

# Messiah: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth

## A Biblical and Reasoned Response to Reza Azlan's "Zealot"

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March 13, 2015

I first became interested in *Zealot* when I heard that the library at Cleveland State University was having a book discussion about it. The book discussion gave me a good excuse to read *Zealot* and to formulate an organized defense of the historical reliability of the New Testament (NT). I read the book, consulted the works of NT scholars, and made notes as I went along. This essay is the result.

After all that I had heard about *Zealot*, I was pleasantly surprised that it included some interesting, historically helpful, and accurate material. Aslan has a healthy respect for the authenticity of the NT documents (although not for their reliability)<sup>1</sup>, and he provides background material about first-century Rome and Judaism that should be interesting to any Jew, Muslim, or Christian. However, in spite of some strengths, the book is full of inaccuracies and misleading statements. My overall conclusion is that the amount of good that the book offers is, unfortunately, overwhelmed by error and misrepresentation, some of it deliberate.

In the material that follows I move through the book *Zealot* in order, from the first page to the last. I first list an interesting or erroneous statement from the book, and then I immediately follow it with my rebuttal. At the end of this essay I provide some concluding statements and a few additional notes on the historical reliability of the NT.

### **Author's Note**

Page xix says, "The Bible is replete with the most blatant and obvious errors and contradictions."

This is the type of statement that's easy to make but is more difficult to support with specific examples. Aslan gives examples throughout the book to support this claim, but his examples are easily countered, as we will see later. Aslan's statement about the Bible being full of errors is one of his major premises. It is one of those popular misconceptions that "everyone knows" but that falls apart under further examination.

Page xx says, "I have ... provided the arguments of those who disagree with my interpretation in the length notes section at the end of this book."

But he doesn't do that at all. Aslan's interpretation is that Jesus was a political revolutionary who wanted to overthrow Rome and restore Israel to its rightful place as the world's pre-eminent empire. Aslan does not believe that Jesus viewed himself as a spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> The question of *authenticity* deals with whether or not the gospels were written by who they claim to have been written by, and whether or not they were written in the first century or shortly thereafter. The question of *reliability* deals with whether or not they are historically accurate.

deliverer, and he most emphatically does not believe that Jesus viewed himself as equal to God. Aslan believes that the “messianic” aspirations of Jesus were political rather than spiritual, contrary to the clear teaching of the NT. Aslan gives simplistic, faulty, tired, old arguments against the historical accuracy of the Bible, and he ignores counterarguments that have been well-known for decades. Anyone who is really interested in the historical reliability of the NT documents can easily access the writings of scholars like F. F. Bruce, John A. T. Robinson, Craig Blomberg, Richard Bauckham, J. P. Moreland, Gary Habermas, Norman Geisler, David Wenham, Lee Strobel, William Lane Craig, Michael L. Brown, Mark D. Roberts, and many others. It appears from Aslan’s book that he is either unaware of these works,<sup>2</sup> or he is ignorant of them.

## **Introduction**

Page xxvi says that the gospels “are not eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ words and deeds.”

Aslan makes this claim to cast doubt on the reliability of the gospels. I have a couple of reactions to this claim. First, it is not true. Second, even if it were true, it wouldn’t matter. To start with my first reaction, Mark was probably written on the basis of Peter’s first-hand accounts (more on this below in the Prologue to Part II). Luke was not written by an eyewitness, but Luke emphasizes in the prologue to his gospel that he obtained his information from eyewitnesses: “... just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ... have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account ...” (Luke 1:2, 3). Of all the gospels, John makes the most internal claims to being written by an eyewitness. Although it may have been composed in stages by John’s followers, at least part of it was probably written by John himself early in the first century: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24 – more on this below in the Prologue to Part II).

My second reaction is that, even if the gospels were not written by eyewitnesses, it would not matter. After all, how much history is written by eyewitnesses? Should we throw out all of the biographies of George Washington that were not written by eyewitnesses? Should we throw out all of the Civil War histories that were not written by eyewitnesses? Should we throw out Aslan’s book since it was not written by an eyewitness?

Page xxvi says, “Mark’s account was written first sometime after 70 C.E.”

Aslan makes this claim to cast doubt on the historical reliability of the gospels. If all of the gospels were written after 70 C.E., then they were probably written by the Christian church in an attempt to sanitize the life of Jesus – that is, to present him as a spiritual deliverer rather than the political revolutionary that he really was. However, Mark was probably written well before 70 C.E. I discuss this more below in my comments on pages xxix and 75.

Page xxvii says, “Between 90 and 100 C.E., the authors of Matthew and Luke ... updated the gospel story ... conflicting infancy narratives.”

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<sup>2</sup> Aslan does at least mention F. F. Bruce in a few of his notes at the end of the book.

Aslan does not support this claim with any facts. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are from two different perspectives but do not contradict. Matthew discusses the journey to Bethlehem and the visit from the shepherds, while Luke discusses the visit from the wise men. The accounts are different, but I fail to see any contradictions between them.

Page xxvii says that the synoptic gospels are “greatly at odds with the fourth gospel, John, which was likely written ... between 100 and 120 C.E.”

Again, there is no support for this claim. The fourth gospel is much different than the first three, but that’s because they are written from different perspectives and for different purposes.

Page xxvii says, “It is unanimously agreed that the original version of Mark ended with 16:8.”

This is an interesting point, but is not quite right. What is really “unanimously agreed” is that the last 12 verses of Mark were not part of the original gospel. However, it is certainly not agreed that verse 8 was the original end of Mark. In fact, Aslan himself provides the counterargument on page 227 in his notes section. What probably happened is that the end of the book of Mark was somehow lost early in its history, and the current verses 9–20 were inserted later as an ad hoc ending.

In any case, Aslan’s point is irrelevant. His point is that Mark does not narrate the resurrection because verses 9–20 are not authentic. But even though Mark does not narrate the resurrection, his gospel presupposes the resurrection. Mark 16:6, 7, which everyone (even Aslan) agrees are authentic, says the following: “And [the young man at the tomb] said to them, Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” Even though Mark does not narrate the resurrection, he does record it, thus providing the second earliest account of the resurrection (later only than Paul’s account in 1 Corinthians 15).

Page xxviii says, “These two facts [that is, that Jesus led a popular Jewish movement in Palestine at the beginning of the first century, and that the Romans crucified him] can help paint a picture of Jesus of Nazareth that may be more historically accurate than the one painted by the gospels.”

This is the crux of Aslan’s problem. He ignores four perfectly good, reliable accounts of the life of Jesus, and he ignores the first-century statements about Jesus that were written by Paul,<sup>3</sup> and he fabricates a “life of Jesus” that is based on tangential evidence, as if it were impossible for Jesus to rise above his cultural and religious environment. Aslan stereotypes Jesus as a typical first-century peasant Jew with naïve political aspirations. It is remarkable that we have four largely independent accounts of the life of Jesus, a man who lived in the public light for only three years during the first century, and yet modern historians ignore or marginalize those accounts.

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<sup>3</sup> See the comments below on Chapter 14 for more about Paul’s writings about Jesus.

Page xxix says, “Almost every gospel story ... was composed *after* the Jewish rebellion ... in 66 C.E.”

What about Q, which was compiled about 50 C.E., which includes about 350 verses, and whose authenticity Aslan himself acknowledges on pages 29, 175 in *Zealot*? Here is what happened: Jesus lived and taught until about 30 C.E., then over the next few years eyewitness material was written by the disciples and others in Aramaic, then over the next few years the eyewitness material was translated into Greek, and then over the next few years the eyewitness material was compiled into Q, which was completed by 50 C.E. This sequence shows that the eyewitness material was written much earlier than 50 C.E. The original sources for the eyewitness material that we have in Q could have been written even before 40 C.E.

## **Chapter 2**

Page 20 says, “Herod’s was a profligate and tyrannical rule marked by farcical excess and bestial acts of cruelty. He was ruthless to his enemies ... he massacred nearly every member of the Sanhedrin ...”

This is an interesting and important insight that is widely acknowledged, and I am grateful to Aslan for discussing it. This will be important later in our discussion.

## **Chapter 3**

Page 24 says, “There is no synagogue” in Nazareth.

This is also claimed on page 35 as a refutation of Luke’s account of Jesus’ sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:14–30). But how in the world would Aslan know whether or not there was a synagogue in Nazareth? Archeological evidence confirms that there was a synagogue in Nazareth in the third century, and it was probably built on top of the earlier synagogue that was familiar to Jesus. It’s interesting that if a non-Christian first-century historian discussed the synagogue at Nazareth, no one would doubt its existence, but if a Biblical author discusses it, then it is automatically dismissed as legend. This is the double standard that confronts Bible believers: non-Christian history is given the benefit of the doubt, while Christian history is considered false until corroborated by additional evidence.

The rhetorical Jewish structure of Luke 4 shows that Luke clearly did not fabricate his account of Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth. The account in Luke 4 has the unmistakable features of being recorded by a Jewish Christian, and then adapted by Luke for his gospel.<sup>4</sup> Luke may not have even been aware of the rhetorical Jewish structure of his account – remember that Luke was a gentile who was writing for gentiles.

Page 30 says, “In the year 6 C.E. ... Quirinius did call for a census to be taken of all the people, property, and slaves in Judea, Samaria, and Idumea – not ‘the entire Roman world,’ as Luke claims ... Luke is also wrong to associate Quirinius’s census in 6 C.E. with the birth of Jesus, which most scholars place closer to 4 B.C.E. ... Luke’s suggestion that ... every Roman subject

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<sup>4</sup> K. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Chapter 12.

was forced to travel great distances to the place of his father's birth ... is, in a word, preposterous."

