

“Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth”

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Reza Aslan
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Terry McCarthy: Our speaker tonight, Reza Aslan, was born in Tehran and immigrated to the United States with his family after the takeover of government in Iran in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini. He grew up in San Francisco. He went to three universities: Santa Clara, where he did his BA; then Harvard; he did his PhD at UCSB. He’s an established authority on religions.

His first book, “No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam,” I read in Iraq. It was a very interesting look at both where Islam comes from and where it might be going. That’s how I first got to know his work. It was an international best seller, and lasted ten years. He had a long run for that.

What’s interesting about his latest book, “Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth,” is that he sold more copies in one month than he sold of his best seller in ten years. Apart from the fact that it’s a very good book, as those of you who’ve read it know, there was a particular TV interview which really made it. I think some of you have probably seen that. It was on Fox, and the host, Lauren Green, conducted what, in my profession opinion, having done some interviews in my life, was undoubtedly the worst-ever televised interview in the history of American television. What it did was it made his book rush off the shelves like hot cakes.

We’re going to start our conversation with the same question she asked, which is: Why would a Muslim write a book about Jesus?

Reza Aslan: You know, I’ve had eight months to think of an answer, and I still can’t think of one. What’s funny about that whole experience is how quickly it stopped being about either me or the book. I don’t know if this is a good thing or a bad thing, but we’ve become so polarized as a country that this ten minute TV interview became yet another

reason for us to pick sides. What I noticed in the weeks following that interview going viral is how quickly people had to pick a “camp.” Are you on Fox’s side or are you on Reza’s side? To me, stepping back and watching this whole phenomenon take place, what I found truly fascinating, and even inspirational, is that it launched a series of conversations about things, such as journalistic integrity, media bias, the role of religion in society, and who gets to speak for Jesus. These are conversations that I tend to have in a dusty library with two other academics. All of a sudden it became a conversation that the entire country was having. It was a thrill for me to have inadvertently launched a much needed public discussion on these incredibly important yet heady topics.

TM: Before we get into the book, there was an interesting question that came up in our student briefing. You were born Muslim, you converted to Christianity when you were 15, and then converted back to Islam in college. The question was how that affected your thinking and your religion. You had a quite interesting answer.

RA: I said it didn’t. Because my faith has never been in a religion; my faith has been in God. Religion is nothing more than the language that I use. It’s like saying that I used to speak Persian, and now I speak English. How is that? I’m still communicating the exact same sentiment; I’m just using a different language to do so.

I did grow up in Iran; I grew up in a family that was a mix of lukewarm Muslims and exuberant atheists. My mother was the lukewarm Muslim; my father was the exuberant atheist. The kind of atheist that always has a pocketful of Prophet Mohammad jokes that he pulls out at inappropriate moments. But in a sense, my father’s militant atheism saved us, because at the end of the revolution when the Ayatollah Khomeini returned, those of you who remember, the first thing that he said was that he had no interest in any sort of political role, that he wanted nothing to do with government, that he just wanted to go back to his studies. My father took one look at that and said, “Bullshit.”

He got us out of the country for what he thought would just be a very brief time. He said, “Let’s just leave, and wait for things to settle down.” And obviously that was three decades ago.

When we came to the United States, we were not a particularly religious family. Religion was part of our identity, I suppose in a way, but it wasn’t all that serious for us. But then, coming to the United States, in the early 1980’s, I’m not sure if you remember the 1980’s, but it was not a good time to be Iranian in the United States, as opposed to now, when it’s *fantastic*. This was at the height of the hostage crisis, 444 days in which Americans were being held hostage in Tehran. For an eight year old boy, trying his hardest not to stick out, being Iranian or being Muslim was the furthest thing from my mind. In fact, I admitted frequently that I spent a good part of the early 1980s pretending to be Mexican. Let me tell you something. You know when your particular

ethnic community is in trouble when you assume Americans will treat you better if you say you're Mexican. This was the times.

Despite the fact that I didn't have any kind of religious instruction or any kind of spiritual edification at home, I was always deeply interested in religion and spirituality. I think it partly had to do with the images of revolutionary Iran; the visceral experience of how religion can transform a society for both good and for bad never left me. And I think that that in a sense really created this intense interest to know about religion, religious phenomenology and spirituality. But of course, without an opportunity to experience that in any way, until, as you say, when I was 15 years old and I went with some friends to an evangelical youth camp in Northern California and heard the gospel story for the first time. I had never heard anything like this before. This story about the God of Heaven and Earth coming down in the form of a baby, and growing up and dying for our sins, and that anyone who believes in him will also never die and have eternal life...this was the greatest story that I had ever heard in my life. It was a transformative experience for me. I converted to this very particularly conservative brand of evangelical Christianity and spent the next four years or so preaching this gospel to everyone, whether they wanted to hear it or not frankly.

