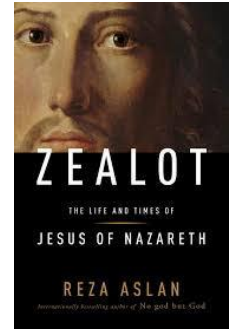


Jesus: Failed Zealot or Successful Savior? By Bob Waldrep

"As with everything else in the gospels, the story of Jesus's 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". (*Zealot*, p. 154)

Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth written by Reza Aslan was published by Random House on July 16, 2013. In a prepublication review, *Publishers Weekly* concluded, "...this superb work is highly recommended". Even with such a glowing industry endorsement, the initial release was done without a great deal of fanfare and the book would have most likely soon faded without cracking the bestseller list. However, an event that occurred on July 26, just ten days after its publication, would hurtle the book into the center of a controversy that quickly put it on the top of the bestseller lists.



Within three weeks of the event it climbed from number 30 to number 5 on *USA Today's* bestseller list. It reached the top of the "Hardcover Nonfiction" category on the *New York Times'* Bestseller List and remained in the top 25 through the week of November 17, 2013. It made it to number one on Amazon's US bestseller list. Due to the increased attention to the book, Random House reported that within two days of the July 26 event, sales of the book had increased 35%; prompting an additional printing of 50,000 books to meet this growing demand.

What event had brought so much attention to the book? It was a ten minute interview given by the author during the book's publicity launch. Aslan was making the cable television circuit pitching his book on any show that would book him. Despite these numerous appearances, the book wasn't generating a tremendous amount of attention. This would change on July 26 after the author was interviewed by *Fox News* religion reporter, Lauren Green. (Watch the interview at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwWbPpFZ31s)

Unlike other interviewers who questioned the author about the book and gave him time to promote it, Green zeroed in on the author being a Muslim. Rather than focusing on the contents of the book, she repeatedly questioned how a Muslim could write about "the founder of Christianity". At one point she even read a viewer's comment comparing it to a democrat writing a book about Ronald Regan not being a good Republican. To which Green added, "Why would a Democrat want to promote democracy by writing about a Republican?"

Due to what many consider the absurd nature of Green's questioning, the interview quickly went viral. Green's interview tactics were widely questioned with comments such as: offensive, embarrassing, how not to conduct an interview, etc. Suddenly, rather than his publicist trying to get him bookings to promote his book, Aslan was being sought out by media wanting to interview him about the *Fox* interview. The end result was a growing interest in *Zealot* and the author's views of who Jesus was.

Concerning the effect of this interview, Stuart Kelly wrote in *The Guardian* (08-07-13), "Had Reza Aslan not been interviewed in a gauche and silly fashion on Fox News, I doubt this book would be being reviewed at all." Similarly, Stephen Prothero, professor of religion at Boston University wrote the interview, "...propelled the book toward the top of the bestseller lists".

Green was not wrong to point out Aslan is a Muslim. However, this is something Aslan readily admits to and even declares in the book making Green's objections seem all the more petty. It also allowed Aslan to establish a certain degree of credibility by repeatedly citing his credentials in support of his writing the book as a religion scholar, not as a Muslim. In all fairness, Green did eventually try to discuss what should have been the real controversy - the book's content; however, she was unable to develop this conversation due to having begun with a perceived attack on his being a Muslim.

As the *Fox* interview became the focal point of subsequent media interviews, Aslan's claims about Jesus continued to go unchallenged. And, as the book gained more media attention, there developed a growing confidence its story was credible. But, is it?

The basic premise of *Zealot* is there is little reliable historical information known about Jesus. In fact, Aslan states, "In the end there are only two hard historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth upon which we can confidently rely: the first is that Jesus was a Jew who led a popular movement in Palestine...the second is that Rome crucified him for doing so." (*Zealot* p. xxxviii) Material from the Bible is generally discounted (unless it supports a view held by the author) as Aslan does not accept it as a historical reference.