This is Aslan's attempt to discredit Luke's account of Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth. However, this again shows Aslan's bias against the gospels, automatically assuming them to be false unless corroborated with external evidence. Just because we do not have a secular record of a census in 4 B.C.E. does not prove that such a census did not take place. Furthermore, just because Quirinius was appointed governor in 6 C.E. does not prove that he was not also governor during an earlier term. In fact, we do not have any record of the governors of Syria between 4 B.C.E. and 6 C.E.<sup>5</sup>

There is secular evidence of the forced travel of Romans to the place of their father's birth for a census in an edict in 104 C.E. by Gaius Vibius Maximus, governor of Egypt.

Finally, Luke 2:2 is usually translated "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria," which indicates that Luke thinks that Quirinius took a census in 4 B.C.E., the year of Jesus' birth, and which Aslan vigorously disputes. However, Luke 2:2 can easily be translated, "This registration was *before* the one held by Quirinius governor of Syria." In this case there would be no contradiction between Luke and secular history, even if Quirinius was not governor of Judea in 4 B.C.E.

Surely Aslan is aware of these counterarguments. But perhaps not.

Page 30 says that first-century readers "would have known that Luke's account of Quirinius's census was factually inaccurate ... Luke himself ... knew that what he was writing was technically false. ... Luke never meant for his story about Jesus' birth at Bethlehem to be understood as historical fact."

See above for the possibility of a census in 4 B.C.E. But more to the point here is the observation that Aslan's statement about Luke is incredibly condescending. In reality, Luke was much more interested than Aslan in historical accuracy. Luke 1:1-4 says, "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses ... have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." Luke was deeply interested in historical accuracy, and he went to great lengths to interview eyewitnesses to confirm the accuracy of his gospel – both of which are much more than we can say for Aslan. The fact that many of Luke's readers would know first-hand or second-hand about the census that he records would motivate Luke to get his facts straight, not to make up stories after his claims of careful compilation in Luke 1:1-4.

Page 31 says, "Hence, Matthew's equally fanciful account of Jesus' flight into Egypt, ostensibly to escape Herod's massacre of all the sons born in and around Bethlehem in a fruitless search for the baby Jesus, an event for which there exists not a shred of corroborating evidence ... Matthew's equally fanciful account of Jesus' flight into Egypt ... not a shred of corroborating evidence ..."

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<sup>5</sup> This is an important point to note. In spite of meticulous record-keeping by the Romans, we do not know who the Roman governor of Judea was from 4 BC to 6 AD. This fact should warn us to be careful about arguing from silence.

See page 20 above for the cruelty of Herod. Josephus makes it clear, as Aslan notes, that Herod was insanely jealous, killing three of his own sons, one of his wives, and one father-in-law, because he feared them politically. Herod's slaughter of the children in Bethlehem, along with the escape of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus into Egypt, makes good historical sense.

Page 31 says, "Matthew needs Jesus to come out of Egypt for the same reason he needs him to be born in Bethlehem: to fulfill the scattered prophecies ..."

Aslan is here referring to the prophecy in Hosea 11:1, which says, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. Aslan thinks that Matthew needs to artificially ensure that this prophecy is fulfilled. However, surely the message of the gospels does not depend on Jesus coming out of Egypt. Today we recognize Hosea 11:1 as a prophecy of Jesus, but only in hindsight. If Jesus had not come out of Egypt, our interpretation of Hosea 11:1 would simply have been restricted to the Israelites, which, in fact, is its primary meaning anyway. Hosea 11:1 would in no way have been viewed as a failed prophecy.

Page 32 says, "... a host of contradictory prophecies about the messiah ..."

The "contradictory prophecies" to which Aslan alludes refer to the messiah coming as both a suffering servant and as a reigning king. However, in retrospect, Jesus perfectly fulfills these "contradictory prophecies," as the NT writers make clear. He certainly suffered, as the gospels so eloquently record. And he is also a king who reigns now in the lives of Christians, and who will eventually reign over all creation.

Page 33 says, "Luke places Jesus' birth in Bethlehem not because it took place there, but because of the words of the prophet Micah ..."

Aslan is referring here to Micah 5:2, which prophecies, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel." See the comments above on page 30 for the historical accuracy of Luke. Also, similar to Matthew's account of Jesus' flight to Egypt (see comments above on page 31), the message of the gospels does not hinge on Jesus being born in Bethlehem. Today we recognize Micah 5:2 in hindsight as a prophecy of Jesus, but if Jesus had not been born in Bethlehem, our interpretation of Micah 5:2 would simply have been restricted to a prophecy of Jesus' descent from David – it would in no way have been viewed as a failed prophecy.

Luke was a gentile who wrote for other gentiles. However, Luke's account of Jesus' birth is probably from a very early Jewish tradition, as indicated by the following.<sup>6</sup>

- 1) Luke says that Mary and Joseph "went up" from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Bethlehem was built on a ridge and was 650 feet higher in elevation than Nazareth, so Luke got the geography right.
- 2) Luke refers to Bethlehem as the "City of David," which was a local name. Luke adds the phrase, "which is called Bethlehem" for the sake of his Greek readers.
- 3) Luke refers to Joseph as being of the "house and lineage" of David. The term "house" would be understandable to Jewish readers as referring to ancestry, Luke adds the explanatory note "lineage" to clarify his meaning for Greek readers.

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<sup>6</sup> K. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, page 28.

- 4) Luke says that Jesus was wrapped in “swaddling clothes,” which is a Palestinian custom that Luke had to explain to his readers.
- 5) The Davidic ancestry of Jesus is clearly seen in Luke’s account, but this would not be important for Greek readers.

## **Chapter 4**

Page 34 says, “Nearly 97% of the Jewish peasantry could neither read nor write ...”

Page 35 says, “Jesus had some basic knowledge of Greek ... but certainly not enough to preach. ... Jesus would not have had access to the kind of formal education necessary to make Luke’s account [of the 12-year-old Jesus debating with rabbis] even remotely credible. There no schools in Nazareth for peasant children to attend.”

Aslan uses the 97% statistic to demean Jesus, but it is an irrelevant and misleading use of statistics. Why assume, in view of the historical record of the gospels, that Jesus was among the 97% of illiterates? It’s like saying that only 1% of the population is genius, therefore it’s extremely unlikely that Einstein was a genius.

Aslan relies on the Greek word *tekton*, which the gospels use to describe Jesus, to claim that Jesus was an ignorant, uneducated peasant. However, there is no reason to suppose that Jesus was a peasant. The Greek word *tekton* used of Jesus in Mark 6:3, and of his father in Matthew 13:55, simply means *craftsman*, and more specifically, *carpenter*<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, given the success of Jesus’ family,<sup>8</sup> it is likely that Jesus’ father Joseph was successful in his business. Even if there were no schools in Nazareth, Jesus could have been educated in the booming metropolis of Sepphoris, which Aslan discusses on pages 38, 43, 44 (see below).

Page 36 says, “John ... presents Jesus as an otherworldly spirit without earthly origins.”

Aslan makes this claim to support his thesis that John was a gospel that was fabricated by the early church and that is completely disconnected from the historical reality of the life of Jesus. However, John emphasizes the fleshly existence of Jesus (John 1:14 – “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”) no less than the fleshly existence of John the Baptist (John 1:6 – “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John”). Other verses in John that emphasize the humanity of Jesus include the following.

- John 4:7 – Jesus said to her, Give me a drink. [This demonstrates Jesus’ physical needs.]
- John 6:54, 66 – Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life ... After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. [This demonstrates not only the difficult sayings of Jesus, but also the fact that he was composed of physical flesh and blood.]
- John 7:27, 28, 41 – But we know where this man [Jesus] comes from, and when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from. So Jesus proclaimed, as he taught in the temple, You know me, and you know where I come from. ... Others said, This is the Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon

<sup>8</sup> Jesus was the founder of a worldwide religion, James was one of the first and most eminent leaders of that religion, and James and Jude were both Biblical authors.

But some said, Is the Christ to come from Galilee? [This emphasizes the earthly origins of Jesus.]

- John 11:35 – Jesus wept. [This emphasizes the human emotions of Jesus.]
- And, of course, John 18 and 19, which detail the arrest, suffering, and death of Jesus – not a likely sequence of events for an “otherworldly spirit.”

In spite of John’s emphasis on the divinity of Jesus, he cannot escape the fact that Jesus is also fully human.

page 38 says, “Jesus and his brothers would have had to go to bigger towns or cities to ply their trade ... the capital city, Sepphoris. Sepphoris was a sophisticated urban metropolis, as rich as Nazareth was poor.”

page 43 says, “Not long after [6 C.E.] the Romans marched to Sepphoris and burned it to the ground ... a short time later, Herod Antipas arrived and immediately set to work transforming the flattened ruins of Sepphoris into an extravagant royal city fit for a king.”

page 44 says, “Jesus would have spent most of his life not in the tiny hamlet of Nazareth, but in the cosmopolitan capital of Sepphoris.”

I don’t have any disagreement with these statements. Aslan’s comments here support the possibility that Jesus received a good education in both Greek and Jewish thought: Greek because of his residence on the northern boundary of Judea, and Jewish because of his heritage and his religion.

## **Chapter 5**

Page 47 says, “The gospels present Pilate as a righteous yet weak-willed man ... that is pure fiction. What Pilate was best known for was his extreme depravity, his total disregard for Jewish law and tradition, and his barely concealed aversion to the Jewish nation as a whole.”