When I went to university, I decided that I was going to study the New Testament for a living. That was the moment in which I was confronted with this experience, that I think frankly a lot of people in my situation are confronted with, which is this sudden realization that almost everything I thought that I knew about Jesus was incorrect, or at least incomplete; that there was this incredible distance between the Christ of faith, and the Jesus of history. I was just more drawn to the Jesus of history. He became more real, more appealing, and more accessible to me. Although I did eventually leave Christianity as a faith, I continued to delve deep into the life of Jesus the man. And truly, that's the result of this book, twenty years later.

TM: My youngest daughter, Eloise, is four years old. Just yesterday, she made what I thought was quite an astonishing leap of logic. We were talking about birthdays, and she said, "Daddy, you know Jesus, he had it tough, because he only got one birthday present because he was born on Christmas." Which I thought for a four year old was pretty impressive processing. But it turns out we don't even know the very basics of where he was born. Our idea of Bethlehem maybe isn't right. So tell us what we do know about Jesus and what we don't know.

RA: This is the problem. The quest for the historical Jesus, of course, is not a new phenomenon. I didn't invent the search for the historical Jesus. This is a process that has been going on for nearly two centuries, ever since the seminal work by Albert Schweitzer, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus." This was an attempt to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. I think what we've realized in the last 200 years

is that when you take away the New Testament, when you take away Christian writings, we know almost nothing about the Jesus of history, except maybe three things. And when I use the word “know,” what I mean by that is the things that there is probably the greatest consensus around amongst Biblical scholars about the Jesus of history.

Number one: he was a Jew. This sounds obvious, but it’s a good thing to remind ourselves of every once in awhile. And I will remind you of it probably three or four more times tonight because it is the single most important fact to know about Jesus. Indeed the difference between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history is predicated on this one fact: that the Jesus of history was a Jew, preaching Judaism to other Jews. If you keep that in mind, the rest of this evening will make much more sense to you.

Number two: sometime in the first half of the first century, he started this Jewish movement, for Jews, the purpose of which was to reestablish the Kingdom of God. There’s a lot of debate about what that actually means. But that was the purpose of Jesus’ movement: we are here to establish the Kingdom of God.

And number three: as a result of that movement, he was executed as a state criminal by Rome.

That’s it! That’s all we know about Jesus. Indeed, because that’s all we know, most scholars nowadays would say that its not enough, that the whole quest for the historical Jesus is a fool’s errand, and that we should stop pretending that we can know anything about who Jesus the man was.

I disagree. The argument that I make in this book is that if that’s all you know about Jesus, it’s enough. While we know very little about Jesus the man, we know almost everything about the world in which he lived. First century Palestine was an era that was very well-documented, thanks in large part to the Roman occupation. Whatever you want to say about the Romans, they were very good at documentation. That and killing were their two big strengths...and roads I suppose. We’ll give them roads. We know how much a bushel of wheat cost in Jesus’ time. So what I try to do is to take what little we know about Jesus, plant him firmly into his time and place, and allow the world in which he lived, and the time in which he lived to define him, to create his biography. And *then*, we can go to the gospels and analyze the claims of the gospels according to what we know about know about the history of the time to decide what is more likely historical or less likely historical. When you do that experiment, the Jesus that arises is a little bit different than the Jesus that most of us are familiar with.

TM: You extrapolate a lot in this book about what Jesus might have done. Do you have any fear that sometimes you went over the line from supposition to... [1st recording cut out 15:15]

RA: Everything we know about Jesus is speculation. Everything. The difference is: is it reasonable and educated speculation or not? I admit, quite freely, that writing a biography about Jesus is not like writing a biography about Napoleon. When you're talking about Jesus, I think the metaphor that I use is that it's like trying to put a giant puzzle together when you only have four pieces. And the rest of it, you just have to take your best guess as to what it looks like. But this is a pretty good guess. One thing that I try to do, certainly in the Notes section, is to quite honestly say, "Look, there are people who disagree and these are their names and this is the book, and this is why they disagree with me and this is why I think they're wrong."

This argument about who Jesus was is an old argument, but I think that we have access to new tools nowadays that help us to draw what I think is a far more historically accurate picture of this man. But you're absolutely right, Terry. In the end, it's just guessing.