In fact, he writes, "[*Zealot*] is an attempt to reclaim, as much as possible, the Jesus of history, the Jesus before Christianity". (p. xxx) Concerning what most Christians would believe about the historical Jesus, Aslan goes on to say, "...practically every word ever written about Jesus of Nazareth, including every gospel story in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was written by people who...never actually knew Jesus". Concerning the gospels, he goes on to say, "...with the possible exception of Luke, the gospels were not written by those after whom they were named." (p.170)

In addition to calling into question the authorship of the gospels, Aslan believes they were written in the latter part of the first century, and that there are other "scriptures" he infers are much more trustworthy. Of these he writes, "We now have access to an entire library of noncanonical scriptures written mostly in the second and third centuries that provides a vastly different perspective on the life of Jesus of Nazareth." (p. xxvii) (He identifies several of these "other" scriptures as Gnostic Gospels. [Ed. Note: The Gnostic Gospels are a collection of books written from the 2nd to 4th Centuries AD; many of which are claimed to have been written or handed down by a close contemporary of Jesus. The early Church did not consider them Scripture and, in fact, destroyed many of them as containing/supporting heresies.]

Here are some of the questionable/controversial historical revisions presented in *Zealot* (All quotes are from *Zealot*):

Concerning Jesus's Early Years

1. The virgin birth is questioned.

"Outside of Matthew and Luke...the virgin birth is never even hinted at by anyone else in the New Testament...[this] has led to a great deal of speculation among scholars over whether the story of the virgin birth was invented to mask an uncomfortable truth about Jesus parentage - namely. That he was born out of wedlock." p. 36

2. Jesus was not born in Bethlehem, as in the Gospel account.

"[Luke] knew what he was writing was technically false...but Luke never meant for his story about Jesus's birth at Bethlehem to be understood as historical fact." p. 30

3. Jesus's family did not flee to Egypt

"Matthew has Jesus flee to Egypt...not because it happened but because it fulfills the words of the prophet Hosea." p. 32

4. Jesus was not formally educated and could not have reasoned with religious leaders in the Temple.

"Luke's account of the twelve year old Jesus [debating] in the Temple...[or, as a man] reading from the Isaiah scroll...are both fabulous concoctions of the evangelist's own devising." p. 35

Concerning Jesus and His Ministry

1. He was not tempted by Satan in the wilderness.

"[Jesus] stayed in the wilderness for a while, not to be 'tempted by Satan', as the [gospel writers] imagine it, but to learn from John and to commune with his followers." p. 89

2. He did not perform miracles - he was a magician.

"All of Jesus' miracle stories were embellished with the passage of time and convoluted with Christological significance, and thus none of them can be historically validated." p. 104 "...Jesus was just one of an untold number of diviners and dream interpreters, magicians and medicine men who wandered Judea and Galilee." p. 105

3. The kingdom of God he preached was a physical kingdom—a call to revolution, to overthrow Rome.

"The kingdom of God is not some utopian fantasy...It is a chilling new reality in which God's wrath rains down upon the rich, the strong, and the powerful." p. 119 "[It] is a call to revolution, plain and simple." p.120

4. He was not a peacemaker who proclaimed love your enemies.

"Jesus as an inveterate peacemaker who 'loved his enemies' and 'turned the other cheek'...has already been shown to be a complete fabrication." p. 120

5. Jesus never appeared before Pilate.

"What is truly beyond belief is the portrayal of Pilate...spending even a moment of his time pondering the fate of yet another Jewish rabble-rouser." p. 149

6. The events concerning his resurrection were invented to answer objections.

"The fact remains that the resurrection is not a historical event...The resurrection stories in the gospels were created to...put flesh and bones upon an already accepted creed; to create narrative out of established belief." p. 176

Concerning Jesus Being God

1. He was not God in the flesh but a failed messiah who died a shameful death as a state criminal.

"Regardless of how Jesus viewed himself, the fact remains that he was never able to establish the Kingdom of God. The choice for the early church was clear; either Jesus was just another failed messiah, or what the Jews of Jesus time expected of the messiah was wrong and had to be adjusted." p. 144

The task of defining Jesus' message fell instead to a new crop of educated, urbanized, Greek speaking Diaspora Jews who...gradually transformed Jesus from a revolutionary zealot to a Romanized demigod, from a man who tried and failed to free the Jews...to a celestial being". p. 171