Aslan makes this statement in an attempt to show that the gospels were rewritten by the early church to blame the Jews for Jesus’ death while exonerating the Romans. However, in all of my years of attending church, I never thought of Pilate as righteous man. The gospels do present Pilate as weak-willed, but they also present him as an entirely unrighteous man who, ignoring his wife’s wise advice, sent the innocent Jesus to his death in an attempt to pacify his constituents (the Jewish leaders). An unbiased reading of the gospels shows that there is plenty of blame to go around for Jesus’ death – the Jewish leaders, the Romans, and those of us for whom Jesus died.

## **Part II – Prologue**

Page 73 says, “So revelatory is this single moment in Jesus’ brief life [Jesus’ cleansing of the temple] that it alone can be used to clarify his mission, his theology, his politics, his relationship to the Jewish authorities, his relationship to Judaism in general, and his attitude toward the Roman occupation.”

Aslan finally finds something in the gospels that he can cling to in support of his thesis that Jesus was a political revolutionary. But this raises the question: Does a good historian

interpret a man's life based on a single event? Or might it be more accurate to interpret the man's life on the basis of his entire biographical record?

Page 75 says, "The gospels were all written after the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E."

Probably not. Luke apparently wrote Acts before Paul's death in 66 AD,<sup>9</sup> and Luke was clearly written before Acts.<sup>10</sup> Matthew was written around the same time as Luke. Mark was written earliest of all (both from internal evidence and from external testimony).<sup>11</sup> John was probably written last of all the gospels, based on its advanced theology of the nature of Jesus, its more sophisticated literary nature, and the testimony of 2nd-century church fathers, but John (or at least part of it) still easily could have been written before 70 AD.<sup>12</sup>

The early origins of the gospels shows that they were not fabricated by the early church. Manuscript evidence shows very little change in the gospel documents throughout the centuries. The clear conclusion is that the gospels that we read today are essentially the same as the documents that were written in the first century.

Page 76 says that Jesus' words in Luke 19:43, 44 prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem were "put into his mouth after the fact."

This statement by Aslan is necessary if one approaches the Bible with naturalistic presuppositions, or if one refuses to believe that Jesus had enough foresight to predict the destruction of Jerusalem. But if the historical evidence is investigated at face value, then it is difficult to deny that these words were written before the destruction of Jerusalem. The destruction of Jerusalem is also prophesied in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. Given that we have three largely independent accounts of Jesus' words on this topic, an objective historian should consider them to be reliable.

Page 77 says, "[Jesus said] So then, give back to Caesar what is his, and give back to God what belongs to God. That is the zealot argument in its simplest, most concise form."

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<sup>9</sup> Acts discusses events in Paul's life up until about 64 AD. Acts concludes with Paul in Rome (64 AD) but does not mention his death in 67 AD. Acts does not mention Peter's crucifixion in 67 AD. Acts does not mention the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Acts does not mention Nero's persecution of Christians, which began in 65 AD (note Acts 26:31 – "And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, This man [Paul] is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment"). So Acts was probably written around 65 AD.

<sup>10</sup> This can be seen by comparing the prologues of Luke and Acts in the first few verses of each book.

<sup>11</sup> Mark probably got much of his information from Peter (martyred in 67 AD) because of: common themes and wording between Mark, Peter's sermons in Acts, and 1 Peter; Mark was Peter's "spiritual son" (1 Peter 5:13); Eusebius (300 AD) says that Mark got his information from Peter; Papias (60-130 AD, bishop of Hieropolis) says that "Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him, but afterward, as I said, he was in company with Peter, who used to offer teaching as necessity demanded, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses."

<sup>12</sup> The Rylands papyrus (found in Egypt) contains a fragment of John and is dated 125 AD. Note the present-tense location of Bethesda in John 5:2 – "Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda ..." There is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem except in the future tense (John 11:48 - If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation), although other future events are mentioned in hindsight (John 21:19 - This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God).

Aslan makes this claim to support his thesis that Jesus was a political revolutionary. However, these words by Jesus are not a zealot statement, as seen from the Jewish leaders' response in Luke 20:26 – “And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marveling at his answer they became silent.” Aslan interprets Jesus' statement as a zealot argument, but the Jewish leaders were hoping for a zealot statement so that Jesus would incriminate himself. Instead Jesus claimed that he was unconcerned with political structures, thus foiling the Jewish leaders' attempt to catch him in his own words.

Page 78 quotes a conversation between Jesus and his disciples from Luke 22:36, 38 – “If you do not have a sword ... go sell your cloak and buy one. Master, the disciples respond, Here are two swords. It is enough, Jesus says.”

Aslan quotes the above conversation to support his claim that Jesus was a political revolutionary. However, Aslan conveniently (and dishonestly) omits verse 37, where Jesus says, “For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: And he was numbered with the transgressors. For what is written about me has its fulfillment.” Jesus' statement in verse 37 shows that his statement in verse 36 about buying a sword, like many of his statements, was meant to be figurative. He was resigned to death, and he was telling his disciples to be prepared for spiritual warfare. His statement “It is enough” in verse 38 should be interpreted as either a rebuke, or exasperation at the disciples' lack of understanding. Even today, thousands of years later, many continue to display a lack of understanding when confronted with the words of Jesus.

Page 79 says, “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 ...”

Aslan is correct about the reason for Jesus' crucifixion. However, it is not historically honest to allow a single fact to “color everything we read.” A more complete and honest approach is to connect all available historical evidence to obtain a complete picture, not to interpret everything that we read on the basis of a single event.

## **Chapter 7**

Page 81 says, “The evangelists mistakenly identify Herodias's first husband as Philip.”

Herodias's first husband was actually Herod II. Aslan states in his notes on page 242, “Any attempt ... to make up for this blatant error – for instance, by referring to Antipas's half brother as ‘Herod Philip’ ... falls flat.” As Aslan states, Philip did not marry Herodias – he married his niece Salome, the daughter of Herod II and Herodias. But Josephus, in Antiquities 18:5:4(137), identifies Herod II as Herod Philip I, and the Philip to whom Aslan refers could easily be identified as a different Herod Philip – for instance, Herod Philip II.

It's true that this may be an error in Matthew (14:3) and Mark (6:17), which is corrected in Luke (3:19), who knew more about Herod's family. This is one of the few criticisms of the gospels that Aslan may actually have right – but he severely overstates his point. This minor error is not much more than a typo in Matthew and Mark, and it does not take away from the essential truth of the gospels.

Page 81 says, “The evangelists ... seem to confuse the place of John’s execution, the fortress of Machaerus, with [Herod] Antipas’s court in the city of Tiberias.”

I’m not sure why Aslan thinks that the gospels report Tiberias as the place of John’s execution. None of the gospels record the place of John’s execution.

Page 82 says, “A more prosaic yet reliable account of the death of John the Baptist can be found in Josephus’s *Antiquities*.”

Josephus suggests that Antipas killed John because he was seen as a political threat. But Aslan’s dismissal of the gospel account as unreliable in favor of Josephus is unnecessary. The two accounts are actually compatible: a popular religious leader who publicly attacks Herod’s controversial marriage could be viewed as a political threat by Herod. There are often several ways to interpret historical events. In this case, Josephus and the gospels simply present two sides of the same coin.

Page 83 says, “The gospel of Luke provides a fantastical account of John’s lineage and miraculous birth, which most scholars dismiss out of hand.”

Scholars who are committed to naturalism have no choice but to dismiss the miraculous account of John’s birth. But if the evidence is investigated at face value, then it is difficult to deny the historic accuracy of Luke.

Page 85 says, “... a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). The unmistakably Christian nature of this phrase casts serious doubt on its historicity. ... an odd statement for the early church to make about John: that he had the power to forgive sins ...”

The fact that Mark 1:4 is an “odd statement for the early church to make” provides credibility for its historic accuracy as opposed to Aslan’s view that it is an invention of the early church. The fact that Mark 1:4 is “unmistakably Christian” is not because the early church revised Mark 1 – it is because Christian belief arose from the gospels.

Page 88 says, “This is all part of Luke’s concerted effort ... to persuade John’s disciples to abandon their prophet and follow Jesus instead.”

There is no reason to suppose that there were many disciples of John remaining after Jesus’ death and resurrection. They had already left John to follow Jesus. Matt. 11:2–6 says, “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? And Jesus answered them, Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Matthew 11 indicates that most of John’s disciples naturally gravitated to Jesus after John’s death.

Page 88 says, “This frantic attempt to reduce John’s significance, to make him inferior to Jesus – to make him little more than Jesus’ herald – betrays an urgent need on the part of the early

Christian community to counteract [the fact that] Jesus very likely began his ministry as just another of his disciples.”

There is nothing to “counteract” here. It is entirely plausible that Jesus, as John’s younger cousin, was once John’s disciple. The gospels are clear about the humanity of Jesus and his need for learning and education. For example, Luke 2:46 says, “After three days they found [Jesus] in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” Luke 2:51, 52 says, “Then [Jesus] went down to Nazareth with [his parents] and was obedient to them. ... And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.”

## **Chapter 8**

page 94 – “There is no cliff to be pushed off in Nazareth ...”

Aslan here refers to the account in Luke 4:14–30, which refers to the Jews attempt to push Jesus off a cliff after Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth. However, Aslan’s objective is not well founded. Luke is clear that the cliff is *outside* of Nazareth. “And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff” (Luke 4:29). It is two miles from Nazareth to Mount Precipice, which is the traditional site of this event to which Luke refers.

## **Chapter 9**

Page 104 says, “There is more accumulated historical material confirming Jesus’ miracles than there is regarding either his birth in Nazareth or his death at Golgotha.”

Page 105 says, “There was never any debate, either among his followers or his detractors, about his role as an exorcist and miracle worker.”

