

A REVIEW AND CRITIQUE
Of New York Times Bestseller
ZEALOT: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth, By Reza Aslan
David Renwick, September 12, 2013

My Background:

Ph.D. Union Seminary in Virginia, 1988

Thesis published in 1991: “*Paul, The Temple and The Presence of God*” (Brown University Judaic Studies Series)

Why the Interest?

In Part . . . A National Pastime to be curious about various views of Jesus!!

TV DOCUMENTARIES:

- e.g., “From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians ” (1988)
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/etc/synopsis.html>

MOVIES: e.g.,

- The Ten Commandments, Ben Hur, The Robe . . .
- The Last Temptation of Christ (Scorsese, 1988)
- The Passion of the Christ (2004)

NEWS MAGAZINES:

Every Easter and Christmas . . . in Time Magazine, Newsweek . . . Newspaper . .

BOOKS ON RELATED TOPICS:

- Bishop John Shelby Spong: “Why Christianity Must Change or Die”
- Elaine Pagels, “The Gnostic Gospels”
- Dan Brown, “The DaVinci Code”

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

- Dead Sea Scrolls
- Nag Hammadi
- James Ossuary

THE BIGGER RELIGIOUS QUESTION OF OUR DAY

- Pluralism – Are all religions the the same (different metaphors for the same goal)
. . . See Stephen Prothero: *God is Not One*
- Can we believe what we once believed?
- Are all the problems in the world caused by people who hold strongly to old beliefs (e.g., Christians or Muslims; Hindus are more open, etc. . .) see Keith Ward: *Is Religion Dangerous?*
- Who’s right? Us or them? Are we completely right? Are they completely wrong?

In Part . . . human interest story about the author:

which Aslan introduces at the outset . . .

- Secular Muslim Household
- Became an evangelical Christian through Young Life
- Couldn't believe the Bible "literally true" (so Dr Bart Ehrmann, UNC)
- Re-visited, re-embraced the religion of his heritage (Islam)
 - [Fox News Interview: <http://video.foxnews.com/v/2568059649001/zealot-author-reza-aslan-responds-to-critics/>]
- Wife and mother now still Christians
- He writes (xx): *"Two decades of academic research into the origins of Christianity has made me a more committed disciple of Jesus of Nazareth than I ever was of Jesus Christ."*

What about His Credentials and Research?

- Santa Clara University, BA 1995 (Religion, Phi Beta Kappa)
- Harvard Divinity School, Master.Theol.Stud. (1999, 2 yr)
- University of Iowa, MFA 2002
- Iowa Writers Workshop
- U.C.Santa Barbara Ph.D. 2009 Sociology (of Religions)
- Position: U.C. Riverside, Professor of Creative Writing

Previous Book: *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, 2005

Web-site: <http://www.aslanmedia.com/>

What do the Readers/Critics/Scholars say (in general)?

- All Agree: A great writer.
- All Agree: not much new academically – just re-packaged (e.g. SGF Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots*, 1967)
- Some: Parts are helpful and good
 - (e.g., some great descriptions of the first century world)
- Some/Most: Parts are not believable
 - (e.g., the central thesis: Jesus espoused violence – even the extremely liberal John Dominic Crossan disagrees!) . . .
 - Aslan turns a multi-faceted person into a somewhat boring single-faceted person.

Approach Tonight

1. Aslan's Basic Assumptions
2. My Assessment of those Assumptions
3. So What About the Contents of the Book?

What are his Basic Assumptions?

1. The Gospels in the Bible are documents written by believers in order to create faith in Jesus as the divine Son of God: this is “Jesus Christ”
2. The Gospel authors (as well as Paul the Apostle) are
 - a. not interested in the accuracy of historical facts (historical accuracy is a modern concern)

154 “As with everything else in the gospels, the story of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and execution was written for one reason and one reason only: to prove that he was the promised messiah. Factual accuracy was irrelevant. What mattered was Christology, not history.”

