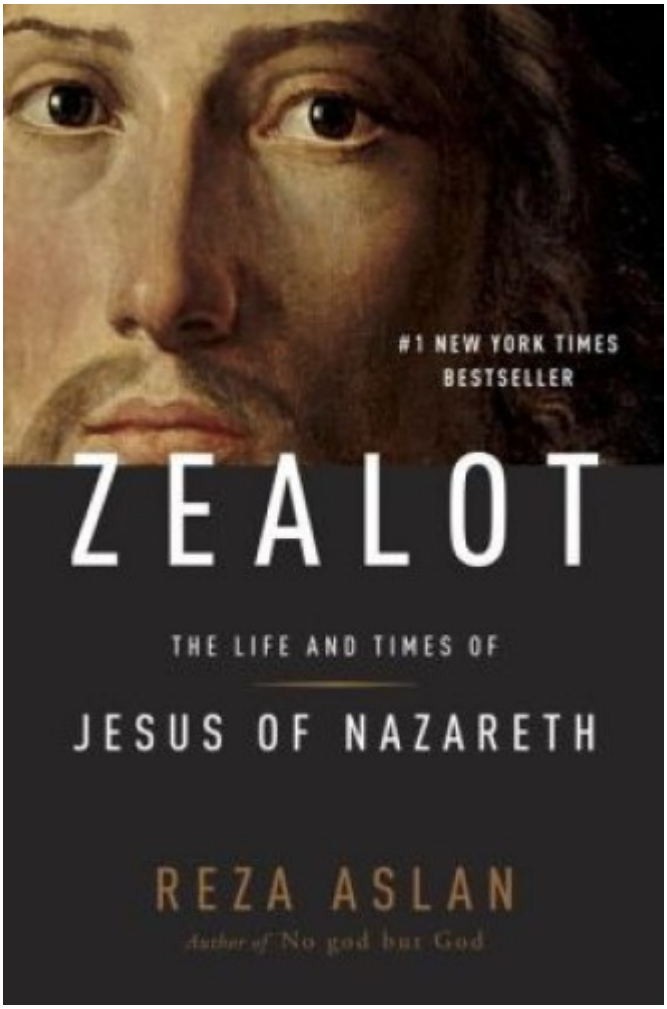
Zealot, by Reza Aslan

reviewed by Greg Carey in the October 16, 2013 issue

In Review



Zealot

By Reza Aslan
Random House

Reza Aslan's *Zealot* arrived with an enormous splash. An engaging and personal interview on NPR's *Fresh Air* attracted widespread interest. Then a Fox News interview commandeered Internet coverage. The network's religion correspondent,

Lauren Green, began by asking why Aslan, a Muslim, would write a book about Jesus. In his reply Aslan perhaps overstated his scholarly qualifications to write about the New Testament. The contentious interview was pure gold for Aslan and Random House: *Zealot* rocketed to Amazon's no. one best-seller spot. Several accomplished biblical scholars quickly posted reviews of the book—something that rarely happens. At this point, any review must reckon with *Zealot*'s remarkable marketing journey.

Aslan has established himself as an influential scholar and commentator on religion. His controversial *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* is perhaps the most influential introduction to Islam for Western audiences. Aslan completed a master's degree in theological studies at Harvard, then a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of California–Santa Barbara. His dissertation investigated global jihadism, a subject he took on in *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*. In short, Aslan is a public commentator on religion whose academic credentials are stronger in some areas than in others. New Testament studies represents one of his interests but not an area of formal expertise.

Aslan's biography also invites interest: born a Muslim in Iran, he experienced an evangelical Christian conversion as an adolescent living in the United States. After an undergraduate encounter with critical biblical scholarship undermined his biblicist naïveté, Aslan abandoned Christianity and returned to embrace Islam—but with a difference. He identifies primarily with Sufism, Islam's best-known expression of mysticism. Holding a critical distance from conventional dogma, Aslan welcomes truth from many religious traditions but chooses to identify primarily with Islam.

Aslan admires Jesus and portrays him sympathetically as a person of justice, passion and charisma. As Aslan sees it, Jesus lived during revolutionary times. Like many Jews of his day, he resented Roman domination of Galilee and Judea, and he condemned the Jerusalem elites who administered affairs in the temple and collaborated with Rome.

According to Aslan, when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God he was announcing God's dramatic intervention to liberate Israel from its bondage and to inaugurate a new age of justice and prosperity. When Jesus marched into Jerusalem, he was declaring himself Israel's true messiah, who would set his people free. When he created a disturbance in the temple, he was attacking Israel's priestly nobility. And when Jesus said, "Give back to Caesar the property that belongs to Caesar, and give

back to God the property that belongs to God" (Aslan's translation of Mark 12:17), he advocated not accommodation to the authorities but refusal to collaborate. Many Christians, including many scholars, would agree with Aslan on most or all of these points.

Most readers balk at Aslan's thesis on one particular point: Aslan contends that not only did Jesus resist Rome and those who supported its empire, he was a revolutionary who approved of violence. For Jesus, "love your enemies" did not apply to enemies beyond the boundaries of Israel; Jesus meant to build Jewish solidarity. Jesus meant it, literally, when he said he came not to bring peace but a sword (Matt. 10:34; see Luke 12:51). Above all, Jesus saw himself as the messiah who would set things right for Israel. The crucifixion demonstrates who Jesus really was. The Romans reserved crucifixion for subversives, and Jesus died for being the revolutionary that he was.

Aslan's Jesus is hardly the savior of the world. His death provided no vehicle by which God could forgive human sin. He did not consider himself divine. That idea emerged well after Jesus' death; indeed, Aslan traces much of Christian orthodoxy to Paul's creative impulse. Many Christians will naturally object to these conclusions, though again these are the sorts of questions serious biblical scholarship routinely engages.