2. Paul is the primary source for many erroneous views of Jesus.

"Paul's lack of concern with the historical Jesus is not due, as some have argued, to his emphasis on Christological rather than historical concerns. It is due to the simple fact that Paul had no idea who the living Jesus was, nor did he care." p. 187

"Two thousand years later, the Christ of Paul's creation has utterly subsumed the Jesus of history." p. 215

(Interestingly, *Zealot* also denies Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road, stating, "[It] is a bit of propagandistic legend created by the evangelist Luke." p. 184)

So the Bible is out and *Zealot* is in, as far as historical works are concerned. But do people actually believe these claims made by *Zealot*? The fact it sold so well might suggest they do. It is also noteworthy that the book is classified as non-fiction; and, incredibly, as 2013 ended, Amazon listed it as one of the best "History" books of the year and placed it at number forty among all books published in 2013.

How credible is this as a historical document? Not very; for while it tries to hide under the guise of history, for the most part, it is the author's speculation and interpretation of the historical narrative - he makes himself the authority as to which sources are reliable and which are to be thrown out.

For example, when he maintains there is no historical evidence for Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, he would have to also admit there is no historical evidence that Luke fabricated the event. Yet, he presents his theory about Paul's conversion as if it is steeped in the historical record.

He also has no problem accepting the credibility of the Bible on points that support his views. It is only on those points with which he disagrees that he pulls out his "this was not meant to be a historical fact by the writer" claim. As Stuart Kelly wrote in his review, "Aslan simultaneously disparages and relies on the gospels. If a verse fits, he snatches it: if it contradicts his thesis he takes it as proof of the unreliability of the source. (*The Guardian*)

Aslan also spins history to best suit his needs. For example, he makes a big issue of any claim that Jesus could have appeared before Pilate, writing, "...it 'beggars the imagination' to even think Pilate would be in the same room with Jesus." (p. 148). Yet, on the preceding page he wrote, "Pilate's chief responsibility in Jerusalem is to maintain order...The only reason a poor Jewish peasant and day laborer would be brought before him is if he had jeopardized that order." (p. 147) In light of this statement, as Aslan's basic premise is that Jesus was a zealot - a revolutionary, attempting to overthrow Roman rule - it seems he would be just the kind of person that might be brought before Pilate.

The bottom line is that *Zealot* really doesn't offer anything new. These assertions have been made many times before and are quite old. In *Christianity Today* (August, 2013), Craig Evans, professor of New Testament at Acadia Divinity College writes, "There are numerous problems with *Zealot*, not least the fact that it heavily relies on an outdated and discredited thesis.

Dale B. Martin, professor of religious studies at Yale, may not agree it has been discredited; however he does recognize it is not new. In his review of *Zealot*, he mentions two books with a similar thesis—Herman Samuel Reimarus' *Fragments* (published 1774-1778), which shows how old Aslan's theories are, and *Jesus and the Zealots* (1967) by S.G.F. Brandon, which Martin calls "the most famous case for this thesis". In fact, in reading *Zealot*, Martin appears to have recognized so much of Brandon's work, that he wrote, "Mr. Aslan follows Mr. Brandon in his general thesis as well as in many details, a borrowing that should have been better acknowledged". (*NY Times*—"Still a Firebrand, 2,000 Years Later" 08-06-13)

Following are a few quotes from Reimarus' *Fragments* that evidence some of what Aslan postures is simply a rehashing of themes found as early as the 1700s:

1. Concerning Jesus intent to establish an earthly kingdom:

"It was then clearly not the intention or the object of Jesus to suffer and to die, but to build up a worldly kingdom, and to deliver the Israelites from bondage." p. 27

2. That the resurrection was a fabrication:

"[After Jesus death, the Apostles] Behind locked doors, and so long as they were unanimous as to their common anxiety, they had good opportunities for deliberating and above all things, it was necessary to get rid of the body of Jesus as speedily as possible, in order that they might say he had arisen and ascended into heaven, and would promptly return from thence with great power and glory." pp 93-95

