

『南山神学』46号（2023年3月）pp. 213-220.

**【書評】**

A Review of:  
Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of  
Nazareth*,  
(Westbourne Grove, London: The Westbourne  
Press, 2014, pp. i-xxxiv and 1-318) .

Rejimon VARGHESE

In this review, after offering a brief mention about the author and how his book came about, I will proceed to present his methodology, his account of historical Jesus, and the merits of the book. This review will be concluded with a criticism of some important points.

*About the Author and the Reception of the Book.*

Reza Aslan is an internationally known Iranian-born American scholar of religions. In his book, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, Aslan recounts that, when he was an Iranian Muslim teenager living in America during the 1980s, he was told for the first time a remarkable story about Jesus Christ. Some two thousand years ago, a helpless child was born in Galilee as the Son of God, the Savior of the world. During his life, he challenged the Jewish authorities through his words and deeds, for which they crucified him. Though he could have saved his life, he freely chose to offer it as a sacrifice to

free humanity from its sins. Three days later, he rose from death and was exalted by being raised to heaven. Now, all who believe in him will not only never die, but also enjoy eternal life. Captivated by the story of Jesus Christ, Aslan converted to evangelical Christianity. However, when he delved deeply into the Bible to know more about Jesus, he discovered an uncompromising disparity between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Jesus of history. As a consequence, Aslan re-embraced Islam, his original religion. Yet, “as an inquisitive scholar” (p. xix) he continued to research the New Testament as well as the origins of Christianity for twenty years. This book is the result of his studies.

*Aslan’s Methodology.*

Aslan squarely states that this is neither a book about “Jesus the Christ,” the anointed one as presented in the New Testament, nor about “Jesus Christ,” a cosmic divine being who existed before time as presented in the Johannine Gospel and in the Pauline Epistles. Aslan sees the christological doctrines contained in these writings as mere later embellishments, detached from the historical Jesus and as fitting only to the realm of personal beliefs. His aim, rather, is to reclaim “the Jesus before Christianity” (p. xxx). For this reason, he develops a theory about Jesus of Nazareth by means of an historical exercise—a process of “integration.” Accordingly, he integrates two historical facts concerning Jesus of Nazareth that he discovered from the material from the Q source as well as Mark’s Gospel. Furthermore, Aslan relies greatly on the works of the first-century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, who wrote extensively about the tumultuous first-century in which Jesus lived. Aslan, then, allows history to speak of who Jesus of Nazareth really was. This process is corroborated in great length by Aslan’s persuasive and skillfully worded arguments throughout Parts I-III of his book (pp. 1-216).

*Jesus as a Zealot.*

For Aslan, “Jesus of Nazareth was first and finally a Jew” (p. 121). Aslan sees this as an irrefutable historical fact. He claims that Jesus’ Jewishness played a crucial role in his life, concerned as he was for his unjustly exploited fellow Jews by the Temple priests and Romans. This ultimately stimulated Jesus to become a zealot, akin to other Jewish zealots who came before and after him. Hence, a politically and morally conscious Jewish Jesus gathered “followers for a messianic movement” (p. xxx) whose goal was to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus, at the same time, did not intend to establish this kind of kingdom as a celestial kingdom existing only on a cosmic plane. Instead, Jesus wanted to build a kingdom that “was very much of this world” (p. 144) though “not part of this order/system [of government]” (p. 117) of this world. Simply put, Jesus wanted to establish a kingdom of justice and righteousness, a complete reversal of the current political, religious, and economic system. To effect this required turning the prevalent unjust social system upside down, wherein the poor and the dispossessed would be more valued socially and economically than the rich and the possessed, as seen in the Beatitudes. Aslan claims that what motivated Jesus to strive for a just society was his own witnessing of “the rapidly expanding divide between the absurdly rich and the indebted poor” (p. 44), which, according to Aslan, Jesus experienced from the time he began to work for Herod Antipas as a *tekton* (day laborer) in Sepphoris, the capital city in Galilee, to the time he appeared before John the Baptist. Jesus’ preference for the socially, religiously, politically, and economically marginalized fellow Jews was, after his death, inherited, practiced, and promoted especially by his brother James in Jerusalem, and for which he was called “the just” (p. 204).