At the same time, we might be surprised by Aslan's openness to the miraculous dimensions of the Jesus story. Aslan's Jesus did build a reputation as a healer, and his healing work empowered people to live blessed lives without the mediation of the temple authorities. Moreover, without specifying exactly what the resurrection was, Aslan accepts that it refers to the actual experiences of Jesus' followers. We remember at this point that Aslan is a mystic, open to many levels of truth.

The broad outlines of Aslan's argument are hardly new. Many readers have observed an affinity between Aslan's account and the argument set forth by Hermann Samuel Reimarus in the 18th century, though Aslan shows more sympathy for Jesus and his followers. Reimarus saw Jesus as a failure, as does Aslan, but he attributed Christianity's emergence to the ambition and deception of Jesus' followers. More recently many scholars—including S. G. F. Brandon in his 1967 book *Jesus and the Zealots*—have noted Jesus' affinity with those who resisted Rome.

Most scholars have already sifted through Aslan's basic claim, and almost all have rejected it. Why? For one thing, Jewish resistance did not always imply violence. The Jewish apocalyptic traditions, classically embodied in the book of Daniel, advocate not revolt but faithfulness to Israel's covenant regardless of the consequences. We find similar sentiments in Revelation. The sectarians who created the Dead Sea Scrolls may have fantasized about holy war, and it seems likely their settlement was destroyed by the Romans during the First Jewish Revolt, but we have no evidence that the Essenes were true revolutionaries. Aslan observes possible affinities between Jesus and the Essenes, but he does not follow through with this insight. In other words, Jesus may well have resisted the powers of his day, but that doesn't mean he was a revolutionary in the conventional sense.

Aslan far overstates what we may infer from Jesus' crucifixion. True, Romans crucified Jesus because they perceived him as a threat to public order and because Jesus' social status was low enough that he qualified for such a shameful and torturous death. That does not necessarily mean that Jesus was a violent revolutionary or even that the Romans regarded him as such. Jesus' crucifixion simply means that the Romans wanted to put an end to his activities in such a public way as to discourage others from following his path. In short, Aslan's portrayal of a revolutionary Jesus relies on a false assumption: that for Jesus to have been politically engaged, he must have been a violent revolutionary.

The main worry I have about this book does not involve Aslan's primary argument. Attention to *Zealot* has dropped precipitously since specialists began responding to it. My chief concern involves other ways in which the book might influence readers. Aslan writes vivid, compelling prose, and he cites primary sources frequently. The overall effect is that readers may believe that Aslan is setting forth the real world in which Jesus emerged, lived and died. Indeed, Aslan has read widely and deeply—*Zealot* includes over 50 pages of small-font notes—but over and over again he shows that he has not fully immersed himself in the fields of ancient Judaism and New Testament studies. The clarity of his writing does not make up for the lack of clarity in his critical judgment.

Some reviewers have already set out to catalogue *Zealot*'s many factual and logical errors. Aslan sometimes regards the Gospels critically, and he sometimes takes them at face value, but I cannot discern the criteria by which he makes such decisions. He uses Josephus's histories as if they provided straightforward accounts of the people and events they describe. No serious historian does that. Some of

Aslan's factual errors are minor and silly: there were not "countless" messianic prophets in Jesus' day, we have no solid evidence that Jesus labored in Sepphoris, we know that it was not "unthinkable" for a Jewish man not to be married, and ancient people believed their sacrifices, which involved cooking an animal, were efficacious because they smelled good, not because they created an "insufferable stench."

Other errors, however, involve substantive parts of Aslan's argument and play into commonly held misperceptions. Readers of the synoptic Gospels know that they often portray Jesus as secretive concerning his identity and activities. This motif is called the "messianic secret." Aslan believes that Jesus really was secretive in order to evade the watchful eyes of his enemies. In making this case, Aslan appeals to a long-abandoned assumption: that the author of Mark was too clumsy a writer to invent such a perplexing literary problem. On the contrary, though Mark's Greek may be a little rough, the Gospel reflects a highly resourceful storyteller who employed subtle literary patterns. Aslan simply doesn't seem to know this basic information.

Aslan also draws upon the played-out model that Paul "invented" Christianity by turning Jesus from a radical prophet into an object of devotion. He posits a Jewish Jesus tradition that did without the idea of Jesus' divinity. According to Aslan, Paul's Hellenized circles set the church on the path to Nicaea and Trinitarian dogma, a movement that "would have been downright bizarre to Jesus' Jewish followers."

The problems here are too many to count. Was not Paul a Jewish follower of Jesus? He surely learned about Jesus in Jewish circles, as he (sometimes grudgingly) admits, and he took in this teaching within just a couple of years of Jesus' death. Although Paul rarely cites Jesus' teachings, his core values strongly resonate with the Jesus tradition: fulfilling the law through love, service as the basic ethical expression, and an emphasis on charismatic manifestations of the Spirit. Jewish monotheism was much more complicated than previously thought, and many researchers now find a divine Jesus at the earliest layers of Christian discourse. Aslan seems ignorant of these developments.

Readers may derive many benefits from *Zealot*. The book does bring Jesus' world "before the eyes," as the ancients put it. Albeit with many errors, *Zealot* vividly lays out the material and social conditions of Jesus' world, along with the long tradition of Jewish resistance. Aslan artfully explains some of the historical problems presented by the Gospels and Acts, even if his judgment is uneven. Surely the churches need

to take more seriously the political dimensions of Jesus' activity—a point most scholars would support, even when not accepting his specific conclusion. But this book includes so much misleading information and relies on so many outworn misconceptions that I fear it will create more problems than it will solve.