

A “Brand New” Testament: What if Jesus got a Do-over?

Clay Nelson © 30 August 2015

Did you know God is real and is a domineering white-trash bastard in a wife-beater T-shirt and ratty bathrobe who never gets off his computer? You already know about his son, but did you know about his daughter Ea? Neither did we until Rachel and I on a whim attended *The Brand New Testament* at the Auckland International Film Festival. This film by Belgian director Jaco van Dormael was made for Unitarians who like their Bible stories with a thick coat of satire.

It begins at the centre of the universe: a dingy flat in Brussels. Over the course of the wildly inventive first act, Ea resolves to set the record straight on how Genesis really went down, narrating the film’s alternative version of events. Instead of the Garden of Eden, it turns out God began by building Belgium’s capital, which He populated with all manner of animals, from giraffes to ostriches — who look surreal in the streets and supermarkets of the otherwise deserted city. Humans came later, their loins covered with the 21st-century equivalent of a Renaissance artist’s prudishly placed fig leaf. After all that Old Testament “begatting,” the race grew plentiful enough that God started inventing laws to complicate their lives: not gravity and physics, but sadistic ones. He takes delight in making people miserable, tapping out rules on his out-dated DOS computer. He giggles as he makes sure the toast always falls jam-side down, or that whenever in a queue you will be in the slowest.

His wife (simply called the Goddess) is sweet and simple, focusing on embroidering a picture of her son’s *Last Supper* and her baseball card collection. But 10-year-old Ea is observant, gaining in powers and wants to change things. “Don’t get crazy ideas like your brother,” Dad grunts, but later Dad’s domestic violence, capricious hurricanes and plane crashes push her over the edge. She has a conversation with “JC” and the pair devise a plan. Ea is going to get six additional disciples. Instead of preaching to them she is going to listen to them, thus creating a Brand New Testament.

Before she can do this, she must free the world from their need for her bum of a father. Sneaking into his office, she sends a text message to everyone in the world, detailing precisely how much time they have left until they die. At first people think it is a hoax, but when those with only 30-minutes left start dropping dead in ways to make you laugh at death, they realise it’s for real.

For some, the news changes nothing, but others radically change their lives. One guy with decades left to live becomes a daredevil, jumping off buildings but always surviving due to increasingly silly saves. Another person decides to spend his remaining years building the Titanic out of matchsticks. Most people decide that they have no interest in God.

Ea then speaks to her six randomly chosen people and listens to their gospels. Some are silly like Catherine Deneuve’s character, who takes a gorilla from a circus to her bed; others are touching, such as that of a sickly 10-year-old boy who wants to live out the rest of his days as a girl. There’s also an angry dude who always wanted to shoot at people,

and now uses the reasonable logic that if he hits them, it was meant to be.

As Ea gathers her new disciples and the world begins adjusting to a new social order, things ultimately become rather pleasant. A scene at “death beach” where people go to say goodbye to loved ones is more of a celebration than anything else. (A celebration with dark humour: an old man in a suit and tie is seen checking his watch as if he’s annoyed by the wait.)

God tries to follow Ea down to the streets and finds that he’s completely incapable of taking care of himself and is regularly the victim of his own capricious rules. Not to spoil the movie, but it’s too funny not to mention that he ultimately ends up deported “back to Uzbekistan”. Significantly, one of the kindest characters in the film is a homeless man who knows how to retrieve fish burgers from a fast food dumpster. Ea engages him to write her Gospel.

The message of her Gospel is everyone on Earth is ultimately doomed but you have the freedom to live whatever time you have in a positive way. Ea’s act gives people the opportunity to help one another and do it with tenderness.

After viewing the movie I began reflecting on what would be Jesus’ message this time if he came today? Where would he show up? Who would follow him? What would be his gender? Sexual orientation? Race? Who would execute him?

Biblical scholars in recent years have written a lot about the historical Jesus. While some of it is conjecture based on the world he lived in, some is based on words or sayings scholars are pretty sure he might have said. They have eliminated great portions of the Gospels that have no historical basis, such as the entire Gospel of John. They have eliminated all the stories about him that could only be believed in a pre-scientific world, including his bodily resurrection. They have eliminated all portions that serve building up a religion Jesus had no intention of founding. Most have discounted his predictions of the end of the world. When they got done most of what we have about the man Jesus are his parables, most of the thoughts collected in the Sermon on the Mount he never preached, his challenges to a social order that oppressed the poor, women, and outsiders, his criticism of those religious and political powers who perpetrated and protected injustice and his death. Full stop. This nearly blank slate leaves lots of room for the imagination to consider Jesus in another context.

One of the most imaginative attempts was Monty Python’s classic film *Life of Brian*. It was a film that almost wasn’t made after the original producers found it too controversial. Former Beatle George Harrison decided to finance it. In 1979 it was considered highly blasphemous and was banned in 39 local authorities in England. Whole countries banned it as well. Sweden marketed the film by saying, “It’s so funny, it was banned in Norway.

What made it blasphemous? Those who claim responsibility for protecting religion and the church said it mocked Jesus. They got it wrong. It mocked them. They who would impose on others their beliefs and values based on an ignorant understanding of 2000-year-old documents purported to be divine.