From such efforts by Jesus, Aslan concludes that Jesus of Nazareth would,

then, be no different from his fellow Jews who, as zealous revolutionaries swept up in the religious and political turmoil of the time, violently revolted against the Romans and the Temple priests. Aslan admits that Jesus of Nazareth was neither directly involved in any of the known religiopolitical movements of his time, nor did he openly advocate violent actions. However, Aslan cites two Gospel passages to show that Jesus was not always a pacifist: "If you do not have a sword, go sell your cloak and buy one" (Luke 22:36); "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword" (Matthew 10: 34; Luke 12:51). In Jesus' time, zealotry was a model of piety, inextricably linked to the widespread sense of apocalyptic expectation—the end of this present order of the world and the beginning of the Kingdom of God—that had seized the meager Jewish peasants in the wake of the Roman occupation. At the same time, this in-breaking of God's reign could only be ushered in by those who fused banditry and zealotry into a single revolutionary force. Yet, Aslan stresses that the sole weapon that Jesus used for his goal was his zeal.

The other historical fact concerning Jesus of Nazareth comes from the exercise of determining the cause from its consequence. If crucifixion was the price that Jesus ultimately had to pay for his actions, one wonders specifically what led him to this kind of death? Towards the end of his life, according to Aslan, Jesus provocatively entered Jerusalem and attacked the Temple for which he was later arrested by the Jews. His attack on the vendors in the Gentile Court, where selling and buying things for sacrifice was permitted, was not itself directed to them. In fact, it was an attack directed at the Temple priests and the Romans who made a profit out of such business as the Temple tax as well as the Roman tax. We recall that Rome had given the Jewish priestly authorities the right, not to execute but to arrest anyone only within the vicinity of the Temple if that person disturbed the peace and order of the activities there. Hence, says

Aslan, contrary to blaming the Jews as responsible for Jesus' death in Matthew 27:25 ("His blood be upon us and upon our children"), it was actually the Romans who crucified Jesus. Jesus' crime was that he was "striving for kingly rule" (p. 79) which was considered to be sedition against the Roman Empire. Crucifixion "was a punishment that Rome reserved almost exclusively for the crime of sedition" (p. xxviii). Also, because Jesus claimed the mantle of king and messiah, he was seen directly threatening the Roman occupation of Palestine and endangering the Temple priestly life. In the aftermath of his failed mission, the failure to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, Jesus was crucified. As a consequence, the audience to whom his message would be catered to became more and more Gentile.

From the foregoing analysis, Aslan concludes that the Gospel writers as well as Paul reinterpreted Jesus' mission and identity and the nature and definition of the Jewish Messiah. Accordingly, Jesus is portrayed as a pacifistic preacher of good works and as a divine being whose kingdom and mission was not of this world. These writers also excluded the Romans from the culpability of crucifying Jesus, placing it, instead, on the Jews. Unfortunately, this has caused anti-Semitic animosity, even today. As a consequence, this newly invented Jesus, according to Aslan, was acceptable to a larger Gentile audience, especially to the Romans, hence the birth of orthodox Christianity. Aslan argues that this reinterpretation of Jesus "from a revolutionary Jewish nationalist into a peaceful spiritual leader with no interest in any earthly matter" (p. xxx) is intentionally detached from the exigencies of history and has nothing to do with the Jesus before Christianity. Aslan says that the Gospels are not, nor were they ever meant to be, a historical documentation of Jesus' life but are testimonies of faith. According to Aslan, the Gospels tell us about Jesus the Christ or Jesus Christ, not Jesus the man. "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” (p. 216). Thus Aslan concludes his book about the itinerant and morally charged preacher in Galilee whom he sees as a zealot.

