

## BOOK REVIEW:

**ZEALOT: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth.** By Reza Aslan. New York: Random House, 2013. 296 pages. Paper. \$27.00.

**Abstract:** *Reza Aslan is a Muslim who says he once was a Christian after he “found Jesus” in his youth when he interacted with some evangelical Christians in California. But later in college he developed “full-blown doubts” concerning Jesus. What he once believed regarding Jesus he does not say, but in his book it is clear he no longer accepts anything remotely related to biblical Christianity, for his book is a diatribe against Christianity.*

*He argues that we can know only two things for certain about Jesus, namely, that he was a radical Jew and that the Romans crucified him. He calls him “a simple peasant,” “a peasant boy,” “a man of contradictions,” etc. And he has no regard for historical accuracy. For instance, he says some two thousand Christian bishops attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, despite the fact that competent historians estimate there were no more than about three hundred in attendance.*

*He argues that the Old Testament knows nothing about Jesus. Rather, it was his disciples who projected their beliefs as Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Jesus’ activities. And he makes additional radical assertions, including his claim that Jesus’ bodily resurrection has no historical foundation. Christ’s resurrection is merely a faith phenomenon, devoid of any historical facts. The latter ignores the words of the apostles who said, “We cannot but speak of the things we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). His book gives us a good idea how many Muslims today also see Christianity.*

Ordinarily, book reviewers try to say something good or positive about a book, even when it is notably flawed. But regarding Reza Aslan’s book titled *Zealot*, I find it impossible to say anything positive, for it is replete with undocumented assertions, negative labeling, context violations, contradictions, and historical errors.

Aslan begins his book saying he was raised in a family of “lukewarm Muslims and atheists” that came to the United States from Iran. And at age fifteen, he “found Jesus” while attending an evangelical youth camp in California. A few years later in college he developed “full-blown doubts” concerning “Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus of history.” Regarding the latter, he writes, “There are only two hard historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth upon which we can confidently rely.” They are “that Jesus was a Jew who led a popular Jewish movement in Palestine at the beginning of the first century C.E.; the second is that Rome crucified him for

doing so.” Thus, according to him, what we “know” about Jesus is only from the “testimonies of faith.”

Here two things need to be noted. One, Aslan uses “C.E.” (Common Era) rather than the traditional “A.D.” when he refers to the era after Christ’s birth. Before retiring as a professor, I often told my students not to use this politically correct abbreviation, for it takes Jesus Christ out of history. It also reveals an anti-Christian bias that says historians do not need to take in account the influence of Christ to help them understand two-thousand years of history since his birth.

Two, Aslan does not define what he means by “faith,” although it is quite obvious he sees faith as believing in something for which there is no historical or empirical evidence. But this is not how the New Testament portrays faith, for it shows the faith of the disciples, for instance, was founded on empirical facts and evidence. The doubting Thomas did not believe Christ had risen from the dead, and what that meant, until he saw him alive with his crucifixion wounds (John 20). That prompted him to declare, “My Lord and my God,” an expression of faith prompted by what he saw. The disciple John looked into the tomb of Jesus; he saw it empty, and thus he believed (John 20:8).

Biblical examples such as these, Aslan simply dismisses. Why? Because they assume people at the time of Jesus were, similar to us today, interested in “observable and verifiable events.” This kind of thinking, he argues, without any documentary evidence, is the “product of the modern age.” Moreover, “it would have been an altogether foreign concept to the gospel writers for whom history was not a matter of uncovering facts, but of revealing *truths*.” If this were true, then why did Peter say “to this we are witnesses” when he told his fellow Jews they had “killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead” (Acts 3:15). If uncovering facts is not what the biblical writers sought to do, then why did Paul argue for the fact of Christ’s

bodily resurrection when he told skeptics in Corinth that some 500 people, many who were still alive, had literally seen the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:1-6)?

