescue of Brian is underdetermined, other episodes in the film are deliberately overdetermined to produce a corresponding deficiency in meaning. Here the episode of the gourd and the sandal, where Brian's followers impute unwarranted significance to the gourd and the sandal that Brian accidentally drops in trying to escape the crowds. As a satire on religious sectarianism, it is brilliant in its exposé of the human tendency to discern religious significance where none exists. The crowds' willful credulity—"I say you are [the Messiah], Lord, and I should know; I've followed a few"—raises the suspicion that divine destiny is a human not a divine product. The *Life of Brian* advances this assumption through its portrayal of the day-to-day absurdities visited upon Brian. The events in Brian's life—both under- and overdetermined are nothing more than the products of freakish chance.

This aperçu constitutes the essence of the *Life of Brian*'s challenge to Christian doctrine. Following the lead of some historical Jesus scholars, the Pythons query the received theological interpretation of the New Testament by implicitly asking what Jesus' life would look like without its theological superstructure. If many of its features were consciously shaped by the Evangelists, what did the unshaped events of Jesus' life resemble? Is it possible that, just as Brian did, Jesus

also resisted being addressed as the Messiah? Is it possible that, as Geza Vermes has argued, Jesus' death was a result of sheer bad luck—of his simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time?<sup>52</sup> In other words, what if the events of Jesus' life were subject to the vicissitudes of chance no less than the events experienced by Brian? What if the events in Jesus' life were not foreordained or prophesied, but merely overdetermined by subsequent tradition?

Not unexpectedly, the Pythons take Brian's and Jesus' story one step “over the top”. The goal of many historical Jesus scholars has been to situate Jesus in his historical milieu—the day-to-day world of first-century Palestine. Nevertheless, most of them would likely affirm that this world was both rationale and meaningful, just as our own world is both rationale and meaningful. But, this is not the Pythons' perspective, and the “aliens episode” is one of the tiny loose threads that threatens to unravel the entire fabric of their Jesus story.

By including this episode in the *Life of Brian*, the Pythons promote a radical deconstruction, not only of the Christian world view, but the standard rational world view as well—one that finds its fullest expression in Eric Idle's song from the cross, “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life,” which liltily affirms, “We know that life's absurd, And death's the final word.” As the musical coda to *Brian*, it offers an authoritative perspective on the film's defining themes. Meaning—particularly religious meaning—is both dubious and arbitrary, something that they emphasize in their follow-up film, *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983; dir. Terry



Jones). Its distillation of the meaning of life and ultimate panacea is summed up in the following banal desiderata: "Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations."

### **Conclusion**

Although its actual running time in the *Life of Brian* is not substantial, the "aliens episode" nevertheless exercises an impact on the film disproportionate to its length. At least three functions can be attributed to the episode. The most straightforward is its function as parody. Terry Gilliam anticipates his later directorial role in his satire of *Star Wars* and other outer-space sagas by crafting a ridiculous space-montage on the cheap. A second function relates to the episode's significant echoes of the Gospels and the religious milieu of Jesus' day.

The 'heavenly' rescue of a plummeting Brian fits readily with the Gospel accounts of the Temptation of Jesus. Moreover, the focus on heavenly ascents and visions of the heavenly spheres is very much a concern of early Jewish and Christian mysticism. Finally, the supposition of a rudderless universe, dominated by chance is a mindset very familiar from the time of Jesus. The random and unexpected rescue of Brian by unidentified aliens is not at all inconsistent with such a perspective. In other words, the "aliens episode" is far more consistent with the concerns of the film than might at first appear to be the case. This is not to deny the

sequence's brilliant role as a piece of parody, but a closer reading of the sequence also lends itself to other interpretations that can contribute to a deeper appreciation of the film as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> *Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/oct/11/top-10-comedy-movies>); the BBC (<http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20170820-the-25-greatest-comedies-of-all-time>) Both accessed December 12, 2019. L. Blanshard and K. Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2011), 182, note that in the UK, the *Observer* in 2007 and Channel 4 in 2006 both voted it the best comedy film of all time. W. R. Telford, "Monty Python's *Life of Brian* and the Jesus Film" in J. Taylor (ed.), *Jesus and Brian. Exploring the Historical Jesus and his Times via Monty Python's Life of Brian* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3-18 (here 3-5).