TM: Which is fine, even if you don't work for Fox News. Let's assume that you know quite a lot about this era, and you've injected Jesus into this. Sketch out your picture of this man. You see him as an exorcist? An impresario? But also as some kind of a political threat to Roman rule and to the temple. Give us your fingernail sketch of how you see Jesus as a [2nd recording indistinct 1:54]

RA: The bare bones, historical sketch of who Jesus of Nazareth was: he was poor, and when I say poor, I mean the poorest of the poor. Let's pause for a moment here and break down what we just said a few moments ago, when we called him a carpenter. And I said, "Well...day laborer." The gospels call Jesus a tekton and we translate that as either 'carpenter' or 'woodworker'. And that's not an incorrect translation, but unfortunately it implies that carpenter was some sort of middle-class skill. And indeed, I'm a big fan of Jesus movies. There's always a wonderful moment in those Jesus movies where he's in his workshop building a chair and someone comes in and he says "Oh, here's a table for you to purchase." But that's not what tekton meant. A tekton was a day laborer, an artisan, someone who was employed in the general building trade, someone who went from village to village looking for work, looking for things to build. A tekton wasn't a carpenter with his own shop. A tekton was the guy who stands outside of Home Depot waiting for a truck to show up. That's what a tekton was. Indeed, the Romans used the word "tekton" as a curse word, as slang for an uncouth or illiterate peasant. And Jesus was very likely both those things. Tekton meant that you were at the second-lowest level of the social ladder, just above the slave, the indigent, and the beggar. Are you getting a sense of how poor this man was? Because I want to emphasize, we are talking poorest of the poor.

He was a Galilean, which in and of itself brings up a whole host of interesting attributes. The Galileans were farmers; they were country folk; as opposed to the Judeans, who were far more cosmopolitan, far more urban. He was from a village, Nazareth, which was so small, so insignificant, that the name itself does not appear on any map before the end of the 1st century. A village of mud and brick huts, a village that didn't have a road, it didn't have a school, and it didn't have a synagogue. It was a village of about 100 families in total.

He was unquestionably illiterate, as was by most scholarly estimates some 95% of Jews in Jesus' time. This was primarily an oral society; the only Jews who could read and write were the Pharisees, the priests, and the scribes and Jesus was none of these things. He had no education, except insofar as being educated in his trade.

Despite the fact that I just described what nowadays we would refer to as a country bumpkin, he had this sort of charisma, this sort of clever ability to innovate the religious teachings that he would hear from the Pharisees, from the rabbis, from the scribes into something utterly new and utterly unique. Despite this position in his life, he founded a movement on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, the weak, and the dispossessed. People like him. A movement that was seen as such a threat to the stability of the Roman Empire that he was hunted down like a criminal, arrested, tortured, and executed for the crime of sedition.

Let me unpack that just for one minute, because I've said it twice now. I want to emphasize what I mean when I say "executed for states crimes or for sedition." That's the only crime that you could be crucified for. Crucifixion was not a willy-nilly punishment in Rome. In fact, it wasn't even a capital punishment. The purpose of crucifixion wasn't to kill a criminal; the purpose of crucifixion was to act as a deterrent against rebellion. The only crimes under Roman law in which a non-Roman citizen (Roman citizens couldn't be crucified) could be crucified was for rebellion, insurrection, sedition, and treason. Now, before I get this in the question part, people sometimes will say, "Wait, I thought there were thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus?" No, there weren't. The Greek word "lesti," which is what's used in the gospels to refer to the two gentlemen, who were crucified alongside Jesus, doesn't mean "thieves," it means "bandit." In Jesus' time, bandit was the most common term that Rome used for an insurrectionist. Indeed, Jesus is repeatedly called "the bandit" in the gospels. When you think of Jesus on the cross, I don't want you to think of Jesus being crucified alongside two thieves, I want you to think of three bandits being crucified near each other, because that's the only thing you could be crucified for.

That little biography of this man I think is phenomenal. It's funny, I get a lot of criticisms for this book as you can imagine, but the one criticism that I don't understand is when people say, "Oh, but well, by politicizing Jesus, and by making him human, you've taken

away what's extraordinary and special about his story." I don't understand that at all. The story that I just told you, imagine I told you that story about a guy named Fred. Would you not want to know Fred? I would think that Fred sounds like the most interesting man in the world and for me; the humanity of Jesus makes him so much more extraordinary, so much more remarkable, so much more worth knowing, and indeed worth following, than the sort of theology about Jesus.

TM: I guess the concern of some people is that by demystifying this man you subtract from the religiosity. I can see how people would say that.

