

Reza Aslan's *ZEALOT* reviewed by Timothy Foote - November 30, 2013

Though Aslan is best known as an apologetic historian of Islam, he begins *Zealot* by conceding that Jesus' life changed the history of the world, swiftly adding that hardly only a few scraps of historically verifiable evidence exist about that life. Relying on those scraps as if they were Holy Writ, he soon justifies one of the book's breathless jacket blurbs: "Aslan rips Jesus out of all the contexts we thought he belonged in and holds him forth as someone entirely new. A passionate Jew, a violent revolutionary, a fanatical ideologue."

The Gospels, he says, must be accepted purely on faith, or (often) not accepted at all--being famously contradictory, all written decades after the events described by men who had not been witness to them.

The confusion in the Gospels is hardly news, these days. Still, strewing footnotes and Biblical citations along the way, Aslan pursues his thesis with surprising zeal. Forget gentle Jesus meek and mild. Not to mention "Blessed are the peacemakers." The whole Sermon on the Mount. The overarching philosophical message of the Gospels, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Aslan's Jesus is an uneducated day laborer, a deeply believing Jew, heart and soul engaged in the segment of history in which he lived, the decades when his countrymen maintained a burning desire to throw off the yoke of Rome. This smoldered for decades until, in a bloody Israeli victory, Rome was expelled. Six years later in AD 70, returning Roman legions crushed the Jews, razing the great Temple of Jerusalem to the ground.

It is a stretch to involve the destruction of the Temple, thirty years after Jesus' death, as the main event in an historical life of Jesus. Aslan is at his most interesting, however, when describing the place. He includes a meticulous cutaway drawing of its many courtyards (Women allowed in only one). In sickening detail he shares with us the ghastly, smelly process of buying, selling, eviscerating and sacrificing to Jehovah the thousands of live animals that went on there.

The Temple, we learn, had been the heart, soul and power center of a Theocratic state. Its immensely rich priests were God's representatives on earth. But as worldly survivors, many worked hand in glove with Roman oppressors. As a result, revolutionaries like Aslan's version of Jesus, felt hostility not only to Rome but to Money men, High Priests and generally to what the author seems to think of as the urban power structure.

Making that point, he lays on the reader a startling assertion. It involves Jesus' famous reply to a famous trick question. Was it all right, he was asked, for Jews to pay tribute money to Caesar? If he said no, he was openly challenging the power of Rome, and in danger of being charged with sedition. If he said yes he was a traitor to the movement and Judaism. His response: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's" has long been taken as a brilliant, diplomatic dodge--a variation on the other worldliness that pervades the Gospels. See "My kingdom is not of this world."

Not by Aslan. For him "that which is God's" clearly means the Holy Land. He insists that the words are a gutsy assertion of the central aim of Jewish revolt. Caesar's head is one side of the coin, so he is entitled to the taxes. Render unto God was a daring demand for Rome to get out of Israel. A clever code phrase for rebellious Jews. How so? Every Jew held that the Holy Land belonged to Jehovah.

Readers here, perhaps for political reasons,, are being subliminally invited to note that Jews in Israel today have the same complex mix of God's will and territorial entitlement to the Holy Land. (In Jerusalem sixty years ago, interviewing a famous Rabbi, I observed that if the new state of Israel did not allow Orthodox men to serve in its army, the Holy Land might be overrun by its enemies. Said the Rabbi: "We were not told we lost the Temple because we could not fight, but because we did not keep the Law.").

The scriptures familiarly present John the Baptist, and Jesus as crowd pleasing preachers and healers, and perhaps the Messiah as well. Aslan has energetically turned up historic references to slews of other inspired or eccentric types trolling (his word) around the countryside, preaching, performing magic tricks, claiming to be --or claimed by crowds to be--THE Messiah. A mob of any sort was viewed as potential danger to state authority, so many mock Messiahs were executed for sedition-- like Jesus, in Aslan's view. He notes that magic tricks and pretended healings by many "Messiahs" often involved a kind of ritual, such as the one he notes used by Jesus when he spits into the open eyes of a man whose sight he cures.(Mark : 8:22-26)

Aslan's Jesus is the "not peace but a sword" Jesus. The one who threatens to bring down the Temple of Jerusalem in ruins. A reader half expects the author to claim that what Jesus really said was "beat your plowshares into swords."

Should *Zealot* be too much taken to heart this season, Christmas may be a bit light on familiar carols.

"Oh, little town of Bethlehem ?"

Jesus couldn't have been born there. On that day Mary and Joseph were homebound in Nazareth. Indeed, there was a census- gathering in Bethlehem at or near the time of Jesus' birth, but Aslan tells us, it had to do with taxes. On tax record matters inflexible Roman Law required householders to stay at home the better to have their worth assessed.

Wise men? Star of Wonder? Angels we have heard on High? Not in history.

Then why invent a birth in Bethlehem (Here you may reassuringly hum a bar or two of "Once in Royal David's City," Or whisper " For unto you is born this day in the city of David." Historically that's what Bethlehem was. According to Old Testament prophecy any Messiah must be of the seed of the house of David. Micah (5:2) , describing the Messiah : "And you Bethlehem...from you shall come to me a ruler in Israel." The Gospel writers took their cue from that. And so on.

No flight into Egypt.

No need for the Holy Family to flee. King Herod was "the most famous Jew in the whole of the Roman Empire" says Aslan. He had his little ways; much reliable material on his doings exists—but nary a word about any horrendous, clearly newsworthy, Israel-wide killing of babies to eliminate future rivals.