<sup>2</sup> Blanshard and Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen*, 183.

<sup>3</sup> John Cleese, for instance, says, "I think it is the most mature thing we did;" cited in The Pythons with B. McCabe, *The Pythons: Autobiography by the Pythons* (London: Orion Books, 2003), 306. Cf. further, David Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks. The Complete Oral History*. Rev. Ed. (New York: Dey Street, 2019), 255-6.

<sup>4</sup> P. Grace, *The Religious Film* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 187-88.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos. The Bible in English Political Discourse since 1968*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 131; cf. J. G. Crossley, "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* 1 (2011), 93-114.

<sup>6</sup> G. Hardcastle and G. Reisch (eds.), *Monty Python and Philosophy. Nudge Nudge, Think Think* (Chicago/LaSalle: Open Court, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> The existence of God: R. E. Auxier, "A Very Naughty Boy: Getting Right with Brian" in Hardcastle and Reisch, 65-81; humanism: K. Schilbrack, "'Life's a Piece of Shit': Heresy, Humanism and Heroism in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*" in Hardcastle and Reisch, 13-23; grotesque: J. O. Thompson, *Monty Python: Complete and Utter Theory of the Grotesque* (London: BFI Publishing, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Palin notes that the Pythons focused on "the idea of there being Messiah fever in Judea at that time. That was really the key to it and gave us the theme." Cited in *The Pythons, Autobiography*, 279.

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<sup>9</sup> The Pythons, *Autobiography*, 355-6. Some of the Pythons were already equipped with a strong biblical background; for instance, in his younger days Terry Gilliam had read the Bible in its entirety numerous times, and had considered becoming a missionary.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Davies, "Life of Brian Research" in C. Exum and S. Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies. The Third Sheffield Colloquium* (JSOTSup 266; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 400-14. Rp. in P. Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway?* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.; (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 142-55.

<sup>11</sup> H. H. Chapman, "Josephus Comicus in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* and *History of the World, Part I*" in H. H. Chapman and Z. Rogers (eds.), *A Companion to Josephus* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 440-54.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Jesus and Brian*.

<sup>13</sup> R. Burrige, "The Church of England's *Life of Python* – or 'What the Bishop Saw'" in Taylor, *Jesus and Brian*, 19-41 (esp. 25); cf. Blanshard and Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen*, 181.

<sup>14</sup> T. Jones, "Preface" in Taylor, *Jesus and Brian*, xv.

<sup>15</sup> Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome*, 187.

<sup>16</sup> B. McCabe, *Dark Knights and Holy Fools. The Art and Films of Terry Gilliam* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1999), 80.

<sup>17</sup> K. Johnson, (1999), *The First 28øYears of Monty Python*. (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1999), 234.

<sup>18</sup> McCabe. *Dark Knights and Holy Fools* 82.

<sup>19</sup> McCabe, *Dark Knights*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *First 28øYears*, 230-31.

<sup>21</sup> Pythons, *Pythons Autobiography*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Gilliam's opening credits in the *Life of Brian*'s offer an homage to James Bond films—especially to *Goldfinger*—so it is perhaps fitting to reference another James Bond film (*Skyfall* 2012) as the title of this article.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Jones cited in D. Sterritt and L. Rhodes, eds., *Terry Gilliam Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 27.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan, *Monty Python Speaks*, 256.

<sup>25</sup> Matt Fagerholm, "KVIFF 2018: Terry Gilliam Dreams the Impossible Dream." July 5, 2018. Accessed December 12, 2019. <https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/kviff-2018-terry-gilliam-dreams-the-impossible-dream>.

<sup>26</sup> R. Sellers, *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* (London: John Blake, 2003), 52.

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<sup>27</sup> Fagerholm, "Terry Gilliam Dreams."

<sup>28</sup> Literary parodies of space travel are even more venerable and at least as old as Lucian's brilliant *A True Story* (9-30), where the narrator and his ship get carried to the moon by a storm and get involved in a cosmic battle between the outlandish creatures of Endymion and those of Phaethon.