RA: Yes, and I understand that. But I have to remind people that, as we were talking in our student section early on, the foundation of Christianity, the absolute central pillar of Christianity is that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. That he is both of these things.

Now, I don't want to talk for the people in this room. But I used to be a Christian, and I can tell you from personal experience that I could never reconcile that idea. I get it that it's supposed to be a mystery, please don't email me, I get it. But what I mean to say is this: that, for me, the "God" part of Jesus' identity always subsumed the "man" part. It became impossible to think of Jesus as suffering, or cold, or anxious, or scared, or any of these human emotions that a person would have, because in the back of my mind, I would think, "Yeah, but he's God, so..." The metaphor that I often use is that it's sort of like watching a tightrope walker with a net. Who cares? What's the big deal? So he falls, so what, there's a net underneath him. There's no reason to be invested in it. What I'm trying to say with this book, is that whatever else you believe about Jesus, whether you believe he's the Messiah or the son of God or indeed God incarnate, you believe that he was also a man. And if that's truly what you believe, you have to face the consequences of that belief. What are the consequences of that belief? That he lived in a very specific time in place, that his teachings were addressed to very specific social ills, that his actions were a response to very specific political and religious powers of his time, that he was whatever else he was, a product of his world. So if you want to know who he was, over and above any kind of theological claims you have about him, you need to know about the world in which he lived because that world shaped him.

TM: I have one more question and then I want to open it up to the audience. Treating Jesus as a historical figure who came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as his triumphal entry, obviously his followers thought great things. Here was the Messiah who'd arrived. Within a week, he's dead. And it appears that he's failed. In fact, the first gospel, Mark, isn't written for another 40 years. So, what happened? He's now the biggest historical creation of western civilization. Explain how Jesus went from a failed Messiah to the Christ?

RA: It's a very good question. First let me say something about that whole triumphal entry. What's fascinating about Jesus is that he had a very brief ministry. The ministry itself is less than three years. All but five days of those three years he spent in Galilee. And not just in Galilee, he spent it in tiny, poor, insignificant villages in the Galilee. For almost that entire three year mission except for those last five days. And then, at one point, for some reason, he basically tells his followers: let's go to Jerusalem and die. That's what he says.

Now, a person of faith would say that is because that was the plan of God of all along. And that is a perfectly good answer. But if you want to think of Jesus as a human being making human decisions, it's a stumbling block. There's this moment in which Jesus says, let's go die. And he walks in to Jerusalem begging the Romans to kill him. He enters claiming to be the king. He takes part in this dramatic violence, an act of treason, in his cleansing of the temple. And almost immediately, he's arrested, tortured, and executed. It's hard to imagine that he thought anything else would have happened. Why? Again, the faith answer is a very good answer, but the human answer, to me, is so much deeper, the notion that he truly chose to sacrifice himself as a means of amplifying his message. All you can say is that it worked, in a way.

But here's the problem. There is this one stumbling block. That is, that in the 1st century, if you say you are the Messiah you mean something very, very specific. What you mean is that you are descendent of King David, you are here to reestablish David's kingdom on earth and to usher in the reign of God. Jesus wasn't the only person who said he was the Messiah. I write about another dozen or so Messiahs that said they were the Messiah. Many of them were in their lifetimes far more popular, far more successful than Jesus was. But they all meant the same thing. The term "I am the Messiah" is universally understood by the Jews of Jesus' time to mean that you are descendent of King David, you are here to reestablish David's kingdom. If you say you're the Messiah, and you die without reestablishing the Kingdom of David, guess what? You're not the Messiah. It's as simple as that. And indeed, all the other Messiahs who made that claim and were killed by Rome were considered failed Messiahs. They are no longer the Messiah; their disciples (those who survived) simply just went home. But Jesus' disciples did not. They stuck around. Buoyed by this ecstatic experience of him as risen again, and you can define that however you want to define that, the fact of the matter is that the resurrection is by definition an ahistorical phenomenon. A historian has no business talking about the resurrection. But what is an undeniable fact, is that very, very soon after Jesus' death, within a decade, belief in him as risen from the dead was the foundation of this new movement. It was a very early belief. And that's a fact. And then you can go ahead and define that however you want to define it. Buoyed by that experience, by that belief, these disciples decided not to abandon the cause. Confronted with this uncomfortable fact that by the definition of Messiah, Jesus was the Messiah, they simply changed the definition and made the Messiah something else. They made

the Messiah a spiritual figure, not an earthly figure. They made the Messiah's kingdom a heavenly kingdom, not an earthly kingdom. They de-Judified the very concept. In doing so, they had a very difficult time preaching this new message to other Jews. What every historian of early Christianity agrees about is how unpopular this movement was after Jesus' death among Jews, certainly among so-called Palestinian Jews as opposed to the Jews in the Diaspora. But it wasn't that unpopular among non-Jews. Greeks, Romans, Syrians, Arabs; these groups had a much easier time accepting this notion because they didn't have any baggage, anything to define it by.