#### *Merits of the Book.*

The book has received international attention, partly since it is a book written by a Muslim about Jesus of Nazareth. Since its first publication in 2013, the book has been published in seventeen languages, including Japanese (2014). It is a well-researched reader friendly book, that is well documented. Furthermore, it gives us valuable information about the social, economic, religious, and political plight of the Jews of first-century Palestine, especially the Jewish revolt against Rome in 66 C. E. and the destruction of Jerusalem, including the Temple, in 70 C. E. The book is also a useful source to learn more about the Jewish history, including the first destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B. C. E. and how Rome came to occupy Judea in 63 B. C. E., to mention but a few landmark events.

#### *Critiquing the Book.*

While several critical remarks can be made about Aslan’s book, I will limit myself to a few of the most important.

First, the book contains theological flaws about Jesus of Nazareth. For example, Aslan’s description of Jesus born from Mary out of wedlock or that Jesus had brothers and sisters is questionable. Actually, it is a book written not so much about Christology but more about the historical Jesus as a revolutionary. Unfortunately, Aslan fails to give sufficient emphasis on God’s love for humanity in and through Jesus.

Second, Aslan claims that the Gospel of Mark and the Q material (both dated around 70-71 C. E.) are “the earliest and thus most reliable sources

available to us about the life of the Nazarean” (p. xx). As a result, he excessively depends on them to develop his story of Jesus of Nazareth. His reasoning is that because these two materials are written prior to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (both dated between 90-100 C. E.) and that of John (dated 100-120 C. E.), they offer the most authentic picture of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, the argument that the later in time something is written about the event that occurred, the more likely inaccurate it would be is not based on an authoritative basis. Aslan’s dismissal of the Epistles of Paul, written more than a decade prior to both the Gospel of Mark and material from Q, as being about Jesus Christ as a divine person is questionable. Accordingly, Aslan may be susceptible to a methodology of picking and choosing from various sources that agree with his basic analysis in order to portray an image of Jesus of Nazareth which he, Aslan, perhaps previously had in his mind that Jesus was a zealot. This inadvertently reflects Aslan’s words:

The task [of writing a biography of Jesus of Nazareth] is somewhat akin to putting together a massive puzzle with only a few of the pieces in hand; one has no choice but to fill in the rest of the puzzle based on the best, most educated guess of what the completed image should look like. The great Christian theologian Rudolf Bultmann liked to say that the quest for the historical Jesus is ultimately an internal quest. Scholars tend to see the Jesus they want to see. Too often they see themselves—their own reflection—in the image of Jesus they have constructed (p. xxxi).

Accordingly, Aslan integrates material from the Gospel of Mark and Q sources to the outline of the story of Jesus of Nazareth that Aslan claims and integrates with what he found appropriate from the works of the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (dated 90s C. E.) to create Jesus as a zealot.

Third, Aslan does not see the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. His claim that the two variant infancy narratives of Jesus in the

Gospels of Matthew and Luke respectively are made-up stories to fill in what is lacking in the Gospel of Mark goes flat. Mark may have written the first Gospel but this does not necessarily mean that it contains everything we need to know about Jesus of Nazareth. For example, John concludes his Gospel by writing “There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written” (21:25).

Fourth, Aslan himself admits that the Gospels are testimonies of faith. Yet, his heavy reliance on the Gospel of Mark to discover the real historical Jesus looks contradictory.

Finally, although Aslan refers to the first Ecumenical Council held in the Byzantine city of Nicaea in 325 C. E. to argue how Jesus was declared “true God from true God,” he makes no reference to the subsequent Council of Chalcedon in 451 C. E. that declared Jesus as “true God and true man.” This mystery of the two natures of Jesus is overlooked in Aslan’s efforts to paint Jesus of Nazareth mainly as a zealot.