Aslan also is bold to say that “the gospels are not, nor were they ever meant to be, a historical documentation of Jesus’ life.” Thus, he asserts that the “infancy narratives in the gospels are not historical accounts, nor were they meant to be read as such.” Thus, Matthew’s account (not written by Matthew, according to Aslan) that has Joseph and Mary fleeing from King Herod with infant Jesus to Egypt, and later returning to Palestine, is a story made-up by the author because it fulfills the prophet Hosea’s words, “Out of Egypt I have called my son” (Hosea 11:1). This story was written “to reveal the truth: that Jesus is the new Moses, who survived Pharaoh’s massacre of the Israelites’ sons . . . .” Similarly, Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, as Micah prophesied. Rather, Luke intends to convey the belief that Jesus is “the new David, the King of the Jews . . . .” According to Aslan, Matthew and Luke took Old Testament prophecies that they knew had nothing to do with Jesus, but nevertheless they wrote them as though they did. Thus, both men were either narrators of fiction or intentional deceivers.

Frequently, Aslan contradicts himself. Given his argument that we know little for certain about the historical Jesus, then logically it would be foolish to quote any of Jesus’ sayings found in the four gospels. But oddly enough Aslan frequently quotes him, apparently forgetting what he said at the beginning of the book that there are only two things we know for certain about Jesus, namely, that he was a Jew, and that the Romans crucified him. Here are a few quotations from Jesus: “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” “No prophet is accepted in his hometown.” “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters—yes, even his life—he cannot be my disciple.”

The author delights in pinning low-status labels on Jesus, such as “illiterate peasant,” “peasant boy,” “Galilean peasant,” “lowly peasant,” “simple peasant,” and “Jewish nationalist.” And “he was a man of profound contradictions.” Apart from negatively labeling Jesus, he calls the apostle Luke “Paul’s sycophant.”

Claiming to be a scholar, he nevertheless violates a fundamental rule of scholarship, namely, a scholar must not quote or cite a statement out of context. But he does. In his trying to prove Jesus was a not pacifist, he cites him saying, “Do not think that that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword.” In both passages (Matthew 10:34 and Luke 12:51), which Aslan references, it is abundantly clear that Jesus used the word “sword” as a symbol of division that his teachings would cause among people, not that he or his followers would literally use the sword as an instrument to fight or kill, for instance, as the Koran states, “I will instill terror into the hearts of the infidels; strike off their heads then, and strike off from them every fingertip” (Sura 8:12).

The author makes numerous exaggerated statements. For instance, he says there were “nearly two thousand bishops” who attended the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. Over the years, I have seen various estimates by historians regarding the number of bishops who presided at this council. Their estimates range from the upper 200s to about 320. I have never seen a reputable historian suggest a number even close to 500, let alone 2,000. In another exaggerated claim he says Pontius Pilate, during his tenure in Jerusalem, “sent thousands upon thousands of Jews to the cross.” Here one looks in vain for any documentation.

Still another exaggeration asserts, “Paul had no idea who the living Jesus was; nor did he care.” He also writes that “Jesus very likely began his ministry as just another of his [John the

Baptist's] disciples." And Jesus was "never actually baptized by John." Again, one must ask him, "How do you know this? What is your source for these unqualified, undocumented assertions?"

In addition to exaggerated claims, Aslan also gives erroneous information. For example, he states that Paul after his conversion "immediately began preaching the risen Jesus . . . ." No, in Galatians 1:17 Paul tells us that right after his conversion he went to Arabia. How long he resided there is not known for certain. Some scholars think it was about three to five years.

He incorrectly states that the synod of Hippo in 398 canonized the present New Testament's twenty-seven books. This synod did not meet in 398 but in 393. Moreover, its transactions were lost. It was the third synod of Carthage, four years later (in 397) that reportedly had Hippo's list of New Testament books and decided to accept it. This list was essentially the list that Athanasius had cited in his Pascal Letter in 367. Still, the action of Carthage in 397 did not finalize the New Testament canon, for differing lists (canons) continued to appear for centuries after 367 in different geographic areas of the church.

