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## Aslan's 'Zealot' is thought-provoking, informative

*"Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth" by Reza Aslan. New York, NY: Random House, 2013, 296 pages, \$27.00.*

"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

This quote, found at the very beginning of "Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth," the phenomenal bestseller by Reza Aslan, serves to set the stage for the narrative that follows.

"It is a miracle that we know anything at all about the man called Jesus of Nazareth," Aslan observes. "The itinerant preacher wandering from village to village clamoring about the end of the world, a band of ragged followers trailing behind him, was a common sight in Jesus's time – so common, in fact, that it had become a kind of caricature among the Roman elite."

"The first century was an era of apocalyptic expectation among the Jews of Palestine, the Roman designation for the vast tract of land encompassing modern-day Israel/Palestine as well as large parts of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon," he continues. "Countless prophets, preachers, and messiahs tramped through the Holy Land delivering messages of God's imminent judgment."

Aslan is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of California, Riverside, as well as a research associate at the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy. He has degrees from Santa Clara University, Harvard Divinity School, the University of Iowa and the University of California, Santa Barbara, and his previous books include "No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam," which has been translated into thirteen languages, and "How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror." He is also the editor of "Tablet & Pen: Literary Landscapes from the Modern Middle East" and a contributing editor to "The Daily Beast." He has lived in the United States since 1979, when his family fled Iran when the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power after the overthrow of the Shah.

As might be expected given Aslan's reputation as one of the world's foremost authorities on religions, "Zealot" is exceptionally well-researched, with no less than fifty-four pages of source notes at the conclusion of the fifteen chapters that constitute the main text. And although countless books (literally) have been written about the life of Jesus, Aslan still manages to capture his subject in a unique and even insightful manner.

"Zealot" is written in three sections. Parts 1 and 2 comprise the first twelve chapters and deal primarily -- and exhaustively -- with Jesus's life and teachings. In these carefully crafted segments, Aslan goes to lengths to properly and accurately (as he sees it) place Jesus's words and actions into their appropriate historical context. He is masterful at describing the cultural and political circumstances that existed during the time of Jesus's life and ministry; he certainly provides much more information than I received in my Sunday school classes years ago.

Witness the following from “Zeal for Your House,” the prologue to Part 2: “But look closely at Jesus’s words and actions at the Temple in Jerusalem – the episode that undoubtedly precipitated his arrest and execution – and this one fact becomes difficult to deny: Jesus was crucified by Rome because his messianic aspirations threatened the occupation of Palestine, and his zealotry endangered the Temple authorities. That singular fact should color everything we read in the gospels about the messiah known as Jesus of Nazareth – from the details of his death on a cross in Golgotha to the launch of his public ministry on the banks of the Jordan River.”

Interestingly, I found the three chapters that make up Part 3 to be among the most thought-provoking. Here Aslan discusses the resurrection in light of the contributions and historical significance of Paul (“Am I Not an Apostle”) and James (“The Just One”) to the development of Christianity after Jesus’s death. In perhaps my favorite chapter, “If Christ Has Not Been Risen,” the author explores the resurrection and its preeminent relevance to Jesus’s legacy.

“Obviously, the notion of a man dying a gruesome death and returning to life three days later defies all logic, reason, and sense,” Aslan explains. “One could simply stop the argument there, dismiss the resurrection as a lie, and declare belief in the risen Jesus to be the product of a deludable mind.”

“However, there is this nagging fact to consider: one after another of those who claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus went to their own gruesome deaths refusing to recant their testimony,” he continues. “That is not, in itself, unusual. Many zealous Jews died horribly for refusing to deny their beliefs. But these first followers of Jesus were not being asked to reject matters of faith based on events that took place centuries, if not millennia, before. They were being asked to deny something they themselves personally, directly encountered.”

In the final analysis, “Zealot” succeeds because Aslan approaches Jesus’s life from a variety of perspectives. At times it is difficult to distinguish between Aslan the scholar and Aslan the human being struggling to make sense of what he has encountered on a personal level. He is certainly honest in his pursuit of a realistic understanding of what we know – and what we don’t know – about the life of one of the most influential people who ever walked the earth. Believer or not, I highly recommend “Zealot” for anyone interested in learning more about Jesus of Nazareth and why we are still affected by his life twenty centuries after his death.

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