

Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth, by Reza Aslan

Albert Schweitzer in his book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906) wrote “The historical Jesus must always be a stranger and an enigma. . . . Jesus means something to our world because a mighty spiritual force streams forth from Him and flows through our time also. This fact can neither be shaken nor confirmed by any historical discovery.”

Let me begin by applauding the publication of Reza Aslan’s *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*.

- Not because it breaks new ground in the study of Jesus—which it doesn’t.
- Not because it’s a particularly scholarly book—which it isn’t.
- Not because it’s an objective analysis of Jesus and the Gospels—which it isn’t.
- And not because it is very well written and a comfortable “read”—which it is!

Why applaud the book? Because of its public prominence, because it has gotten folks talking about the Gospels, and Jesus, and history, and critical Biblical study—folks that either would not normally care about Jesus and his times, or folks who do care but only believe what they were taught in Sunday School. And we can thank Fox News that the public is buying and talking about the book. Last summer, Lauren Green, the chief religion correspondent for Fox News, interviewed Reza Aslan and the video went viral. (If you haven’t seen it, just google the words: zealot fox news.) Sales for Aslan’s book have broken every record in the category of religious studies.

However, putting aside all the ‘buzz’, Aslan’s Jesus is a one-dimensional character: a nationalist revolutionary zealot who’s only mission and motivation is to overthrow Roman occupation. In truth, the Gospels present many possible Jesus personalities and mission motivations. And history shows us that 1st C Judea, Samaria and the Galilee was a complex, chaotic and multi-cultural landscape that cannot be as easily reduced and simplistically explained as Aslan does.

So what should you look for and watch out for when reading his book—which I do in fact recommend. Aslan does three things well. He writes well: smoothly with an engaging style. It is certainly an easy and interesting read. Secondly, he has his history right, with one glaring exception: he calls the Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*): “Palestine”. It is only in the notes in the back [p. 219] that he acknowledges that in fact it was *not* called “Palestine” until the 2nd C (135 CE) by Emperor Hadrian who named it *Philistia*, meaning the Land of the Philistines—a purposeful, back-handed slap at the Jews.

The third thing he does well is provide bibliographic essays—many of which have little to do with the text they reference, but all of which are interesting, and they provide a good list for further reading, along with his extensive bibliography. But—and here begins my critique of the book—there is not a single footnote or conventional endnote.

In general Aslan has a fondness for hyperbole. In the Fox interview he claims over 100 pages of notes in the back of the book (the essays I referred to), in fact it’s only 53 pages. In his Introduction, right at the beginning, he says that in those days there were “countless” messiahs [p. xxiii] among the Jews. We know certainly of six, or seven if Bar Kochba in 135 CE, the leader of the last rebellion against Rome, is included. In addition, he is overly confident in his simplistic assertions and conclusions on very complex social, theological and historical matters. So let’s look more specifically at his text.

The message of *Zealot* is that the real Jesus of Nazareth was an illiterate peasant from the Galilee who zealously conspired to overthrow the Roman governor to become himself the King of Israel. Aslan portrays Jesus not as a religious figure, but purely the political leader of his Jewish rebellion (which is sure to offend Christians). But Aslan provides nothing that is new or original. What he writes has been written often before—though perhaps not as well, and certainly not as easily available or as interesting to read. What *is* striking about this book is Aslan’s “relentlessly reductionist, simplistic, one-sided and often harshly polemical portrayal of Jesus as a

radical, zealously nationalistic, and purely political figure.” (Allan Nadler, *Jewish Review of Books*). Any description other than his, Aslan says, is only myth and not history.

Aslan opens his book with the assassination of the Jerusalem Temple’s High Priest by Jewish zealots in 56 CE, on Yom Kippur, and the political tumult, chaos and violence which followed. He apparently wants us to associate Jesus, who was crucified 30 years before, with the Jewish zealotry that brought about the Roman destruction of 70 CE. We are to understand that Jesus is the precursor to the bands of (mostly anonymous) Jewish zealots who wreaked terror and havoc throughout Judea for almost a century.

The historical Jesus, he claims, was a guerilla leader, who gathered and led a “corps” of fellow “bandits”, traversing the Galilee on their way to mount a surprise insurrection against Rome and its Priestly lackeys in Jerusalem. And any Gospel verse that might complicate, let alone undermine, this depiction, Aslan rejects as “ridiculous,” “absurd,” “preposterous,” “fanciful,” “fictional,” “fabulous concoction,” or “patently impossible.”