 - i. which they can re-shape in order to tell the story
 1. the way they want to tell it
 2. the way they want their audience to hear it

150 “By the end of the first century, when the bulk of the gospels were being written, Rome, in particular the Roman intellectual elite, had become the primary target of Christian evangelism. Not only did all traces of revolutionary zeal have to be removed from the life of Jesus, the Romans had to be completely absolved of any responsibility for Jesus’ death. *It was the Jews who killed the messiah.* The Romans were the unwitting pawns of the high priest Caiaphas.”
 - b. interested only in the meaning of those facts
 - i. as they understood them
 - ii. and as they wish them to be understood (again, see p.154, above)
3. Therefore, in the Gospel stories,
 - i. the ‘facts’ about Jesus are at best partially “true”
 - ii. and the opinions expressed by and about Jesus (who he was and what he came to do) are biased in some direction or another
4. As in a court of law, in order get the real story behind the facts and biases, and so recover Jesus of Nazareth (Jesus as he really was, an ordinary person like you and me), and not the embellished Jesus (Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God) a historian must use
 - i. secular history (which has often been ignored)
 - ii. personal judgment on what parts of the story are true and what are embellished
 - iii. the consensus of other scholars
 - iv. etc.
5. The new picture that emerges must somehow all fit together and be as credible, if not more credible than the presenting picture (i.e., the Gospels themselves)

A Personal Response To These Assumptions

1. The Gospels in the Bible are documents written by believers in order to create faith in Jesus as the divine Son of God: this is "Jesus Christ"

YES:

- John 20:30-31 . . . *these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God . . .*
- John 21:25 *there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that could be written!*

2. The Gospel authors (as well as Paul the Apostle) are

- a. not interested in the accuracy of historical facts (historical accuracy is a modern concern)

To a Certain Extent, Yes: the Four Gospels are more like four portraits than like four photos; we have an interest in precision that was not the case even 100 years ago

But to Aslan's extent, No! this does not mean a callous disregard for historical fact

Eyewitnesses 2000 years ago, weren't naïve!! They still knew when the facts have been twisted (see e.g., Aslan on Stephen, Pt.3, Prologue)

See Richard Bauckham, *"Jesus and the Eyewitnesses"* (2006)

Historians 2000 years ago, were still interested in facts

NT Wright, *"Who was Jesus?"*; Richard Burridge, *"What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography"*

- i. facts which they can re-shape in order to tell the story (cf.p.31)

1. the way they want to tell it

2. the way they want their audience to hear it

To a Certain Extent, Yes: The Gospels are "sermons" intended for a specific audience, more like portraits than like photos.

- *Mark's Jesus is in a rush!*
- *Matthew's Jesus is a Teacher*
- *Luke's Jesus is soft on the Pharisees*
- *John's Jesus gives really long speeches about himself*
 - Is this a negative or a positive?
 - Is this more credible or less credible?
 - At different times in history, different parts of the church have embraced one view of Jesus more than others: surely this is normal?

- b. interested only in the meaning of those facts

- i. as they understood them

- ii. and as they wish them to be understood

To A Certain Extent, Yes: the Gospels and Letters contain the personality and ideas of the authors

But To Aslan's Extent, No: meaning was not the "only" interest of the authors .
.they are definitely interested in facts: e.g., Why else include the stories of Simon Peter's blunders, if they didn't happen?

3. Therefore, in the Gospel stories,
 - i. the "facts" about Jesus are at best partially "true"
 - ii. and the opinions expressed by and about Jesus (who he was and what he came to do) are biased in some direction or another

Life is more complex and beautiful than Aslan acknowledges:

e.g., Is a photograph more true than an impressionist painting by Monet?

- *Did Monet intentionally cover up, reveal or twist the truth by painting the way he did?*
- *How easy or hard is it to get to the "real object/person" if you start with a photo or if you start with Monet?*

4. As in a court of law, in order get the real story behind the facts and biases, and so recover Jesus of Nazareth (Jesus as he really was, an ordinary person like you and me), and not the embellished Jesus (Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God) a historian must use
 - i. secular history (which has often been ignored)
 - ii. personal judgment on what parts of the story are true and what are embellished
 - iii. the consensus of other scholars (assuming there is consensus)
 - iv. etc.

Do we gain something in our view of Jesus by looking at **the world of Jesus' time**?
YES! Is it possible that we have missed something important? YES! Always!