Ever since the early church father Origen (185-254) classified the New Testament's books as *homologoumena* (not doubted and universally accepted) and *antilegomena* (doubted and spoken against), many theologians did not see all twenty-seven books as *homologoumena*, and thus not considered to be God's inspired Word. Of the twenty-seven books that Carthage in 397 approved, many theologians in the early church considered some books as *antilegomena*, thus not canonical. They were the epistle to the Hebrews, James, Jude, the second and third epistles of John, 2 Peter, and the book of Revelation.

During the Lutheran Reformation, Martin Luther again raised the canonicity question. Of the New Testament's seven *antilegomena* books, he accepted the second and third epistles of John and 2 Peter. But he did not accept Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation, and in his New

Testament translation he placed them at the end of the list and did not number them. Then, largely in response to Luther, Rome's Council of Trent in April 1546, decreed that all twenty-seven books were canonical and anathematized anyone who did not accept its decree. Previously in the history of the church, no church council or synod had ever decreed that a given list of New Testament books had to be accepted as canonical. Past lists of books were merely issued to give Christians guidance relative to which books were considered apostolic and thus spiritually edifying.

Aslan says James, Peter, and John "were pillars of the church . . . "who walked and talked with Jesus. They were among the first to see him rise from the dead." (Oops, Aslan forgot that we really know nothing about Jesus other than he was a rebellious Jew, and that the Romans crucified him. Ironically, here he even says Jesus rose from the dead.

Regarding Peter, James, and John, we know Jesus often gave them special attention. Of the three, James was the son of Zebedee, and John was his brother. But Aslan incorrectly sees this James as the brother of Jesus (James the Just) who served as the first bishop in Jerusalem. And he clearly favors this James not only by listing him first, but also because he sees him as having compelled Paul (Acts 21:24-26) to go to the temple to "demonstrate to the Jerusalem assembly that he no longer believed what he had been preaching for nearly a decade." And preceding this preposterous claim, he says Paul "was forced by James to publicly repent of his beliefs by taking part in that strict purification ritual in the Temple of Jerusalem." In addition, he declares that "James, Peter, John, and the rest of the apostles, viewed Paul with wariness and suspicion, if not open derision, which is why they went to such lengths to counter-act Paul's teaching, censuring him for his words, warning others not to follow him, even sending their own missionaries to his congregations."

Wow! What prompted Aslan to make these audacious claims? While he does not specifically tell us, he tips his hand when he refers to the *Pseudo-Clementines*. These are apocryphal writings of the late-third century that reflect the beliefs of Judaizing Christians who saw Jesus as Messiah, but not as divine, nor born of a virgin, preferred the law-oriented teachings of James, and had problems accepting Paul's teaching that "man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28).

If any Christian reads this book, he or she should know and remember that its author clearly denies Christ's bodily resurrection when he declares, "The fact remains that the resurrection is not a historical event." Other times he uses the phrase "after Jesus' death," a less obvious way of saying the same thing. To deny Christ's resurrection is to demolish the unique and solitary pillar upon which Christianity stands or falls. Hence, every Christian needs to remember there are dire consequences if Christ's resurrection did not occur in history. For St. Paul warned, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17).

In summary, Aslan's book is a radical treatise, for according to him, whether it is Christ's resurrection and other aspects of Christianity, they are the product of "educated, urbanized, Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews." For it was they "who gradually transformed Jesus from a revolutionary zealot to a Romanized demigod, from a man who tried and failed to free the Jews from Roman oppression to a celestial being wholly uninterested in any earthy matter." Thus, Aslan's portrayal of Jesus is not just a book that merely deconstructs Jesus, but it also deconstructs biblical, historical Christianity. If anyone accepts this book's premise and conclusions, he or she will bring to mind Jesus' question, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8).

Finally, one wonders whether this book would have been published by a well-known publisher thirty or forty years ago when Christophobia was not in vogue as it is today. And one also cannot help but wonder whether the author would have had the courage to publish a book portraying Muhammad of Islam as a zealot. If so, would he have been able to find a major publisher today willing to publish it?

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