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Author Examines Complex Life of Jesus of Nazareth in New Book, "Zealot"

By Lou Fancher



Reza Aslan Photo provided

Rising like a rigorous intermission amid a summer of escapist beach reading, writer and scholar Reza Aslan's "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth" (Random House, 2013) is this season's muscular literary entity. The author of the international bestseller "No god but God" will appear courtesy of the Commonwealth Club at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center on July 23 to read from and discuss his new book.

Twenty years of research and a vigorous, intellectual thirst for clarity fuels Aslan's comprehensive, boisterous writing style. Widely regarded as a leading scholar on Islam and religion, the biography unfolds - or rather, plunges - into an investigation of Christianity's most vexing question: Who was Jesus the man and how did he become Jesus the Christ?

Relying on the gospels for narrative outline only (Aslan emphasizes the gospels were not written as eyewitness accounts but were authored well after-the-fact and presents a strong argument for their being colored by political, religious and cultural agendas), Aslan has said Jesus's biography "writes itself." Key to the factual architecture he prefers, historical writings and Roman documents support his central claim that Jesus the man's story is as good news as was (or is) Jesus the Christ's.

Aslan is a Muslim, he tells us in the book's intimate opening. After temporarily becoming a follower of Christ in his teens, he fell away when his studies exposed a gaping divide between fact and mythmaking within the folds and filters of Christianity. Ironically, a return to his ancestral faith stripped the shadows from the Jesus he thought he was leaving behind: revealing a social activist, possibly illiterate, an insurrectionist, a zealot, who nevertheless influences Aslan's beliefs and the principals he imparts to his children.

Jesus of Nazareth

First century Palestine was a morass of grand and minuscule religiopolitical skirmishes, we learn, as Aslan lays the contextual landscape of Jesus' time. Searching within the mess of messianic movers, Roman rulers and Temple priests, two truths are all that are certain about the life of the man who has shaped Western thought and culture more than any other: Jesus was a Jew and Rome crucified him for the crime of sedition, or "striving for kingly rule."

Distinguishing between "zealot" and a later, 66 C.E. (Common Era) Zealot Party movement, Aslan defines Jesus as a member of a "Fourth Philosophy" whose undying devotion to the rule of One God and Israel's independence required "zeal." Marching through religious and political history while never losing sight of the man leading the charge, "Zealot" tells two stories simultaneously.

The first is the tale of the birth of a religion amid an era rife with apocalyptic feverishness and profound nationalism. Civil strife, miracle workers and declarations of the coming of the Kingdom of God filled the streets and temple courtyards; causing tumult in the minds of pious Jews and fury in Rome's imperial circles.

The second is the story of a boy who barely became a man before he was crucified. Jesus was a peasant, teacher, minister, messenger, wonder worker - and almost more than anything else, Jesus was a keeper of secrets, a fascinating mystery. Aslan makes the point concrete in a chapter about Jesus' parables, noting that Jesus "consciously chose to veil the Kingdom of God in abstruse and enigmatic parables."

Aslan is a skilled scavenger who never tosses aside contradictory evidence without close examination: the book's "notes" section is a repository of authoritatively researched counter arguments. He freely acknowledges the limitations of his search and an academic mindset allows him to skirt dogmatism. Fortunately, with impressive investigation and unambiguous scholarship, Aslan makes the "abstruse and enigmatic" life and times of Jesus of Nazareth an elegant, illuminated read.

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