An Example from Roman Coinage . . . Caesar as "Son of God," and "Father"

Augustus Caesar Denarius



Augustus, AR Denarius, 2 BC (?)–4 AD, Lugdunum - RIC I, 207

Augustus, AR Denarius, 2 BC (?)–4 AD, Lugdunum

CAESAR AVGVSTVS-DIVI F PATER PATRIAE

Laureate head right

AVGVSTI F COS DESIG PRINC IVVENT

Gaius and Lucius Caesar, each togate and standing facing, resting hand on shield, spear behind each shield

Simpulum on left facing right and lituus on right facing left in upper field

C L CAESARES in exergue

19mm x 20mm, 3.70g

RIC I, 207

Permission to display granted from Beast Coins – www.beastcoins.com

KEY DATES FOR THIS PERIOD OF HISTORY

64 BC Rome occupies Palestine (Pompey)

d.4BC Herod the Great Rules on Rome's behalf

c.4BC Jesus is born

“Organized Religion” in the Temple becomes corrupt

Divisions exist between rich Jews and poor Jews

c. late AD20's John the Baptist begins his ministry

c.AD30 Jesus begins his ministry

c.AD33 Jesus is crucified by the Romans (“King of the Jews”)

c. AD33-35 Jesus is first believed to be “God made flesh” by Stephen

AD50's Paul's letters; Christianity grows and becomes more Gentile

AD66 Jewish Revolt Begins

DR: Mark's Gospel?

AD70 Jerusalem and its Temple destroyed

Ancient Judaism as we know it destroyed

RA: Mark's Gospel?

post AD 70 Christianity grows and become even more Gentile

[AD90's Pharisees regroup, and modern Judaism is born

AD220 Mishnah, the basic document of modern Judaism, is complete]

5. The new picture that emerges must somehow all fit together and be as credible, if not more credible than the presenting picture (i.e., the Gospels themselves)

As many people have pointed out . . . the new picture that usually emerges,

- Even from erudite scholars, often looks eerily like the scholar!!
- Is almost always selective . . . you have to ask not only “what's included?” but “what's omitted?” (see, for example, the chinese puzzle “tangram”)

In other words, all we prove, is

- not something new about Jesus:
 - *e.g., that Jesus is different from or better than the one presented to us in the Gospels,*
- but something about us!!!
 - that we are just as biased, if not more biased than the original authors!
 - E.g. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle kicks in!!

See, Scott McKnight: *The Jesus We'll Never Know*

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/15.22.html?paging=off>

Response by NT Wright <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/april/16.27.html>

SO WHAT ABOUT THE BOOK?

Author's Note – Aslan's Story; Outline of his thesis

xix PREMISE:

- “the idea that the leader of a popular messianic movement
- calling for the imposition of the ‘kingdom of God’ (implying a revolt against Rome)
- could have remained uninvolved in the revolutionary fervor that had gripped nearly every Jew in Judea is simply ridiculous.”

PART ONE (DR: The Jewish World of the 1st Century)

Prologue: A Different Sort of Sacrifice (DR: Jewish internal divisions mid 1st century)

Internal Jewish Hatred of their own High Priest, Ananus, in AD 57

1. A Hole in the Corner (DR: Compromised Jewish Religious leadership 1st century)

For a Peasant: The Reality of Roman rule and a corrupt upper priestly class in cahoots with the Romans, from 64BC on . . . always meant anger, and the desire for physical strife

2. King of the Jews (DR: the peasant hope for a new king, the messiah)

“Urbanization” of Galilee under Herod the Great (before 4BC)

Divide grows between the rich and the poor

The Messianic Hope: a (secular) King to restore Israel's freedom

3. You know where I am from (DR: Jesus' birth place)

Jesus grows up in Nazareth, and RA believes he was born there . . . not Bethlehem

Birth stories (says RA) were not intended to be literal;

Going to Bethlehem and staying for months is “preposterous”;

The flight to Egypt is “fanciful”

but, see N.T. Wright “Who is Jesus Christ?”

4. The Fourth Philosophy (DR: The Jewish nationalist “zealots”)

Asserts that Jesus and disciples are illiterate

(DR: this becomes critical to his thesis: the simple Jesus, believed by simple followers is hi-jacked by the educated Greek speaking Jewish Christians; see p. 181, etc.);

Factual Mistake: Sepphoris is a day's journey away (actually, an hour)→

Growing anger among the poor: ZEAL . . . a group willing to do extreme acts of violence, which must have (asserts RA) impacted Jesus

5. Where is your Fleet to Sweep the Roman Sea? (DR: The stream of sub-par Roman Governors)

. . . Pontius Pilate. Says Gospels paint Pilate as ‘righteous but weak’ (???) – (trying to make him better than he was) . . . Pilate was bad news!! (says RA and DR!)