Aslan dismisses just about all Jesus’ healings and teachings prior to his “storming” of Jerusalem and his subsequent arrest and crucifixion. He insists that Jesus’ zealous assault on the Jerusalem Temple is the “singular fact that should color everything we read in the Gospels about the Messiah known as Jesus of Nazareth.” [p. 79] Everything!?! He writes that the very fact of his crucifixion for the crime of sedition against the Roman state is all one has to know about the historical Jesus.

To make his point, Aslan selectively quotes the Gospels for those narratives that support his thesis. But he never tells us how he separates historical fact from Gospel fiction. He accepts as historically valid those verses which fit his description of Jesus and his mission, and everything else is “summarily dismissed as apologetic theological rubbish of absolutely no historical worth” (Nadler).

What *is* primarily historical, Aslan writes, is the “why” and the “how” of his death. “As with every criminal who hangs on a cross, Jesus is given a plaque, or titulus, detailing the crime for which he is being crucified. Jesus’ titulus reads KING OF THE JEWS. His crime: striving for kingly rule, sedition. And so, like every bandit and revolutionary, every rabble-rousing zealot and apocalyptic prophet who came before or after him . . . Jesus is executed for daring to claim the mantle of king and messiah.” [pp. 78-79]

And it’s not as if there is anything new in Aslan’s claims. The British scholar S.G.F. Brandon in 1967 wrote *Jesus and the Zealots*, and he does a much better job of painting Jesus as a zealot. It’s curious to me that though Aslan must have extensively used Brandon, he is only briefly noted in the bibliography. Brandon, in his book, with rather brilliant insight, points to the names of Jesus’ followers.

- Mark and Matthew identify a “Simon the Canaanite” as one of the lesser twelve. The problem is that there were no Canaanites left by 1st C. Luke thinks Mark and Matthew got it wrong, that his Hebrew or Aramaic name was *Shimon ha-Kanai*, meaning “Simon the Zealot”—because *kanai* in Hebrew does mean ‘zealot’!
- In Matthew’s Gospel Simon who is called Peter is identified as *Shimon bar-Yonah*, Simon the son of Yonah. But Brandon sees there an Akkadian word *baryonah* that means outlaw!
- James and John are identified as *Boanerges*, from the Aramaic *b’nai ra-ash*, “sons of the thunder”—presumably dangerous men.
- And finally Brandon writes that Judas Iscariot is really Judas *ish sicarri*, meaning “man of the Sicarri”, Jewish assassins who targeted Roman officials in the years before 70 CE.

Brandon, almost 50 years ago, makes a much better case for Jesus the Zealot than does Aslan, but he’s mostly forgotten because his conclusions were generally dismissed.

What Aslan, and earlier Brandon, fail to acknowledge is that Jesus clearly sets himself apart from the revolutionary zealots in his adamant rejection of violence, and the thoroughly peaceful and loving content of his teachings and parables. Aslan virtually ignores Jesus’ response to his disciples’ one and only act of violence on the night of his arrest. When the officers of the High Priest come for him “one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear.” (Mark 14:47) And though Mark’s Jesus ignores the violence, he does

protest the violence against him crying out “Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit?” (Mark 14:48). In Matthew’s version: “Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (26:52). And Luke adds “But Jesus said, “No more of this!” And he touched his ear and healed him. (22:51)

Aslan asks why the Gospel writers would “fabricate” its pacifist image of “turn the other cheek” Jesus, since it’s so obvious that he was a zealous freedom-fighter. His answer: “With the Temple in ruins and the Jewish religion made pariah, the Jews who followed Jesus as messiah had an easy decision to make: they could either maintain their cultic connection to their parent religion and thus [be subject to Rome’s hatred], or they could divorce themselves from Judaism and transform their messiah from a fierce Jewish nationalist into a pacifistic preacher of good works whose kingdom was not of this world.” [p. 150]

Most of modern scholarship is particularly wary of coming to either/or, black or white conclusions about Jesus. Aslan is the exception. He is certain that Jesus of Nazareth was a zealous, radical, and purely political revolutionary, and never the Jesus Christ portrayed in the Gospels: a moral pacifist, a teacher and preacher. And Aslan does the same with his portrayal of the Jews of that time: they were either violent apocalyptic Jewish bandits who mounted one rebellion after another against the Romans, or they were corrupt collaborationists like the High Priest Caiaphas, lackeys to their Roman oppressors. The scholarly Pharisees, the major philosophy at the time, who opposed both these postures, are simply ignored.