These are interesting statements by Aslan. He seems to accept the miracles of Jesus as historically accurate, while contradicting most of the other important features of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

## **Chapter 10**

Page 117 says, “Yet the Kingdom of God is not a celestial kingdom ... Those who claim otherwise often point to a single unreliable passage ... My kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).”

This appears to be an intentionally inaccurate depiction by Aslan of Jesus’ teaching.

- Matt. 5:3 says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Note the present tense, and note that Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs not to zealots but to the poor in spirit.
- Matt. 5:10 says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Note again the present tense, and the possession of the kingdom of heaven not by those who overcome, but by those who suffer.
- Mark 1:15 says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Note what Jesus is looking for as a response to his announcement of the kingdom of God – he is not looking for warfare; he is looking for repentance.

- Luke 17:20, 21 says, “Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, [Jesus] answered them, The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.” Again note the present tense, and note that the kingdom of God does not come in physically observable ways.

Surely Aslan is aware of these and similar passages.

Page 117 says, “There are those here who will not taste death until they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power (Mark 9:1).”

Aslan uses this quote to indicate that Jesus expected the overthrow of Rome by his followers within one generation. However, Jesus may be talking about the fall of Jerusalem here. The “coming of God’s kingdom” could be a phrase that indicates God’s judgment on Israel. Jesus may also be talking about his transfiguration, which follows in Mark 9:2–8, and which Aslan conveniently ignores.

Page 120 says, “The common depiction of Jesus as an inveterate peacemaker who ‘loved his enemies’ and ‘turned the other cheek’ ... has already been shown to be a complete fabrication. ... Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword. (Matt. 10:34, Luke 12:51).”

Actually, Jesus did love his enemies by dying for them and by praying for their forgiveness even while hanging on the cross, and he did turn the other cheek by not resisting their evil actions when he was crucified.

- In Acts 8:32 Philip applies the prophecy of Isaiah 53:7 to Jesus: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.” See below (page 122) for more discussion of this point.
- Jesus’ statement about “bringing the sword” in Matt. 10 and Luke 12 can be interpreted in a couple of different ways, but given the context of the gospels, it is clear that he did not intend to fight for his kingdom. He explicitly told his disciples not to fight the Romans who came to arrest him. Consider the following accounts of Jesus’ arrest by the Romans.
  - Matt. 26:52 – “[Jesus said] Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”
  - John 18:11 – “[Jesus said] Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?”
  - Luke 22:50, 51 – “And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched his ear and healed him.”

Other statements by Jesus that demonstrate his inveterate tendency toward peace include the following.

- Mark 9:50 – “Be at peace with one another.”
- Matt. 10:23 – “When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.” Jesus did not tell his disciples to stand up for themselves, but to flee.
- Matt. 16:24, 25 – “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but

anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it.” These do not sound like the words of a man who is gathering an army.

- Matt. 18:3 – “I tell you solemnly, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus tells his followers to become child-like, not warrior-like.
- Matt. 22:40 – “You must love your neighbor as yourself.”
- Luke 6:27-30 – “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.”
- Luke 23:34 – “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.” With these words Jesus forgives his murderers. These are not the words of a man who is seeking to inspire a revolution with his death.
- Jesus intentionally went to Jerusalem after predicting his own death. This is recorded in all three synoptic gospels.
- Jesus’ statement about “bringing the sword” could be interpreted either symbolically (spiritual conflict), or as prophesying persecution for those who would follow him, or as predicting judgment on Israel in 70 C.E. because of their rejection of him.

Page 122 says, “His commands to ‘love your enemies’ and ‘turn the other cheek’ must be read as being directed exclusively at his fellow Jews ...”

Jesus teaches these precepts in Luke 6, which is clearly directed at a “great multitude,” including those from Tyre and Sidon (Luke 6:17), which are outside Israel. And the sermon on the mount in Matt. 5–7 includes instructions about how to treat non-Jews, as Jesus stated in Matt. 5:43–47, which says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ... if you greet only your brothers what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?” So Jesus’ commands to love enemies clearly applies to gentile enemies as well as Jewish enemies.

Page 124 says, “But the sheer volume of Jesus’ statements about his inevitable capture and crucifixion indicates that his frequent self-prophecies may be historical.”

This is a nice capitulation on the part of Aslan to acknowledge the reliability of the gospels on at least this one point. It is interesting to me that he acknowledges their reliability on this point, while disputing their reliability on many other equally well-attested points.

## **Chapter 11**

Page 134 says, “Even those Jews who agreed that Jesus was the messiah did not agree about what being the messiah actually meant. ... eschatological prophet ... liberator ... royal claimant ...”

The Old Testament (OT) prophesied a coming prophet, liberator, servant, and king, which was confusing to the Jews because of the apparent contradiction. In hindsight we see

how Jesus fulfilled all of these roles, and the rest of the NT is unanimous in its agreement that Jesus fulfills all of these roles.

Page 135 says, “The early church obviously recognized this dilemma and, as will become apparent, made a conscious decision to change those messianic standards. ... Jesus may not have been prophet, liberator, or king. But that is because he rose above such simple messianic paradigms ... But it does not appear to be how Jesus himself understood it [his identity].”

Jesus was indeed prophet, liberator, and king. However, these “messianic standards” are clearly more than a “simple paradigm.” The references below show that Jesus did view himself as prophet, liberator, and king.

#### Jesus claims to be king

- John 18:36 – “My kingdom is not of this world.”
- Jesus accepts his disciple’s claim in John 1:49 – “Rabbi, Nathanael replied, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”
- Jesus accepts the crowd’s claim in Luke 19:38-40 – “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!” “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”
- Jesus claims to be king before Pilate in Luke 23:3 – “So Pilate asked Him, ‘Are You the King of the Jews?’ He answered him, ‘You have said it.’” (Also see Matt. 27:11 and Mark 15:2.)
- Jesus claims to be king in his conversation with the thief on the cross in Luke 23:42, 43 – “Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!’ And He said to him, ‘I assure you: Today you will be with Me in paradise.’”

#### Jesus claims to be liberator

- In John 8:32 Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”
- In John 8:36 Jesus says, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”
- In John 3:16 we see the kind of freedom that Jesus is talking about: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus is talking not about freedom from Roman oppression, but freedom from sin.

#### Jesus claims to be prophet

- In John 7:16 Jesus says, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me.”
- In John 8:28 Jesus says that he spoke “just what the Father has taught me.”
- In John 17:8 Jesus says “I gave them the words you [God] gave me.”
- In Mark 6:4 Jesus says, referring to himself, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household.”
- In Luke 13:33 Jesus says, prophesying of his own death, that “it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.”

Page 136 says, “Contrary to Christian conceptions, the title ‘Son of God’ was not a description of Jesus’ filial connection to God but rather the traditional designation for Israel’s kings.”

Aslan's point about the title 'Son of God' is irrelevant. Regardless of what that specific title meant, and contrary to Aslan's conception, Jesus clearly understood himself as having a filial connection with God.

- Luke 22:70, 71 – They all asked, “Are you then the Son of God?” He replied, “You say that I am.” Then they said, “Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips.” Then in Luke 23:1 we read, “Then the whole assembly rose and led him off to Pilate.” In other words, the Jewish leaders crucified Jesus because of his claim to be the Son of God. Jesus' claim deserved the death penalty in their eyes – not because he was claiming to be a king, but because he was blasphemously claiming to be equal to God.
- John 10:29–31 says, “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him.” As above, the Jews did not attempt to stone him because he claimed a mystical union with God. They attempted to stone him because he blasphemously made himself to be equal to God.
- John 19:7 says, “The Jewish leaders replied, We have a law, and according to our law he ought to die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.” The same comments apply here as above.
- In John 8:58 Jesus says, “Before Abraham was, I am.” This is a clear reference not only to Jesus' eternal existence, but also to the divine OT name of God “I am.”
- Matt. 9:2, 3 says, “Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven. At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, This fellow is blaspheming!” Here Jesus claimed to have the power to forgive sins, a power that belongs only to God.
- After Jesus calmed the storm, Matt. 14:33 says, “Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God.” Power over nature is not an attribute of kings; it is an attribute of deity.
- Matt. 27:54 says, “Now when the [Roman] centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.” Also see Mark 15:39. Clearly the Roman centurion was not recognizing the Jewish kingship of Jesus; he was recognizing the deity of Jesus.
- Mark 3:11 says, “And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God.” Also see Mark 5:7.
- John 14:9 says, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”
- In John 20:28 Jesus accepts Thomas's statement “My Lord and my God!”
- In John 6:38 Jesus says, “For I have come down from heaven ...”

The deity of Jesus is especially attested to in John as the latest of the gospels, but can be clearly derived from all four gospels.

Page 142 says, “Jesus speaks at length about the Son of Man, and often in contradictory terms. He is powerful (Mark 14:62), yet suffering (Mark 13:26). He is present on earth (Mark 2:10) yet coming in the future (Mark 8:38). He will be rejected by men (Mark 10:33), yet he will judge over them (Mark 14:62). He is both ruler (Mark 8:38) and servant (Mark 10:45).”

Page 144 says, “The fact remains that he was never able to establish the Kingdom of God. ... what the Jews of Jesus’ time expected of the messiah was wrong and had to be adjusted.”

Messianic prophecies were confusing and often in apparent contradiction. However, in hindsight we can recognize how a messiah can be both powerful and suffering, both present on earth and coming in the future, both rejected by men and judging over men, both ruler and servant. The gospels show that Jesus understood his dual roles all along, but it took time for his disciples to understand it.