Rome begins to lose control in 50's-60's

6. Year One (DR: 1st century Jewish History and its impact on the what story the Christians decided to tell)

AD 66 Jewish Revolt; zealots rise up!

AD 70 Jerusalem starved and destroyed; Judaism over; Rome wins

The Christian “cover up” job begins:

- i. The Gospel is no longer aimed at Jews but at Romans
- ii. Therefore, Jesus must not be seen as a Jewish nationalist,

- iii. Christians must not be seen as hating Romans;
- iv. Romans must not be seen as responsible for Jesus' death (sedition)
- v. Jews get the blame (blasphemy)

See PCUSA Confession: "A Brief Statement Of Faith" 1983: "crucified for blasphemy **and** sedition"

SO --- John Mark writing in Rome after AD 70 (so Aslan) tells an altered version of the real Jesus, palatable to sophisticated Romans.

PART TWO

Prologue: Zeal for your House (DR: *Holy Week Evidence that Jesus was a this-worldly revolutionary*)

- o Palm Sunday: Entering Jerusalem as a (real) King;
- o Holy Week: Challenge the Temple Authorities
- o "Render to Caesar" (to Aslan, means: "You owe Caesar Nothing" = "a zealot litmus test")
- o Disciples have swords in Gethsemane

7. The Voice Crying Out in the Wilderness (DR: *Who was John the Baptist to Jesus? and why the gospel writers began to cover up the truth*)

Aslan sees the story of John's death at Macherus by Antipas as a fabrication.

The first Christians find it embarrassing that Jesus was baptized by him (was his disciple) and seek to minimize John's stature.

DR: If Jesus was a 'revolutionary' why was John confused? If the Gospel writers were trying to hide the fact that Jesus was a revolutionary, why not just omit the story of his doubt about Jesus (Mark omits; Matthew adds!! Matt.11:2)?

8. Follow Me (DR: *The historical context of Jesus' ministry in Galilee*)

Urbanization (yes, but!); Grinding poverty (but "rich fishing")

Parable of Good Samaritan challenging the Temple establishment/Caiaphas

Factual Mistake: 95 "Capernaum . . stretched along a wide expanse of seacoast, allowing the cool salt air to nurture all manner of plants and trees"

9. By the Finger of God (DR: *Jesus was a miracle worker who would not take pay*)

Remarkable affirmation of this aspect of Jesus' ministry.

Why? . . . well, His miracles contain a message: "You don't need the temple to be whole before God."

10. May Your Kingdom Come (DR: *Jesus' central message and its meaning*)

Jesus picks this theme up from John the baptist

A "this worldly" kingdom; the choice of the "12" is a call to war . .

Jesus believed himself to be the king: the kingdom of God personified.

122: this one undeniable truth: the same God whom the Bible calls "a man of war" (Exodus 15:3) . . . is the *only* God that Jesus knew and the *sole* God he worshipped.

. . . His commands to "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek" must be read as directed exclusively at his fellow Jews. The commands have nothing to do with how to treat outsiders, especially those savage "plunderers of the world" who occupied God's land in direct violation of the law of Moses, which Jesus viewed himself as fulfilling. *They shall not live in your land.*

In any case, neither the commandment to love one's enemies nor the plea to turn the other cheek is equivalent to a call for non-violence or nonresistance. Jesus was not a fool. He understood what

every other claimant to the mantle of the messiah understood: God's sovereignty could not be established except through force. "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of God has been coming violently and the violent ones try to snatch it away" (Matthew 11:12, Luke 16:16).

DR: Note that NRSV translates Mtt.11:12 not as 'coming violently' but as 'has suffered violence'; Jesus seems not to be defending the violence but rejecting it!

11. Who Do You Say I Am? (DR: Titles for Jesus)

Messiah is a term with many possible meanings. Primarily a real king like David.

However, Jesus prefers the title "Son of Man" (from Ezekiel, Daniel: a pre-existent powerful being); and wants to fill the term "Messiah" with this meaning too.

12 No King But Caesar (DR: shifting the blame of Jesus' Trial/Death to the Jews from the Romans as each Gospel gets written: Going soft on Pilate!)

The trial: (148) "a fabrication"; (149) "What is truly beyond belief is the portrayal of Pontius Pilate, a man renowned for his loathing of the Jews . . . spending even a moment of his time pondering the fate of yet another Jewish rabble-rouser."