In case you haven't seen it in a while, the plot focuses on Brian Cohen who is born in the stable next to the one where Jesus is born, which initially confuses the three wise men. Brian grows up an idealistic young man who resents the continuing Roman occupation of Judea. While attending Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where one in the crowd wonders why Jesus said, "Blessed are the cheesemakers," Brian becomes infatuated with an attractive young rebel, Judith. His desire for her and hatred for the Romans lead him to join the People's Front of Judea, one of many fractious and bickering independence movements, who spend more time fighting each other than the Romans.

After several misadventures, and escaping from Pontius Pilate, the fugitive winds up in a line-up of would-be mystics and prophets who harangue the passing crowd in a plaza. Forced to come up with something plausible in order to blend in and keep the guards off his back, Brian babbles pseudo-religious truisms and quickly attracts a small but intrigued audience. Once the guards have left, Brian tries to put the episode behind him, but he has unintentionally inspired a movement. He grows frantic when he finds that some people have started to follow him around, with even the slightest unusual occurrence being hailed as a "miracle". After slipping away from the mob, Brian runs into Judith, and they spend the night together. In the morning, Brian, completely naked, opens the curtains to discover an enormous crowd of people outside his mother's house, all proclaiming him the Messiah. Brian's mother protests: "He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy."

Brian tries to change their minds because his every word and action is immediately seized as points of doctrine: "Please, please, please listen! I've got one or two things to say." To which the crowd demands, "Tell us! Tell us both of them!"

[Brian](#) continues, "Look, you've got it all wrong! You don't NEED to follow ME, You don't NEED to follow ANYBODY! You've got to think for your selves! You're ALL individuals!"

The crowd bleats back in unison, "Yes! We're all individuals!"

Brian keeps to his theme, "You're all different!"

The crowd mindlessly repeats, "Yes, we ARE all different!"

When one man in the crowd protests, "I'm not...", the crowd angrily turns on him to shush him.

The hapless Brian finds no solace at the PFJ's headquarters, where people fling their afflicted bodies at him demanding miracle cures. After sneaking out the back, Brian finally is captured and is condemned to be crucified. The crowd demands he be released and Pilate agrees and relays his order to the guards, but it doesn't go as planned. When they ask those on crosses if they are Brian, they all say they are, one of them even claims, "I'm Brian and so is my wife" and is released. The film famously ends with Brian and his fellow sufferers breaking into song with *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*.

What I find most interesting about the movie is that well before the Jesus Seminar began trying to find the historical Jesus, the film got a lot right, which is why I can't wait for September 10. That's when a book I've pre-ordered will be released, *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the historical Jesus and his times via Monty Python's Life of Brian*.

But film satirists are not the only one's who have tried to envision Jesus in different circumstances. Even ever-so serious writers like Dostoyevsky have made an attempt. In one of the finest pieces of literature ever written, *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is the classic encounter between the Grand Inquisitor and Jesus. The story is told by Ivan, who only has contempt for the idea of a personal and benevolent god, to his brother Alyosha, a novice monk.

In the tale, Christ comes back to Earth in Seville at the time of the Inquisition. He performs a number of miracles (echoing miracles from the Gospels). The people recognize him and adore him, but he is arrested by Inquisition leaders and sentenced to be burnt to death the next day. The Grand Inquisitor visits him in his cell to tell him that the Church no longer needs him. The main portion of the text is devoted to the Inquisitor explaining to Jesus why his return would interfere with the mission of the Church.

The Inquisitor frames his denunciation of Jesus around the three questions that Satan asked Jesus during the temptation of Christ in the desert. These three are the temptation to turn stones into bread, the temptation to cast Himself from the Temple and be saved by the angels, and the temptation to rule over all the kingdoms of the world. The Inquisitor states that Jesus rejected these three temptations in favour of freedom, but the Inquisitor thinks that Jesus has misjudged human nature. He does not believe that the vast majority of humanity can handle the freedom, which Jesus has given them. The Inquisitor thus implies that Jesus, in giving humans freedom to choose, has condemned the majority of humanity to suffer.

The parable ends when Christ, who has been silent throughout, kisses the Inquisitor on his "bloodless, aged lips" instead of answering him. On this, the Inquisitor releases Christ but tells him never to return. Christ, still silent, leaves into "the dark alleys of the city".

Not only is the kiss ambiguous, but its effect on the Inquisitor is as well. Ivan concludes: "The kiss glows in his heart, but the old man adheres to his idea".

After relating the parable that reveals his contempt for organised religion, Ivan asks Alyosha if he "renounces" Ivan for his views. Alyosha responds by giving Ivan a soft kiss on the lips, to which the delighted Ivan replies: "That's plagiarism... Thank you, though".

From these artistic accounts and from what little we know about the historical Jesus, I think it would be safe to assume that his core message would remain the same: Be free. Free from fear, free to love and free to be. He might desire to avoid his fate and Brian's, so he might like to avoid detection. What better way to do so than to convince us that we are all him, so when asked we would all say, "I'm Jesus." Jesus would then be male and female and transgender. Jesus would be straight, gay and bi. Jesus would come in all skin tones. Jesus would live in cities and on the farm. Jesus would be Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Hindi, Buddhist and yes, Atheist. There would be no one to follow him for we would all be him. We would become his "brand new" testament in our very being. And if the authorities notice and come looking to execute us, we can all hide out here. No one would look for Jesus amongst the Unitarians.