## **Chapter 12**

Page 147 says, “[Jesus] repeatedly threatened the Temple of Jerusalem, vowing that ‘not one stone would be left upon another; all will be thrown down’ (Mark 13:2) ... His very ministry is founded upon the destruction of the present order ...” Later in the book, on page 258 in the notes, Aslan writes, “It is interesting to note that Mark treats as false the claim that Jesus will bring down the temple ... Mark’s apologetic overlay in the trial before the Sanhedrin comes across as a ridiculously contrived attempt to show the injustice of those who made accusations against Jesus ...”

Aslan, along with the first-century Jewish leaders, interpreted Jesus’ statements as threats – or at least that’s the justification they used to crucify him. A more careful interpretation shows that Jesus did not intend his statements as threats – he intended them as predictions. He used the phrase “I will” many times in the gospels, but he never said “I will” when referring to the destruction of the temple. Jesus was in a similar position as many OT prophets who predicted the captivity of Judah and Israel. The OT prophets were likewise persecuted for the predictions because they were intended as threats. But they were not threats at all – they were calls to repentance.

Page 147 says, “Jesus is bound again and escorted ... to appear before Pontius Pilate.”

Page 148 says, “Yet in Mark’s telling of the story, something happens ... so obviously contrived, that it casts suspicion over the entire episode ...”

Page 149 says, “The scene is absolutely nonsensical. ... not a shred of historical evidence for any such Passover custom ... “

Aslan refers to Pilate’s offer to release either Jesus or Barabbas as “contrived” and “nonsensical.” However, this custom is mentioned in all four gospels – we have four largely independent sources for this custom. Aslan does not believe it because it is not mentioned outside the Bible. This is the fallacy called “argument from silence.” Precedent for this custom is found in the Roman governor Albinus’s release of prisoners as he prepared to leave office (Antiquities 20.9.3), in the Roman Egyptian governor’s release of a prisoner around 85 C.E. (P.Flor 61), and in Pliny the Younger’s mention of the release of prisoners around 100 C.E. (Epistles 10.31).

Page 149 says, “What is truly beyond belief is the portrayal of Pontius Pilate – a man renowned for his loathing of the Jews, his total disregard for Jewish rituals and customs ... spending even a moment of his time pondering the fate of yet another Jewish rabble-rouser.” Aslan adds to this in his notes section on page 241 by saying, “... the notion that a no-name Jewish peasant would

have received a personal audience with the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate ... is so outlandish that it cannot be taken seriously."

It is incorrect and dismissive to refer to Jesus as "yet another Jewish rabble-rouser." The Jewish leaders felt severely threatened by Jesus, both religiously and politically. In John 11:48 the Jewish leaders say, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." The Jewish leaders needed Pilate to crucify Jesus, and they used their influence to force the issue with Pilate and to make it happen. John 19:8 says, "When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid." John 19:15 says, "Shall I crucify your king? Pilate asked. We have no king but Caesar, the chief priests answered." Pilate's political hold on Judea was tenuous, and he relied on a love-hate relationship with the Jewish leaders to maintain his position. Without their support, the region could have easily devolved into chaos, which would have been catastrophic for Pilate.

Page 150 says, "... the Jews who follow Jesus ... transform their messiah from a fierce Jewish nationalist into a pacifist preacher of good works whose kingdom was not of this world."

Referring to Jesus as a "fierce Jewish nationalist" is laughable. Jesus was the consummate pacifist, as shown in the comments above on pages 120 and 122.

Page 150 says, "... the Romans had to be completely absolved of any responsibility for Jesus' death ... The Romans were unwitting pawns of the high priest ..."

Here Aslan tries to make the case that the gospels were written after the fall of Jerusalem to present Christianity as a Roman-friendly religion. However, no one who reads the gospels objectively can seriously believe that they absolve the Romans of guilt. Jesus said to Pilate, "He who delivered me over to you has the greater sin" (this is quoted by Aslan on page 151). With this statement Jesus lays the bulk of the blame on the Jewish leaders, but clearly does not absolve Pilate of responsibility. All four gospels record that it was Roman soldiers who arrested Jesus and pounded the nails into his hands and feet.

Page 151 says, "The one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin, Jesus tells Pilate, personally absolving him of all guilt ..." (John 19)

How does the statement that the Jewish leaders have "greater sin" absolve Pilate of all guilt? On the contrary, it clearly implies that Pilate did incur guilt by his actions, albeit to a less degree than the guilt incurred by the Jewish leaders.

Page 154 says, "As with everything in the gospels ... factual accuracy was irrelevant. ... flat-out fabrications."

Page 156 says, "Even the earlier trial before the Sanhedrin ... is full of contradictions and inconsistencies .."

Page 157 says, "The trial before the Sanhedrin violates nearly every requirement laid down by Jewish law for a legal proceeding."

Page 157 says, "... what these flagrant inaccuracies demonstrate is the evangelists' extremely poor grasp of Jewish law and Sanhedrin practice."

Aslan's statements here are related to the gospel accounts of Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin occurring at night, during Passover, on the eve of the Sabbath, and in the courtyard

of the high priest, all of which violated Jewish law. However, the fact that Jesus' trial violated Jewish law does not prove that it did not happen the way that the gospels record. Many legal violations are recorded in historical records. The evangelists' had a firm grasp of Jewish law and practice. Matthew, Mark, and John were Jews. John personally knew the high priest (John 18:15). The fact that the Jewish leaders violated so many laws reveals their desperation to get rid of Jesus under the cover of night. Matt. 26:4, 5 says, "[The Jewish leaders] plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. But they said, Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people." Also see Mark 14:1, 2 and Luke 22:2.

### **Part III – Prologue**

Page 165 says, "But the concept of an individual dying and rising again, in the flesh, into a life everlasting was extremely rare in the ancient world and practically nonexistent in Judaism ... belief in a dying and rising messiah simply did not exist in Judaism. In the entirety of the Hebrew Bible there is not a single passage of scripture or prophecy about the promised messiah that even hints of his ignominious death, let alone his bodily resurrection."

Here are some OT passages that imply the ignominious death and the resurrection of the promised messiah. In view of these passages, it is incredible that Aslan could seriously make the above claim .

- Psalm 16:10 – For you will not abandon my soul to the grave, or let your holy one see corruption.
- Psalm 22:16 – Dogs have surrounded Me; a band of evildoers have encircled me; they have pierced My hands and My feet.
- Psalm 22:17 – I can count all My bones; they look and gloat over me.
- Psalm 22:22 – I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you. (In view of the suffering and death prophecies earlier in the psalm, this verse is a resurrection prophecy.)
- Psalm 22:8 – They divide My garments among them and cast lots for my robe.
- Psalm 69:21 – They also gave Me gall for My food; and in My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink.
- Isaiah 50:6 – I gave My back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting.
- Isaiah 52:14 – Many were astonished at Him – for His body was so disfigured.
- Isaiah 53:5 – But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
- Isaiah 53:7 – He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.
- Isaiah 53:8 – He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished.
- Isaiah 53:9 – He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.
- Isaiah 53:10 – Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. (Note the resurrection prophecy implied here.)

- Isaiah 53:12 – He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors.
- Daniel 9:26 – And after sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off but not for himself. (62×7 years after the time of Xerxes’ decree to rebuild Jerusalem is 33 C.E.)
- Zech. 12:10 – And they shall look upon him whom they have pierced.

Page 166 says, “Peter told the pilgrims gathered at the Temple, ‘David, foreseeing [Jesus], spoke of the resurrection of the messiah, saying that ‘his soul was not left in Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption’ (Acts 2:30–31) ... The ‘prophecy’ Peter speaks of was a Psalm David sang about *himself*.” Aslan adds on page 261 in his notes, “... it is ridiculous to interpret [Psalm 16] as predicting Jesus’ death and resurrection.”

Aslan is referring here to Psalm 16:9–11, which Peter pointed to as a prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection. Peter justified his interpretation of Psalm 16 by noting that David, in fact, *did* see corruption – he pointed out David’s tomb to his listeners. Therefore, David must have been speaking about someone else. In the same sermon Peter mentions another prophecy of Jesus from Psalm 110:1 – “The Lord says to my lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

Page 168 says, “Luke also provides Stephen with the self-defense ... obviously Luke’s creation, is riddled with the most basic errors: it misidentifies the burial site of the great patriarch Jacob, and it inexplicably claims that an angel gave the law to Moses ...” Aslan points out additional errors in Stephen’s defense on page 262 in his notes section.

I’m not sure what Aslan’s point is here. Is Aslan trying to say that since Stephen made some mistakes in his speech in Acts 7, the entire book of Acts is suspect? That would be a huge leap of logic. The evangelical Christian’s position is that the Bible is essentially free from error; however, no Christian would claim that every speech in the Bible is free from error. After all, Satan’s speech is recorded in the Bible, and the speech of many evil men is recorded in the Bible. Christians believe that the Bible is accurate in its representation of history, not that everything that everyone spoke in the Bible is accurate. So it’s perfectly consistent to believe that the Bible is error-free while still acknowledging that Stephen was not perfect.

Page 170 says, “... practically every word ever written about Jesus ... Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, was written by people who ... never actually knew Jesus when he was alive ...”

I’ve dealt with this in some detail above on page xxvi in the introduction. Matthew was a disciple of Jesus, an educated Jew who was a tax collector and was clearly fluent in Greek, which was the original language of his gospel. The tradition of Matthew’s authorship of the gospel that bears his name dates from the second century, and particularly from the writings of Papias, who was the Bishop of Hierapolis and a prolific church historian who lived from 70 C.E. to 163 C.E. Mark’s gospel was written on the basis of Peter’s recollections. Note that if he had followed the common practice of attributing his writing to more prominent individuals, the gospel would be named after Peter, not after Mark. Luke did not know Jesus – he was a historian who wrote on the basis of his interviews with eyewitnesses. John, of course, was in the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples.