Aslan’s Jesus is an illiterate peasant from the Galilee, but he conveniently ignores (or chooses to ignore) the many Gospel accounts of Jesus’ literate sophistication. At his entrance to Jerusalem he quotes Hebrew Scripture. He is addressed numerous times, both by his disciples as well as by the Pharisees and the Romans, as “teacher” and “rabbi” (though the title “rabbi” does not exist until 40 years later, when the Gospels were written). And there is no mention in Aslan’s book of the many debates between Jesus and the Pharisees about specifics of Jewish law—debates in which Jesus is particularly erudite.

Aslan’s Jesus is an “intolerant ethnocentric nationalist prone to violence towards Gentiles and whose charity and love extend only to other Jews” (Nadler). Aslan writes that Jesus was not only not concerned about the foreigner or “other”, but in fact thought the non-Jew beneath him: “When it comes to the heart and soul of the Jewish faith—the Law of Moses—Jesus insisted that his mission was not to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). That law made a clear distinction between relations *among* Jews, and *between* Jews and foreigners. The oft-repeated [sic] commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” was originally given strictly in the context of internal relations within Israel . . . To the Israelites, as well as to Jesus’ community in first-century Palestine [sic], ‘neighbor’ meant one’s fellow Jews. With regard to the treatment of foreigners and outsiders, oppressors and occupiers, the Torah could not be clearer: ‘You shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. *They shall not live in your land*’”(Exodus, 23:31-33) [pp. 121-2]

Aslan completely distorts Torah, to say nothing of painting Jesus as a xenophobe. Does he not know of the many places where Torah prohibits “oppressing the stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger having been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:21 & 23:9). Is he not aware of the *mitzvot*, the commandments to “love the stranger as yourself because you were strangers in the land of Egypt. “(Leviticus 19:34) and “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns.” (Deuteronomy 24:14). Aslan portrays the Jews as an insular community, with one set of ethical values and laws for the homeborn, and a different set of hateful values and particular intolerance for strangers in their land.

One wonders, by the way, if there is a political agenda beneath the surface of his narrative. What makes me additionally suspicious of Aslan, beyond his description of Jewish insularity, is that he implies that Judaism did not survive in the Holy Land after 70 CE. [p. 135] Astonishingly, Aslan says nothing about the pacifistic party of Jewish moderates led by Yochanan ben Zakai, or of the academy he established with Roman approval at Yavneh in the Galilee after 70 CE. The Council at Yavneh formalized and revitalized the Pharisaic philosophy and theology into Rabbinic Judaism.

Readers unfamiliar with Jewish history will read Aslan and assume that the Jews were totally expelled from what would later be called Palestine. Aslan presents Rabbinic Judaism as entirely a product of Diaspora Jews who transformed the violent nationalistic theology of Jesus' day into a scholarly "Judaism" of Torah study. Is Aslan, who presents himself as a "historian of religions", unaware of the rabbis in the Galilee academies who in the 2nd to 6th C. flourished in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, and whose teachings become the Mishnah, and later the Jerusalem Talmud? Does he not know of the Masorites of Tiberias who from the 7th to 10th C. canonized Scripture, who added the vowel signs to the Biblical text? Or is the Muslim Aslan choosing to ignore an inconvenient history so that he can say that after the 1st C. "the land" was emptied of Jews, allowing another population to claim ownership?

That said, I think that Jews will like this book because it is easily readable and not the dry and abundantly-footnoted texts that scholars so often publish. I suspect that we will also like that this is *not* the "Christian Jesus" that often confronts us and challenges us. However, we need to appreciate and be sensitive to the fact that Aslan robs Christians of the Jesus of their faith.

Reza Aslan writes very well. He must be read, however, with the same skepticism and critical analysis, with which he says he brings to the historical Jesus.

Rabbi Joe Klein
www.rabbiklein.com
rabbi@rabbiklein.com