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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth

Reza Aslan

New York, Random House, 2013, 296 pp., \$27.00, Hardback

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Imagine overhearing a conversation between two people about how to divide a loaf of bread. They might deliberate over how much each is entitled to, whether to consume it all at once, or whether some should be saved for the coming days. Now imagine you are reading an account of this conversation, which happened more than two thousand years ago. You might think you understand what it means, it may even sound like a philosophical exchange — but if you learned that it was taking place while there was a famine in the town, or while the fields were burning, the meaning of the words is likely to seem substantially altered.

Putting things into context is the approach in Reza Aslan's new book, *Zealot*. Not simply a biography of Jesus, it is a study of the historical and political realities in which his life was embedded. Aslan contends that knowledge of the events that occurred before Jesus was born, during his life, and shortly after his death is critical in understanding what Jesus meant, and how those words have come to be interpreted.

Events in the Gospels are evaluated in light of other documentation of the period, and at times revealed to be extremely unlikely accounts. Historical context is used both to problematise the narrative, and to explain why its authors were writing something other than history. For example, the Roman census and tax reported in the Gospel of Luke¹—which has Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary traveling to Bethlehem — is revealed to be an absurd invention, judging from basic logistics and known Roman administrative practices, which were to tax the individual and all his assets in his place of residence rather than birth (p. 30). Why write it? Because the author of Luke, in responding to Jewish critics, was trying to fit Jesus into a messianic prophesy that asserted the chosen one would come from Bethlehem, “the city of David,” despite the fact that Jesus was from the obscure village of Nazareth (p. 29).

In fluid narrative style, Aslan separates what he calls the “historical Jesus” or Jesus of Nazareth, from Jesus the Christ. This is not a new distinction, as those with an interest in the subject will be well aware. Indeed, Aslan seems to have borrowed much from the 1967 book *Jesus and the Zealots*, by S.G.F. Brandon. In more popular style, Karen Armstrong has written about the “historical criticism” approach to the biblical texts that Aslan relies on here, while Tom Harpur's *Pagan Christ* also argues that much of the Bible is not about history, but about a certain type of sacred myth.² However, rarely has the history around the New Testament been so convincingly brought to life.

¹ Luke 2:1-6.

² See S.G.F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967); Karen Armstrong, *The Bible: The Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007); Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ: Recovering the Lost Light* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2005).

The persuasive effect is partly due to the fact that unlike traditional scholarly volumes, Aslan uses no direct references. There are research notes at the end of each chapter, which serve as a resource for further study, but it is not a meticulously documented text. The benefit of this for the reader is that one does not become bogged down in the detail of scholarly disputes. Aslan states at the outset that he has based his text on what he considers to be “the most accurate and reasonable argument” (p. xx). The downside of course is that the discussion of opposing views is less visible, which may lend Aslan’s depiction the air of unchallenged authority.

While Aslan has received much criticism for daring to write this book without being an expert in Religious Studies, he clearly has traveled some way toward becoming one. He writes his own translations from the original Greek texts he draws on, and has studied under and collaborated with authorities in the field.

There are several significant claims made about Jesus and his legacy in this book. Because of its style, events and personalities take center stage, rather than historical arguments. There are three very significant characters depicted in *Zealot*.

Foremost is the portrait of Jesus himself. Aslan places him in the midst of a stream of Jewish resistance against Roman occupation and the collusion of priestly authorities with their political masters. Some of these figures became known as zealots, because of their adoption of the “zeal” of Old Testament leaders for religious and political purity (p. 41). The forms that this Jewish resistance took were varied, ranging from prophesying an imminent end to the reigning order, to assassinating Jews deemed to be collaborators, or encouraging armed revolt to bring about change. The “Kingdom of God” that Jesus spoke of was “not a celestial kingdom existing on a cosmic plane” or “some distant future kingdom to be established at the end of time” (p. 117) but an imminent change in the political order.