However, even if Aslan's claim here was true, it would be irrelevant. Most of history is written by people who were not alive during the time of which they write – for example, Aslan's book about Jesus.

Page 170 says, "The apostles ... could neither read nor write."

This is pure conjecture on Aslan's part and is an attempt to discredit the credibility of the apostles and to present them as uneducated rubes. Matthew was an educated Jew who was a tax collector. Jesus' brothers (including James) were likely just as educated as Jesus (see comments above on page 35). The disciples James and John were sons of Zebedee, who owned his own fishing business with employees (Mark 1:19, 20), so he was probably wealthy enough to educate his children. John knew the high priest at the time of Jesus' crucifixion (John 18:15), a fact which provides additional evidence for his and his brother's education. Peter was a leader of the first-century megachurch in Jerusalem who probably ended up in Rome by the end of his life, and there is no reason to suppose that he remained illiterate his entire life (read his sermons in Acts). Also note that James and Peter wrote more than 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection – they had a lot of time to polish their literary skills during their decades of church leadership. Additional material along these lines can be found in *The Jewish Teachers of Jesus, James, and Jude*, by David deSilva (2012).

Page 171 says, "... they [the early church] gradually transformed Jesus from a revolutionary zealot to a Romanized demigod ... wholly uninterested in any earthly matter."

This is the main point of Aslan's position. However, there is no Biblical evidence that Jesus was interested in a revolution (see comments above on page 117). Aslan's position is entirely conjecture. Not only is it conjecture, but it is an entirely inaccurate caricature of the gospels. The gospels show that Jesus was intensely interested in earthly matters. His teaching in the gospels includes subjects as down-to-earth as marriage and divorce, money, taxes, difficult relationships, anger, revenge, and justice for the poor. The gospels show Jesus turning water into wine and healing physical sickness. How in the world can Aslan claim that the gospels portray Jesus as "wholly uninterested in any earthly matter"?

Page 172 says, "Jesus' brother, James ... Paul ... two bitter and openly hostile adversaries ..."

This is revisionist history by Aslan that I discuss in more detail below in Chapters 14 and 15 – see comments there for details.

### **Chapter 13**

Page 174 says, "... one after another of those who claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus went to their own gruesome deaths refusing to recant their testimony. ... They were being asked to deny something they themselves personally, directly encountered."

Page 175 says, "... among all the other failed messiahs who came before and after him, Jesus alone is still called messiah."

These statements by Aslan are strong evidences for Jesus' resurrection. What would it take for you to believe in the resurrection of a man whom you knew had died? What would it take for you to believe it so strongly that you were willing to die for your belief? It's one thing

for those of us who are Christians to believe in the resurrection 2000 years after the fact. It's an entirely different matter to believe in the resurrection of a man whose death you personally witnessed.

Additionally, as Aslan correctly notes, there were dozens of men wandering around Palestine during the first century who claimed to be messiah. Jesus even alludes to them in his teaching: "All who came before me are thieves and robbers" (John 10:8). "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many" (Matthew 24:5). Why did their movements die with them, while Jesus' movement continues even today? Because Jesus rose from the dead.

Page 175 says, "... the first resurrection stories were not written until the mid- to late-nineties ... Paul ... writes about the resurrection in a letter addressed to ... Corinth, sometime around 50 C.E. ... he is repeating what is likely a much older formula, one that may be traced to the early forties."

Aslan is partially correct here. As he says, 1 Corinthians 15 shows that the death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were not invented decades after his death. They were codified in written form no more than 10 years after his death. Furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus is *presupposed* in Mark, the earliest of the gospels, which was probably written no later than the 50s (see comments above on pages xxix and 75). Mark 16:6, 7 says, "And he said to them, Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."

Page 176 says, "The resurrection stories in the gospels were created to ... put flesh and bones upon an already accepted creed ..."

The resurrection stories existed immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, as shown by the preaching of the apostles in Acts. Then the stories were believed by those who became the first members of the church. Then they were informally written. Then they were written more formally in the gospels and in 1 Corinthians (see comments above).

Page 177 says, "... nowhere is any such thing [suffering, death, resurrection of Jesus] written [in the Old Testament] ..."

The suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus is amply supported by OT prophecies. See comments above on pages 165, 166 for details. Aslan does not interpret the OT verses as prophecies because he does not realize that the OT points to Jesus. In John 5:39 Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me." The message of the OT culminated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Page 178 says, "... the disciples simply could not persuade a significant number of Jerusalemites to accept Jesus as the long-awaited liberator of Israel."

Actually, thousands of Jerusalemites accepted Jesus during the weeks after his resurrection (Acts 2:41, 4:4). The fact that Christianity began in Jerusalem is a strong evidence

for Jesus' resurrection. If Jesus had not resurrected, then it would have been easy for the Jewish leaders to discredit the resurrection story. In that case the first disciples would have started their new religion in a more neutral location that was far from Jerusalem. Acts 6:7 says, "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

## **Chapter 14**

Page 184 says, "The story of Paul's dramatic conversion ... is a bit of propagandistic legend created by the evangelist Luke ... he does repeatedly insist that he has witnessed the risen Jesus ..."

Aslan does not present any evidence for relegating Luke's account to legend. Paul's conversion is narrated in Acts 9, and Paul himself recounts his conversion in Acts 22 and Acts 26. As Aslan correctly notes, Paul mentions in several other places that he has seen Jesus (1 Cor. 15, Gal. 1). Aslan's naturalistic presuppositions force him to relegate the account of Paul's conversion to "propagandistic legend." However, the account given by Luke seems to be the best explanation for Paul's conversion. How else could a man who was committed to murdering Christians, as Paul was before his conversion, become convinced that Jesus had really risen from the dead?

Page 185 says, "Paul holds particular contempt for the Jerusalem-based triumvirate of James, Peter, and John, whom he derides as the 'so-called pillars of the church' (Gal. 2:9)."

Paul does not at all deride the church leaders. Gal. 2:9, 10 says, "and when James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." The word "seemed" in Gal. 2:9 might come across as sarcastic in English, but the Greek word for "seemed," *dokeo*, has no such connotation. *Dokeo* means just what it says. Paul saying that he has the impression that James, Peter, and John are pillars of the church. Other translations render the word "recognized" or "esteemed" or "known as," which better conveys Paul's matter-of-fact intent. Paul mentions their status as "pillars" to lend credibility to his own ministry, thus showing his respect for them. Gal. 2:9, 10 actually means the opposite of Aslan's eisegetical view.

Paul also relies on the apostles to validate his ministry in 1 Cor. 15:3–7, which says, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles ..."

Page 185 says, "Whatever they are makes no difference to me ... those leaders contributed nothing to me."

Aslan is again taking verses out of context to create a conflict between Paul and the other apostles. Aslan is referring her to Gal. 2:4–6, which says, "Yet because of false brothers

secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.” Paul is not referring here to Peter, James, and John – he is referring to Christian Judaizers who were requiring that Christians adhere to the Jewish law. Verses 7–9, taken together, clearly show that “those” in verse 6 are different than James, Peter, and John in verse 9.

To see this clearly, consider Gal. 2:6–9, which says, “And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised ... and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me ...” This clearly shows that the Christian leaders whom Paul derides in verse 6 are in a different category than James, Peter, and John in verse 9. Aslan mistakenly lumps the two groups together in a single category.

Page 186 says, “Paul ... thinks he is the *first* apostle.”

Aslan claims that Paul sets himself up as superior to Peter, James, and John. Aslan is attempting to make the case that Paul’s Christianity was fundamentally different than the Christianity that began in Jerusalem. Aslan conveniently neglects 1 Cor. 15:9, which says, “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” In Eph. 3:8 Paul says, “I am the very least of all the saints.” Aslan picks and chooses his verses to make points that are inconsistent with the general tenor of the NT.

Page 186 says, “Paul ... his entirely self-ascribed mission to the gentiles ...”

Aslan again tries to portray Paul as an independent rogue missionary who created his own brand of Christianity. But Paul says in Gal. 2:7–9, “On the contrary, when they [the apostles] saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised ... and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised.” Paul attests here to his cooperation with the Jerusalem apostles, and he even depends on them to validate his own work.

Page 186 says, “[Paul] calls his fellow believers who continue to practice circumcision ... ‘dogs and evildoers’ who ‘mutilate the flesh’ (Phil. 3:2).

Aslan uses this verse to try to drive a wedge between Paul and the Jerusalem church. But the entire passage of Phil. 3:2, 3 reads, “Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” So Paul is not criticizing those who are circumcised. He is rather criticizing those who trust in circumcision as part of their salvation. Paul further states in 1 Cor. 7:19, “For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.” He makes a similar

statement in Gal. 6:15: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.” These verses show that Paul does not despise adherence to Jewish law; he only despises adherence to it for the sake of securing one’s salvation.

Page 187 says, “Paul sometimes directly contradicts Jesus ... ‘everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved’ (Rom. 10:13) ... ‘Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord shall enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 7:21).”

As he does in many other places, Aslan again takes verses out of context to make them say something that the original author (Paul in this case) never intended. Rom. 10:13, 16 says, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. ... But they have not all obeyed the gospel.” Paul never separates calling on God’s name from obedience. This is perfectly consistent with what Jesus says in Matt. 7:21 – “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Page 187 says, “Paul had no idea who the living Jesus was, nor did he care.

This claim on the part of Aslan is astounding in view of the many references in Paul’s letters to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Here are a few references that Paul makes about Jesus’ life and teachings.