3. That Paul was the mastermind behind much of the invented Church theology:

"The resurrection in itself was not incredible to the greater mass, that is to say to the Pharisees; and the people, who believed that others had been raised from death by the prophets, consequently were forced to allow the possibility of the resurrection of Jesus in accordance with their own doctrine. The apostles, or rather Paul, as the cleverest of them, knew how to turn this to account for his defence and acquittal in a masterly style..." p. 97

Zealot fails the test when it comes to being a historical record and as an original idea. But, what about its claim of being a scholarly work? During the *Fox News* interview, the author repeatedly appealed to his credentials; particularly claiming to have a "Ph.D. in the history of religions" and his being "a professor of religion—including the New Testament". (Interestingly, his current position as an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside, has nothing to do with his self-proclaimed area of expertise—religion.) These are presented to support the idea that his work is historically and biblically accurate.

Without question, Aslan has an impressive number of degrees, several of which have some focus on religion. However, his claims concerning these degrees have also generated a bit of controversy after the *Fox News* interview. Writing in the *Washington Post*, (08-08-13) Manuel Roig-Franzia, observes:

"[Aslan is] perhaps overeager - to present himself as a formidable academic with special bona fides in religion and history....[boasting] of academic laurels he does not have. Aslan, 41, has variously claimed to hold a doctorate in "the history of religions" or a doctorate in "the sociology of religions," though no such degrees exist at the university he attended. His doctorate is in sociology, according to the registrar's office at the University of California at Santa Barbara."

Regarding his scholarship, Dale Martin - who holds, at least, some of the views Aslan presents, and as an openly gay professor at Yale University, certainly could not be accused of simply aligning himself with Evangelicals or conservative Christians, on this matter - offers the following:

"Some of Mr. Aslan's other claims are just speculations with no supporting evidence, more at home in fiction than in scholarship...By profession, Mr. Aslan is not a scholar of ancient Judaism or Christianity. He teaches creative writing. And he is a good writer. "*Zealot*" is not innovative or original scholarship, but it makes an entertaining read." (*NY Times*)

Books like *Zealot* are more frequently showing up on the bestseller lists as our culture increasingly embraces the worldview they support. As Christians, it is important that we not stick our heads in the sand; but, become aware of and knowledgeable about such books and be prepared to offer a reasoned response.

We should also recognize that the fact such theories are popularized in culture offers the Church a wonderful opportunity to have a conversation about the "real" history of Jesus that is presented in the Scriptures and to share the wonderful hope of the gospel. Without question, Jesus came with great zeal; however, it was not a zeal to overthrow the Romans but a zeal to complete the task given him - to be the Savior and provide a way by which we could be restored to right relationship with our Creator. And, in this task, he did not fail!

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During her interview of Reza Aslan, Lauren Green tried to establish that Aslan was writing *Zealot* in support of Muslim views of Jesus. Aslan repeatedly denied this, even stating the views he presents are not consistent with what Islam teaches about Jesus. The following chart compares the views of Islam, Christianity, and Reza Aslan's *Zealot*, on four critical areas regarding Jesus.

JESUS ACCORDING TO ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE ZEALOT/REZA ASLAN (CHART BY CROSSWINDS FOUNDATION)			
	Islam	Christianity	Zealot – Reza Aslan
The Biblical Accounts of Jesus’ Life	Bible cannot be trusted; it has been abrogated/changed	The Bible is trustworthy; it is God’s word – authoritative	Much of the biblical account has been fabricated to support Church Christology; therefore, it cannot be believed
Jesus	A great prophet, though less than Muhammad - He is not God	God in the flesh - Savior	A revolutionary Zealot – he is not God and never claimed to be. This was made up by his followers.
Crucifixion	Jesu did not die on a cross. Even if he was crucified, he did not die as a result.	Jesus was crucified on the cross where he took upon himself the sin of man. He did die on the cross	Jesus died on the cross; he was nothing more than a seditionist among fellow criminals
Resurrection	As Jesus did not die on the cross, there was no resurrection	After being laid in a tomb, Jesus rose on the third day having conquered sin and death.	There was no resurrection.