This persistent movement was fiercely suppressed by the Romans, who termed such agitators “bandits” or *lestai* (p. 18), and reserved their harshest punishment — crucifixion — for this political crime. Aslan points out that this is the same word used in the Gospels for the two men crucified along with Jesus: “thieves” is a bad translation (p. 156). Viewing Jesus as one of three *lestai* atop Golgotha (among dozens routinely crucified) changes the tenor of the scene, and suggests a different meaning to his oft-repeated promise to one of them, “Today, you will be with me in heaven.”³

Another startling feature is Jesus’s exclusion of Gentiles from his intended audience. Aslan points out that evidence of this comes from the text of the Gospels themselves. One of his most telling examples comes from Mark 7:27. When petitioned by a Gentile woman to heal her sick daughter, Jesus responds with overtly racial overtones “Let the children [of Israel] be fed first, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs [Gentiles].” Aslan points out the exclusivity of Jesus’s message in his instructions to the disciples to preach only to fellow Jews, which is often forgotten.

We are used to viewing Jesus and his message through the eyes of Paul, whose expansive interpretation of Jesus’s message became the dominant view — what we now call Pauline Christianity. Aslan points again to evidence in the New Testament of the bitter struggle between Paul and the remaining group of original disciples in Jerusalem. They were led by James, the brother of Jesus. The unlikely victory of Paul, who had never met Jesus and claimed authority for his interpretations based on visions, over James and the others who had walked with the man himself, is astonishing. Indeed, read in the context of a highly acrimonious relationship with the Apostles, some parts of Paul’s epistles begin to sound like the work of a self-righteous egomaniac.

³ Luke 23:43.

James, whose existence and familial ties Aslan substantiates by reference to early church authorities including Origen and Eusebius (p. 201), has been all but erased from Christian memory — at least, as the brother of Jesus. The Epistle of James is often contrasted with the writings of Paul because of its emphasis on correct action rather than grace alone.⁴ When James's relationship to Jesus is remembered, the message of this book becomes much more significant as a likely reflection of the ideas of Jesus.

Aslan evokes the world in which Jesus lived, from the geographical landscape to the political intrigue. We have a vivid portrait of the ritual life of the Temple and the socio-economics of the region, down to the building projects commissioned by the new political class in Jerusalem. The routine collaboration of the Temple priests with Roman authorities detailed here sharpens our understanding of Jesus's frequent invective against the priestly class, and his famous attack on the moneychangers in the Temple.⁵ His often evasive answers to questions about who he claimed to be are clearer when one knows about the many recent and contemporary messianic resistance figures familiar to him and his audience. Most of all, the unlikely success of the band of "illiterate ecstatics" (p. 167) who first claimed that Jesus was the messiah is made newly astonishing.

Zealot sheds fresh light on texts that many of us think we know. Aslan pulls evidence for his arguments from right under our noses: familiar verses that, with the context supplied, suddenly point to very contemporary concerns and disputes. Reading this book induces repeated visits to the Bible itself, as the meanings Aslan ascribes to the text are not those which most believers are accustomed to finding there.

Aslan's conclusion may leave some readers unsatisfied. At the beginning of the book he expresses a desire to "spread the good news of the Jesus of history with the same fervour that I once applied to spreading the story of the Christ" (p. xx). He closes with the statement that the main thing that "comprehensive study of the historical Jesus should hopefully reveal is that Jesus of Nazareth — Jesus the man — is every bit as compelling, charismatic, and praiseworthy as Jesus the Christ" (p. 216). A bold claim, but the fascinating emphasis on history that drives the narrative succeeds in reducing Jesus entirely to the time he lived in. If his message was merely political, directed exclusively at Jews in first-century Palestine, it loses much of its relevance for anyone else. While the Jesus of *Zealot* is a startling, even courageous figure, he fails to retain much significance beyond a historical footnote — one of the many failed messiahs of his time. Why he should be compelling now is not something Aslan manages to reveal. Of course, there are many, like Northrop Frye,⁶ who would argue that the relevance of Jesus in the New Testament accounts does not lie in their historical truth at all — but to explain that, the reader will need to open another book.

⁴ "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he have faith and have not works? Can faith save him?" (James 2:14).

⁵ John 3:13-17.

⁶ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).