#### Jesus’ Life

- Jesus’ birth in Gal. 4:4 – But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman.
- Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances in Paul’s sermon in Acts 13:30, 31 – But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.
- Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances in 1 Cor. 15:3-7 – Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles ...
- Jesus’ appearance before Pilate in 1 Tim. 6:13 – I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession ...
- Jesus’ betrayal by Judas in 1 Cor. 11:23 – ... the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread ...
- Of course, Paul does not spend a lot of time in his letters talking about Jesus’ life. Paul’s letters were written for specific purposes, to address specific needs of his readers – they were not written for the purpose of providing details about Jesus’ life. Paul refers to events in Jesus’ life only as needed for the specific purposes of his letters.

#### Jesus’ Teachings

- Paul alludes to Jesus’ teaching on prayer in Eph. 4:32 – Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Compare with Jesus’ teaching in Matt. 6:12 – Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

- Paul mentions Jesus' teaching on giving in Acts 20:35 – Remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in Col. 3:16 – Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly ...
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in 1 Tim. 6:3 – If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ ...
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in Col. 3:17 – And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Compare with Jesus' teaching in John 14:13, 14 – Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. Also John 16:26 – In that day you will ask in my name ... And finally, Mark 9:39 – But Jesus said, Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching Col. 4:6 – Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt ... Compare with Jesus' teaching in Matt. 5:13 – You are the salt of the earth.
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching 1 Thess. 5:2 – The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Compare with Jesus' teaching in Matt 24:43 – If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into.
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in 1 Thess. 5:3 – While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. Compare with Jesus' teaching in Luke 21:34 – That day come upon you suddenly like a trap. (Note that these are the only 2 places where the Greek word *aiphnidios*, or "sudden," occurs in the NT.)
- Paul alludes to the gospels in 1 Thess. 2:19 – For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Compare with Jesus' teaching in Matt. 24:3 – As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. Tell us, they said, when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in 1 Thess. 5:15 – See that no one repays anyone evil for evil ... Compare with Jesus' teaching in Matt 5:39 – But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil.
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in 1 Thess. 5:6 – So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. Compare with Jesus' teaching in Matt. 24:42 - Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in 1 Tim. 5:18 – For the Scripture says, You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain, and, The laborer deserves his wages. Compare with Jesus' teaching in Matt. 10:10 – The laborer deserves his food.
- Paul alludes to Jesus' teaching in 1 Tim. 6:9, 10 – But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. Compare with Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:24 – But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Similar teaching is also recorded in Luke 12:15–20, 16:13–31.

Page 188 says, “Why does Paul ... denigrate and dismiss [the leaders in Jerusalem] as irrelevant or worse?”

On the contrary – as mentioned in the comments above, Paul respects on the apostles in Jerusalem and even depends on them to validate his own ministry. Consider the following.

- Paul appeals to Peter as an example in 1 Cor. 9:5 – “Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?”
- Paul appeals to the apostles to support his ministry to the gentiles in Gal. 2:9, 10 – “And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”
- Paul esteems the apostles in Eph. 2:19, 20 – “... you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.”
- Paul relies on the apostles to validate his own ministry in 1 Cor. 15:3-7 – “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”
- Paul identifies himself with the other apostles in 1 Cor. 4:9 – “For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.” He also does this in Eph. 3:4 – “When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”
- Paul recognizes the apostles as God’s gift to the church in 1 Cor. 12:28 – “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” He also does this in Eph. 4:11 – “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers ...”

Page 188 says, “... transforming Jesus into a completely new creature, one that seems almost wholly of [Paul’s] own making: *Christ*.”

Here Aslan tries to buttress some arguments for the claim that Paul’s teaching about Jesus was completely different than the way Jesus understand himself. This is yet another astounding claim by Aslan, considering the fact that Jesus is declared “Christ” (often in Jesus’ own words) 31 times in the gospels: Matt. 1:1, Matt. 1:16, Matt. 1:17, Matt. 16:16, Matt. 16:20, Matt. 22:42, Matt. 23:8, Matt. 23:10, Matt. 26:63, Mark 1:1, Mark 8:29, Mark 9:41, Mark 12:35, Mark 14:61, Luke 2:11, Luke 2:26, Luke 4:41, Luke 9:20, Luke 20:41, Luke 22:67, Luke 23:2, Luke 24:46, John 1:17, John 1:41, John 4:25, John 4:29, John 4:42, John 6:69, John 11:27, John 17:3, John 20:31.

Page 189 says, “Paul’s Christ is not even human (Phil. 2:7) ... He is the first of God’s creations (1 Cor. 8:6) ... God’s physical progeny (Rom. 8:3) ... But he is not unique. He is merely the first of his kind: ‘the first-born among many brothers’ (Rom. 8:29).”

In order to convince himself that Paul’s Christianity (and therefore modern Christianity) is completely removed from the historical Jesus, Aslan has to convince himself that Paul does not view Jesus as human. However, Paul’s writings show that “Paul’s Christ” is fully human.

- Jesus was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4), was descended from David (2 Tim. 2:8), stands on trial before Pilate (1 Tim. 6:13), is betrayed by his friend (1 Cor. 11:23), and suffers (Rom. 8:17).
- Paul writes in Phil. 2:7 says that Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men.” This passage refers to Jesus becoming man, not that he is non-human.
- 1 Cor. 8:6 says, “Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” It does not say that Jesus is the first of God’s creations; it rather says that Jesus created everything.
- Paul’s references to Jesus as the “first-born” mean that he leads the way with his resurrection to never die again. This is clarified by Col. 1:18, where Paul writes that Jesus is “the firstborn from the dead.”

Page 190 says, “Paul’s Christ is certainly not the Son of Man who appears in Mark’s gospel ... Nowhere in the gospels of Matthew and Luke ... is Jesus ever considered the literal son of God.”

The comments above on page 188 show that Jesus is presented as the Christ on five separate occasions in Mark. The comments above on page 136 show several places in the gospels where Jesus is presented as the literal son of God.

Page 190 says, “Paul’s Christ had long obliterated any last trace of the Jewish messiah in Jesus.”

“Paul’s Christ” was one and the same with the Jewish messiah. The Jewish messiah is one who suffers, dies, and reigns (see comments above on page 135).

Page 191 says, “[Paul was] summoned to appear before a meeting of the Apostolic Council to defend his self-designated role as missionary to the gentiles ...”

Actually Paul’s mission to the gentiles was not “self-designated” – it was a mutual agreement with the apostles in Jerusalem. This point is supported by Gal. 2:9, 10, which says, “And when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

Page 191 says, “Paul claims [in Galatians] that he was ambushed at the Apostolic Council by a group of ‘false believers’ ... neither they, nor their opinion of his ministry, made any difference to him whatsoever (Gal. 2:1-10).”

Paul is not referring to the apostles when he uses the term “false believers.” See comments above on page 185.

Page 192 says, “[Paul railed] against the leaders in Jerusalem who, ‘disguising themselves as apostles of Christ,’ are, in Paul’s view, actually servants of Satan ... (2 Cor. 11:13–15).”

Paul would never refer to the apostles as servants of Satan. Paul highly regarded the apostles. See comments above on page 188.

Page 192 says, “... [Paul] lambastes his congregations for abandoning him: ‘I am amazed at how quickly you have deserted the one who called you’ (Gal. 1:6).”

Paul does not lambaste his congregations for abandoning him; he lambastes them for abandoning God.

Page 192 says, “[Paul] implores his followers not to listen to these delegations ... but only to him: ‘If anyone else preaches a gospel contrary to the gospel you received [from me], let him be damned’ (Gal. 1:9).”

Paul does not hold up himself as the source of truth – he holds up the gospel as the source of truth. The context here is Gal. 1:8 – “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” Paul includes himself as subject to damnation apart from adherence to the true gospel.

Page 192 says, “[Paul claims that the church] should obey Paul and only Paul: ‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ’ (1 Cor. 11:1).”

Similar to the comments above, Paul holds himself up as an example only insofar as he follows Christ. He does not hold himself up any higher than anyone else who imitates Christ.

Page 193 says, “... James forces Paul to take part with four other men in a strict purification ritual ... (Acts 21:24). Paul obeys; he seems to have no choice in the matter.”

Aslan tries to present Paul as cooperating with the Jerusalem apostles only because he had no choice. But it’s hard to imagine that a personality as strong as Paul would “have no choice in the matter.” Remember that Paul “opposed Peter to his face” when necessary (Gal. 2:11). The apostles had conflict and disagreements, just like everyone else, but overall they respected each other and worked together on the basis of their common faith.

Page 195 says, “[Paul] was forced to renounce everything he had been preaching for two decades ...”

Paul did not renounce anything. Aslan makes a mountain out of the molehill of Paul’s purification ritual that is recorded in Acts 21.

Page 196 says, “Stranger still, Luke does not bother to record the most significant aspect of the two men’s years together ... For in the year 66 C.E. ... Nero ... seized Peter and Paul and executed them ...”

The best explanation for the fact that Peter and Paul’s execution is not recorded in Acts is that Acts was completed before 66 AD. This means that Luke was written even earlier than

that. Mark was written even earlier than Luke. The lack of a record of Peter's and Paul's execution is a strong argument for the early authorship of Acts and the gospels. See comments above on page 75.

## **Chapter 15**

Page 199 says, "... by the year 94 C.E., when the *Antiquities* was written, Jesus of Nazareth was already recognized as the founder of an important and enduring movement."

This is an important point because it is the earliest extra-Biblical reference to Jesus.

Page 203 says, "Obviously James did not himself write the epistle; he was, like his brother Jesus and most of the apostles, an illiterate peasant ..."

This statement underestimates the educational level of Jesus, James, and the other apostles. See comments on page 170.