<sup>29</sup> Blanshard and Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen*, 172-90.

<sup>30</sup> McCabe, *Dark Knights*, 84.

<sup>31</sup> P. Marks, *Terry Gilliam* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), 60.

<sup>32</sup> The much later film, *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011; dir. Jon Favreau), employs a similar deconstruction of genres.

<sup>33</sup> E. Best, *The Temptation & the Passion*; 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., (SNTSMS 2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), xv.

<sup>34</sup> This affinity is also noted briefly by Davies "Life of Brian Research," 406; A. Reinhartz, "Hook-Nosed Heebies: Brian, Jesus and Jewish Identity" in Taylor, *Jesus and Brian*, 207-19 (here 216), M. Mayordomo, "'Nicht der Messias.' Monty Python's Das Leben des Brian zwischen Hollywood und Evangelientext" in R. Zwick and P. Hasenberg (eds.), *The Bible Revisited: Neue Zugänge im Film* (Marburg: Schüren, 2016), 198-216 (here 207).

<sup>35</sup> Best, *Temptation & the Passion*, xv.

<sup>36</sup> J. M. Robinson, P. Hoffmann, and J. Kloppenborg (eds.), *The Critical Edition of Q* (Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000)

<sup>37</sup> B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son (Matt 4:1-11 & Par)*, (CB 2:1; Lund: Gleerup, 1966), 53-61.

<sup>38</sup> I am indebted to Charlotte Graves for this observation. Some of her other points have also contributed to this article: cf. Graves, C. "What was the point behind the alien scene in 'Life of Brian'?" *Quora*. March 10, 2017. Accessed December 12, 2019. <https://www.quora.com/What-was-the-point-behind-the-alien-scene-in-Life-of-Brian?share=1>

<sup>39</sup> Blanshard and Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen*, 181.

<sup>40</sup> A. Ferreiro, *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval and Early Modern Tradition* (SHCT 125. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), 133-46.

<sup>41</sup> J. K. Elliott (ed. and tr.). *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in *The Silver Chalice*.

<sup>43</sup> Of course, Peter's own prayer that God not kill Simon but merely break his leg in three places sounds as if it too might come from the script of *Brian*.

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<sup>44</sup> M. Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9-11; C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven. A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*; Rp. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1982), 86-96.

<sup>45</sup> E. P. Sanders (ed. and tr.), “Testament of Abraham” in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*; Vol 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 871-902.

<sup>46</sup> R. Walsh, “Monty Python’s Life of Brian (1979)” in A. Reinhartz (ed.), *Bible and Cinema: fifty key films* (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 187-92.

<sup>47</sup> S. Hultgren, “Jesus: Herkunft, Geburt, Kindheit, Familie” in *Jesus Handbuch*. J. Schröter and C. Jacobi (eds.), (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 214-219.

216; B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 2-22.

<sup>48</sup> A.-J. Levine, “Beards for Sale: The Uncut Version of Brian, Gender and Sexuality” in Taylor, *Jesus and Brian*, 167-84.

<sup>49</sup> H. Chadwick (ed. and tr.), *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>50</sup> A. Lincoln, *Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>51</sup> It is notable that as with Lucian’s space travel, an ancient analogue exists for the experience of individuals entirely under the dominion of fate (*tuche*) or fortune (*fortuna*). In Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, Isis rescues Lucius from the dominion of fate and tells him: “the blindness of Fortune, while torturing you with the worst of perils, has brought you in its random wickedness to this holy state of happiness. Let her begone now! Let her rage in all her fury and hunt some other object for her cruelty, for hostile chance has no opportunity against those whose lives the majesty of our goddess has emancipated into her own servitude. Robbers, wild animals, slavery, the twists and turns of the harshest journeys that end where they begin, the daily fear of death—what benefit were all these to wicked Fortune? But now you have been taken under the protection of a Fortune who can see” (*Metamorphoses* 11.15).

<sup>52</sup> Geza Vermes, *The Changing Faces of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 262.

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