

“REZA ASLAN’S CARTOON JESUS”

by **Robert Barron**

A book review of
*Zealot: The Life and Times
of Jesus of Nazareth*
by Reza Aslan

Reza Aslan's Cartoon Jesus

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When I saw that Reza Aslan's portrait of Jesus, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, had risen to number one on the New York Times bestseller list, I must confess, I was both disappointed and puzzled. For the reductionistic and debunking approach that Aslan employs has been tried by dozens of commentators for at least the past 300 years, and the debunkers have been themselves debunked over and over again by serious scholars of the historical Jesus.

Here is how the method works: a scholar focuses on one aspect of Jesus's life, finds all of the Gospel passages that emphasize that aspect and declares them historically reliable, and then casually characterizes the rest of the Gospels as the non-historical musings of the evangelists and their communities. So in the course of the last three centuries, Jesus has been presented as, exclusively, an eschatological prophet, an itinerant preacher of the kingdom, a wonder-worker, a magician, a social revolutionary, an avatar of enlightened ethics, a cynic philosopher, et cetera. To be sure, evidence can be culled from the Gospels for all of these identities, but the problem is that these portraits invariably fail to present Jesus-in-full, the strange, beguiling, elusive, and richly complex figure that emerges from a thorough reading of the New Testament.

The Jesus that Aslan wants to present is the "zealot," which is to say, the Jewish insurrectionist intent upon challenging the Temple establishment in Jerusalem and, above all, the Roman military power that dominated the land of Israel. His principle justification for this reading is that religiously motivated revolutionaries were indeed thick on the ground in the Palestine of Jesus's time; that Jesus claimed to be ushering in a new Kingdom of God; and that he ended up dying the death typically meted out to rabble-rousers who posed a threat to Roman authority.

Jesus, he argues, fits neatly into the pattern set by Menahem, the heroic defender of Masada, Judas the Galilean, Simon son of Giora, Simon bar Kochba, and any number of other revolutionaries who claimed Messianic identity and who, in the end, were ground under by the Romans. On this reading, Jesus indeed died on a Roman cross, but he didn't rise from the dead; instead, his body was probably left on the cross to be devoured by dogs or the birds of the air.

Now questions immediately crowd the mind. What about Jesus's extraordinary stress on non-violence and love of enemies (hardly the stern stuff we would expect from a zealot)? Oh, it was made up by the later Christian community that was trying to curry favor with Roman society. What about Jesus's explicit claim that his kingdom was "not of this world"? Oh, those were words placed in his mouth by John the evangelist. What about his practically constant reference to prayer, the spiritual life, and trust in divine providence? Oh, that was pious invention. What about the stories of his outreach to the Woman at the Well, the man born blind, and Zacchaeus? What about the healing of Bartimaeus, the raising of Lazarus, and the raising of the daughter of Jairus, actions having precious little to do with anti-Roman activism? By now, you can guess the answer and I trust you see the problem: huge swaths of the Gospel and the early Christian witness have to be cut away in order to accommodate the portrait that Aslan paints.

The most massive difficulty with Aslan's interpretation is that it cannot begin to account for the stubborn fact that no one except specialist historians remembers Judas the Galilean, Menahem, or Simon bar Kochba -- but everyone remembers Jesus of Nazareth. The clearest indication possible that someone was not the Messiah of Israel would have been his death at the hands of Israel's enemies, for the Messiah was supposed to be a liberator and conqueror. And this is precisely why those failed revolutionaries were so quickly forgotten.

But Christianity emerged as none other than a Messianic movement. Paul said, over and over again, *Iesous Christos*, his Greek rendering of *Ieshouah Maschiach* (Jesus the Messiah). How could he and the other early evangelists have declared the Messianic identity of a crucified criminal unless they knew that, despite his ignominious death, he had indeed conquered the enemies of Israel? And how could they have come to that conclusion apart from the resurrection of that crucified criminal from the dead? It turns out that the most convincing explanation, on historical grounds, of the emergence and endurance of the Christian movement is the very thing that Aslan and likeminded interpreters write off as a later concoction of the community.

The favorite strategy of the Jesus reductionists is to claim that much of the Gospel material was invented, made up out of whole cloth by the developing Christian communities. Time and again, they insist that, since the earliest Gospel was written forty years after the time of Jesus, it couldn't possibly contain more than a smattering of historically reliable material. But this is so much nonsense. Would we automatically reject as non-historical a book about the Kennedy assassination, published in 2003? Wouldn't we naturally assume that the author had consulted historical records as well as numerous eye-witnesses to the events of November 22, 1963? Those who knew Jesus, who listened to his words and saw his great deeds, who witnessed his death and resurrection didn't disappear en masse in 30 AD, leaving the Gospel writers with nothing to work with but their theologically informed imaginations. To give just one example: tradition holds (and there is no serious reason to doubt it) that Mark, the first evangelist, was a friend and companion of St. Peter, during the time of the great apostle's sojourn in Rome. His Gospel was therefore grounded in the reminiscences of

someone who knew Jesus intimately and who saw the Lord after his Resurrection. There is absolutely no reason to doubt that the Gospel of Mark, though it was written forty years after the time of Jesus, is filled with reliable history.

There are far, far better accounts of the historical Jesus than the book under consideration. I would recommend studies by E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, Richard Bauckham, Ben Witherington III, or N.T. Wright. What they will show you is that the real Jesus remains far more interesting and compelling than the superficial caricature offered by Reza Aslan.

Father Robert Barron is the founder of the global ministry, Word on Fire, and the Rector/President of Mundelein Seminary.