Page 206 says, "Paul dismisses the Law of Moses as a 'ministry of death ...' (2 Cor. 3:7), James celebrates it as 'the law of liberty.' Paul claims that 'one is not justified by the works of the law ...' (Gal. 2:16). James emphatically rejects Paul's notion that faith alone engenders salvation. 'Can belief save you?' he retorts. 'Even the demons believe – and shudder!' (James 2:14, 19)." page 207 says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works ... (James 2:23) ... Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:1-3, see also Gal. 3:6-9)."

Aslan continues here in his attempt to set Paul against James, which supposedly implies that modern Christianity, as derived from Paul's writings, is antithetical to everything that Jesus and the Jerusalem apostles taught. However, neither Paul nor any Biblical Christian cavalierly dismisses the law. Paul calls the law a "ministry of death" because it shows mankind his inadequacy without providing a means of salvation. The term is not a criticism of the law. A more balanced presentation of Paul's view of the law would include the following.

- Rom. 3:31 – Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.
- Rom. 7:12 – So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.
- Rom. 7:14 – For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.
- Rom. 7:16 – Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.
- Gal. 3:24 – So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.
- 1 Tim. 1:8 – Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully.

James and Paul agree with each other. They both show that Abraham's faith was considered as righteousness for him. This event occurred 10 years before the validity of his faith was demonstrated by his obedience to God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac. So from one perspective (Paul's), Abraham was justified by faith because, after all, it was 10 years before his obedience to God. But from another perspective (James), Abraham was justified by works because, after all, obedience to God was required to validate his faith. These are two different and complementary sides of the same coin. Only those who are looking for contradictions will find them here.

Page 208 says, “[Paul] was forced by James to publicly repent of his beliefs by taking part in that strict purification ritual in the Temple of Jerusalem.”

Page 209 says, “The entire purpose of the rite was to demonstrate to the Jerusalem assembly that [Paul] no longer believed what he had been preaching for nearly a decade.”

Paul’s purification ritual in Acts 21 was not an act of repentance. It was rather an act of accommodation. Paul accommodated himself to people of various backgrounds. Paul explains his perspective in 1 Cor. 9:20–22 – “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.”

## **Notes**

Page 239 says, “Once again this seems like a classic case of scholars refusing to accept an obvious reality that does not fit into their preconceived ... conceptions of who Jesus was and what Jesus meant.”

Ironically enough, this is an excellent characterization of Aslan’s own twisted interpretation of the life of Jesus, although it seems like a stretch to call Aslan as “scholar” – he is a good write, but judging by *Zealot* he is not much of a scholar.

Page 266 says, “That Paul is speaking about himself when he cites Isaiah 49:1–6 regarding ‘the root of Jesse’ serving as a ‘light to the gentiles’ is obvious, since even Paul admits that Jesus did not missionize to the gentiles (Rom. 15:12).”

Paul is clearly referring to Jesus as the “light to the gentiles” in Rom. 15:12, as seen in the following.

- Rom. 15:8, 9 says, “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”
- The quotation of Isa. 49 in Rom. 15:12 says, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the gentiles; in him will the gentiles hope.” In view of the context, it is doubtful that Paul would view Isa. 49 as referring to himself.
- Isa. 49 is also quoted in Matt. 4:13–16 – “And leaving Nazareth [Jesus] went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.’” This clearly shows that Isa. 49 refers to Jesus, a fact with which Paul would surely be familiar.
- Luke 2:28–32 says, “[Simeon] took [Jesus] up in his arms and blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have

seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” Again this shows that Jesus was considered a light to the gentiles from the very beginning of his life.

- Paul says in Acts 26:23, “Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the gentiles.” This shows that Paul viewed Jesus, not himself, as light to the gentiles.

Page 266 says, “[Luke] also claims that the Roman tribune ordered nearly five hundred of his soldiers to personally accompany Paul to Caesarea. This is absurd and can be flatly ignored.”

The account of Paul’s Roman escort is given in Acts 23. The Romans were obligated to protect one of their own, Paul, who was a Roman citizen. Other passages in Acts show the concern that Rome had for its own citizens, and for Paul in particular (Acts 16:35–39, 22:25–29). In view of this historical background, it is not at all “absurd” to suppose that 500 soldiers would protect Paul from a murderous plot.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I appreciate the fact that Aslan’s book has some interesting points. However, it is also replete with errors, simplistic and unsupported claims, poor interpretation, and biased conclusions. His Biblical interpretation is on par with young earth creationism. Young earth creationists are lousy scientists, and they try to make up for it with lousy Biblical interpretation. Similarly, Aslan is a lousy historian, and he tries to make up for it with lousy Biblical interpretation. Not only is he a poor historian and a poor exegete, but I can only conclude, on the basis of some of his outlandish claims, that he is intentionally deceptive in many places in his book.

The popularity of Aslan’s book as NY Times bestseller is an interesting study in American culture, and is due in part because of its political correctness, and in part because of the unfortunate fact that Fox News, a politically incorrect and conservative news network, attacked Aslan, a Muslim, in an embarrassing and widely-publicized interview about his book. All of these events comprised the “perfect storm” for sales of *Zealot*.

I’m not a professional theologian or historian. I’m an engineer and a Christian who has been interested in Biblical theology and history his whole life. I approach these topics as an educated layperson. Given this handicap in my professional training, I’m amazed at how easy it is for me to debunk Aslan’s views. Is it because I’m so smart? Not really. It’s just a lot easier to win a debate when you’re on the right side.

When I first started studying Aslan’s book, I was irritated. I thought, Why do I have to waste my time responding to such rubbish? Do I really have to spend my time arguing with flat-earthers? Do I have to spend my time arguing with young earth creationists? Do I have to spend my time arguing with those who claim that Jesus was a political revolutionary? The answer is “yes,” because I am called to “give an answer” for my faith in Jesus (1 Peter 3:15). In hindsight, my efforts were not wasted because they helped me articulate the reason for my faith, to educate those who are open to the truth, and to clearly confirm the intellectually solid basis of evangelical Christianity.

I hope that this essay will give Bible-believing Christians ammunition to use in their defense of the historicity of the NT, and will give them confidence in the firm historical foundation of the Christian faith. I would be glad to answer emails on this subject at [d.j.simon@csuohio.edu](mailto:d.j.simon@csuohio.edu).

### **Some other indications of the historicity of the NT**

Here are a few other miscellaneous observations that confirm the historical reliability of the NT.

- Jesus did not talk about several topics that were important to the church: circumcision, charismatic gifts, baptism, unclean food, Gentile missions, church organization, and church/government relations. If the gospels were created by the early church, then they would have put words into Jesus' mouth to address these important issues.
- Paul does not directly quote from the gospels, which indicates that Paul's epistles and the gospels were all written early and around the same time. However, it is still true that Paul certainly had personal access to the first disciples of Jesus, and based on some of the similarities between Paul's writings and the teachings of Jesus, it is likely that Paul had access to some early written material about Jesus.
- The gospels contain counterproductive material about Jesus: his denial of being good; his attitudes toward fasting, divorce, and sinners; his anger; his baptism; his background as a carpenter from Nazareth; his family's opposition; and his forgiveness of his murderers (Luke 23:34). If the gospels were created by the early church, then they would not have included such material.
- The gospels contain counterproductive material about the disciples: their lack of understanding; their cowardice; and Jesus' attitude toward teachers in the church (Matt. 23:8–10). If the gospels were created by the early church, then they would not have included such material.
- When assessing the historical reliability of a given document, we consider the length of the time lag between the events and the writing. See the comments above on page 75 for the early origin of the gospels.
- Church fathers as early as the first century quote the NT in their letters and other documents.
  - Justin Martyr, 150 C.E. (the first Christian apologist; martyred in 165 C.E.)
  - Clement, bishop of Rome (pope), 96 C.E. (ordained by Peter; see Phil. 4:3; martyred in 99 C.E.)
  - Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, (martyred in 108 C.E.)
  - Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, 120 C.E. (disciple of John; martyred in 155 C.E.)
  - Irenaeus (disciple of Polycarp), Clement of Alexandria, Theophilus of Antioch, Tertullian of Carthage, Heracleon of Italy, all in the 2nd century
- John's authorship of the Gospel of John as the last gospel written is attested to by Irenaeus (d. 202 C.E.), who was a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. John's authorship of his gospel is also attested to by Clement (d. 99 C.E.) and Origen (d. 253 C.E.).
- Mark probably got much of his information from Peter (martyred in 67 C.E.)

- We see common themes and wording between Mark, Peter’s sermons in Acts<sup>13</sup>, and 1 Peter<sup>14</sup>
- Mark was Peter’s “spiritual son” – see 1 Peter 5:13
- Eusebius (300 C.E.) says that Mark got his information from Peter
- Papias (60–130 C.E., bishop of Hieropolis) says, “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied him, but afterward, as I said, he was in company with Peter, who used to offer teaching as necessity demanded, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses.”
- We have a manuscript of Paul’s epistles (except the Pastoral epistles) from about 200 C.E.
- We have thousands of NT manuscripts from earlier than 400 C.E.
- We have more than a million NT quotations from the early church fathers.

### **Acknowledgments**

The reader might notice that there are only a few scattered references throughout this document. I wrote most of this document on the basis of knowledge that I’ve gained during decades of intermittent reading and study. There is a lot of great scholarship about the historical reliability of the NT, some of which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay in my comments on page xx in the Author’s Note. Personally, I am especially grateful for the influence of F. F. Bruce, John A. T. Robinson, J. P. Moreland, Norman Geisler, C. S. Lewis, and William Lane Craig.

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<sup>13</sup> For example, Acts 10:38 – “he went around doing good.”

<sup>14</sup> For example, compare Mark 12:10 and 1 Peter 2:7; compare Mark 16:19 and 1 Peter 3:22.