Why then flight into Egypt --which among other things inspired Gerard David's charming portrait of Mary in blue , resting with the baby while in the background Joseph knocks nuts off a tree for breakfast.? Aslan blames the words of Old Testament Prophet Hosea (11: 1) "Out of Egypt I have called my son." As well as the powerful memory of Moses and Jehovah implicit in the story. Matthew's Egypt story, Aslan comments, "is not meant to reveal any fact about Jesus; it is meant to reveal this truth; that Jesus is the new Moses, who survived Pharaoh's massacre of the Israelite's sons and emerged from Egypt with a new law from God. (Exodus 1:22)."

Using "history" scraps to refute events in the Gospels, Aslan generally lets his background materials do the refuting. He rarely charges Matthew, Mark, Luke or John with outright invention. One howling exception--the chat between Jesus and Pilate.

Pro-forma no record exists of any words passing between them. In historic context, there also seems to be plenty of common sense adverse evidence against even the possibility—protocol, of course, but more notably Pilates' notorious hatred of, and cruelty to, Jews. During his watch as a matter of course Pilate had hundreds of Jews crucified .Those executed included many who like Jesus stirred up crowds, like Jesus were taken for or

claimed to be the Messiah as predicted (a bit shakily) in the Old Testament. As carolers know: "Isaiah was fore told it, the Rose I'm thinking of."

More disquieting than the author's dismissal as pure fabrication of any chat with Pilate, is Zealot's back-to-back citations of Gospel accounts of the Pilate episode--each one more revealing than the one before.

Mark first. Writing from Rome, 30 years after Jesus' death and only months after Roman legions had destroyed the Temple, he is the one who invents, Aslan says flatly, a non-existent custom whereby Roman authority--on the Eve of Passover-- is supposed to be obliged to spare one Jewish prisoner. This leads to the revealing, anguishing exchanges between Jesus, Pilate, the High Priests and a Jewish mob seeking to spare the life of a bad guy while crying out for Jesus' blood.

Writing in Greek from Damascus, 70 years after Jesus' death, Matthew is at considerable pains to show Pilate's desire that Jesus go free. In this version he is warned by his wife to avoid having anything to do with "that innocent man." He realizes it is the jealousy of the priests that makes them want Jesus dead. Literally washing his hands of blame, he tells the Jews: "I am innocent of this man's blood...See to it yourselves." Finally the Jews cry out "May his blood be on our heads and on our children." (Matthew 27:1-26)

The Gospel of John, written a full century after the Crucifixion, has Jesus himself absolve Pilate of the greatest guilt. "The one who handed me over to you," he says to Pilate, "is guilty of a greater sin," placing the blame clearly on Jewish religious authorities.

And so, Aslan concludes, "a story concocted by Mark to shift the blame away from a Roman to the Jews is stretched with the passage of time to the point of absurdity, becoming in the process the basis for two thousand years of Christian anti-Semitism."

If the tiny, infant religion of Christianity was anxious to exculpate the Romans, he explains, it was because, having failed to convince most Jews to join, it began preaching to the gentiles, mostly Roman, since Rome ran the ancient world. As we know, with inspired help soon to come from St Paul, that effort eventually went so well that Rome gave up torturing Christians and made Christianity the state religion.

Much of his expostulation, however, seems irrelevant. The book is merely the latest stitch in long and fruitless thread of debate, between science and verifiable fact on the one hand, and on the other, religious faith, great creation stories, and a demonstrated human need as real as hunger, for at least the ghost of a hope that death and oblivion may not be all that endures of individual life.

This debate's most recent arc goes back only to the mid 19th century, with the arrival of Science in the form of Darwin and Evolution. Modern Science was in its relative infancy, the Church rich and powerful. If it had had any sense it would have quoted Jesus, "My kingdom is not of this world" and simply gone about its business (as in fact it did day to day) providing spiritual solace to millions, an ancient ritual, some good reasons to care for the poor and not cheat on your wife.

Instead, claiming every word of the Bible literally true, including the date of this globe's creation (4004 BC?) it kept hrowing itself bodily in front of what was to become the Juggernaut of Science. Losing again and again and angering Science, in itself become a jealous religion.

Religious faith is based on a logically unprovable belief in the existence of an immeasurable, unimaginably great power, one so enormous that a human mind cannot even conceive of it, having to make do with hopelessly inadequate stories and metaphors. Such a power could effortlessly snap the universe into being in its spare time. Knock together a really simple experiment, like mankind, mysteriously choosing to imbue him with a unique sense of justice in the midst of a

Nature otherwise created as red in tooth and claw. Tease or test this creation, like an engineer playing with a toy robot, with a religion based on something as implausible as the Resurrection offered in the new Testament.

If any simple minded human being had had anything to do with staging that event-- wanting other men to believe it so wholly that they would die rather than deny its truth—the risen Christ would have appeared not just to two strolling at Emmaus, or to a clearly biased handful of Apostles, but to an infinity of multitudes. With that in mind, the event might better have been put off 2,000 years, or so, until a vaster range of world-wide images was possible. In limited human terms, it has to be a miracle that, conceived when and how it was, the religion survived at all.

A reader of *Zealot* may feel a tiny additional impulse to remember the words of Turtullian: “I believe, because it is absurd.” Or hope a little harder late at night that Science and political correctness will save us.

Or want to recall Einstein’s assertion that, working on science, he worked in “Holy curiosity.” Or even repeat his other famous line: “God does not play at dice with the universe.”