- Barabbas certainly never released;
- Sanhedrin trial illegal (DR: uses laws for the Sanhedrin from a document finished 190 years later, the Mishnah, dated AD220)
- Blasphemy led to "stoning" . . . if Stephen is stoned to death on the spot (Acts 7) why not Jesus? (DR: good question)

PART THREE

Prologue: God made Flesh

(DR: Illiterate original disciples stuck in Jerusalem, and new Greek speaking disciples who never knew the historical Jesus facilitate the message being transformed from Jesus the nationalist to Jesus as God.)

169. KEY BEGINNING TO THIS TRANSITION: The first martyr: Stephen, Acts 7 (between AD 33-35)

169. "The Son of Man in Stephen's vision is a pre-existent heavenly being whose kingdom is not of this world . . . God made flesh"

169. The story of the zealous Galilean peasant and Jewish nationalist who donned the mantle of messiah and launched a foolhardy rebellion against the corrupt temple priesthood and vicious Roman occupation comes to an abrupt end, not with his death on the cross, nor with the empty tomb, but at the first moment one of his followers dares suggest he is God. Understand that there can be no greater blasphemy for a Jew than what Stephen suggests.

13. If Christ has not be Risen (DR: Belief in the Resurrection was a critical factor in the movement's continuation)

RA agrees that this belief is early (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-3).

174. There is one nagging fact to consider: one after another of those who claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus went to their own gruesome deaths refusing to recant their testimony

176. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the resurrection is not a historical event . . . falls outside the scope of history and into the realm of faith"

DR: But see NT Wright, "Surprised by Hope"

- No Scriptures suggest resurrection: unconvincing to sophisticated Jerusalemites.
- Division grows between between Greek speaking Jewish Christians who know/read Greek philosophy and rural Galileans.

- After the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 . . Mission to the Jews abandoned

14. Am I Not An Apostle (DR: Story of Paul who did not know Jesus and has no interest in the Jesus who actually lived, only in Jesus as a divine figure. Gal 1:15-17)

188. It was Paul who solved the disciples dilemma of reconciling Jesus's shameful death on the cross with the messianic expectations of the Jews, by simply discarding those expectations and transforming Jesus into a completely new creature, one that almost wholly is of his own making: *Christ*.

Paul's view ignored by Mark, Matthew and Luke, embraced by John.

DR: What about Acts? Do the Romans look good in Luke's Acts?

195. Paul humiliated by James, is glad to go to Rome.

DR: RA ignores Paul's claim to have been a zealot: "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil. 3:6; also Gal. 1:14). The Pharisees were "zealous nationalists," but were not revolutionaries. Ignores the multiple allusions to Jesus's words (as we know them in the gospels); downplays 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 1 Cor 15

15. The Just One (DR: James, Jesus' brother as the leader of the Jerusalem church, more powerful than Paul, until AD70)

Correctly sees struggle between James and Paul (and Peter?).

DR: YES: Life in the early church was tense not perfect!!!

But see 1 Clement, which unites Peter and Paul in Rome by AD90)

Factual Mistake? 197 "simple garments made of linen not wool" (Linen was for the poor? Or for the wealthy? --see Luke 16:19)

Epilogue: True God from True God

The men of Nicaea win out and fix the practice of Christianity in AD325 (seems to confuse the creed with the canon) . Paul wins

216. "the Christ of Paul's creation has utterly subsumed the Jesus of history. The story of the revolutionary zealot who walked across Galilee gathering an army of disciples with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, the magnetic preacher who defied the authority of the Temple priesthood in Jerusalem, the radical Jewish nationalist who challenged the Roman occupation and lost, has almost been completely lost to history.

That is a shame, Because the one thing any comprehensive study of the historical Jesus should hopefully reveals is that Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus the *man* – is every bit as compelling, charismatic, and praiseworthy as Jesus the Christ. He is, in short, someone worth believing in.

Some Books to Follow Up . . .

Jesus Studies

N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* Eerdmans, 1992 [University of St Andrews, Scotland]

Ben Witherington, "*The Jesus Quest*" (1995) [Asbury Seminary]

NT Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (2000)

Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006) [Sr Scholar at Ridley Hall, Cambridge]

. . . Borg, Crossan, et al . . .

(A Jewish view of Jesus) Amy Jill Levine *The Misunderstood Jew*

History

(Christian) Bo Reicke *The New Testament Era*

(Christian) FF Bruce, *New Testament History*

(Jewish) Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*