And so, within 40 years, by the time the first gospel is written, the first gospel of Mark, this is no longer a Jewish movement. It is now unquestionably a Roman movement. It's for Romans; they don't even bother preaching it to Jews anymore. The gospels are not for Jews; the gospels are writing about a Jew, but they are not for Jews. They're written in Greek, not in Hebrew, not in Aramaic! If anyone in this room who has read the gospels has noticed, over and over again the gospels constantly explain Jewish things. Why are they explaining this? Why are they telling us that it's custom among the Jews that eight days later they go to the temple and they name their child? That's because this is not meant for Jews, that's why! We're talking 40 years, four decades, and this is no longer a Jewish movement. And now, what we understand to be Christianity starts to arise.

TM: Let's get some questions from the audience.

Audience: Did you read the other book about the historical Jesus, O'Reilly's book "Killing Jesus," which is frequently touted as the number one New York Times bestseller, and what did you think about it?

RA: Yes, "Killing Jesus," which apparently is not a manual. I have not read Bill O'Reilly's book so I can't really talk about it in any sort of intelligent way. I will say that the main difference between my book on Jesus and Bill O'Reilly's book on Jesus is that I wrote my book.

I have friends who have read it, and I've read reviews of it. I understand basically he's turned Jesus into a member of the Tea Party. Because it's all about taxes as far as he's concerned. That Jesus was upset about the high cost of taxes, which actually is true, and government interference and that's why he rebelled and that's why he was killed. That's fine. I will say this though. What fascinates me is the way that the political Right in this country has absorbed Jesus and made Jesus their own icon. The Jesus of history is a Middle Eastern Jew who advocated for free healthcare and fed the poor. That's the nightmare of Bill O'Reilly! That's the exact opposite of everything Bill O'Reilly thinks.

Audience: Aside from the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and of course the writings of St. Paul, the letters, the epistles and all that, did you refer to the scrolls of Chenoboskion and Nag Hamati and of course all the other gospels that were afloat? How much did you look to them when researching?

RA: As many of you probably know, we are familiar with the four canonized gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but we know that there were dozens and dozens of other gospels. We now have copies of them thanks to a find in 1945, in a village in Upper Egypt called Nag Hamati, we now have access to an entire canon of extra-canonical gospels including the gospel of Philip and the gospel of Thomas, the gospel of Mary Magdalene, etc. These are sometimes referred to as the Gnostic Gospels, and some of them are Gnostic, but that's a strange term to use for the entire library. Many of these gospels were written in the 2nd and 3rd centuries with the possible exception of the gospel of Thomas. There's reason to believe that the gospel of Thomas is a very early one.

Let's put things in perspective for a moment. We already said the gospel of Mark was written sometime around 70 A.D., so Jesus was born around 4 B.C. He dies sometime in the early 30s. Paul starts writing in the early 50s, so the first person to ever write about Jesus is Paul, but that's problematic because of two reasons. One, because Paul never met Jesus, never knew Jesus, never spoke to Jesus. Two, because Paul never actually says anything about Jesus. Paul never quotes Jesus; he never says anything that Jesus did, except of course for the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection, but those are creedal formulas for Paul, they're not historical events. Paul has no interest in the historical Jesus; his interest is in the celestial Christ.

The first gospel, the gospel of Mark is written around 70 or 71. The gospels of Matthew and Luke are written almost simultaneously sometime between 90 and 100, unbeknownst to each other, but around the same time. And then the gospel of John is written sometime between 100 and 120 A.D. I would say the most common dating for the gospel of Thomas is between 120 and 150 A.D. That's pretty close.

The rest of them however are written in the later 2nd and 3rd centuries. They provide an incredible insight into the enormous diversity of Christianity. When we read these other gospels, what we realize is that there is no such thing as Christianity. There were maybe two or three dozen Christianities. There were dozens of different ways in which people thought of Jesus and who he was and what he did. Of course, in the 4th century when Rome becomes Christian, and now its time to create a canon, and one Orthodox version of Christianity, all of these other Christianities become outlawed and their texts are all destroyed. Thank god, some monk in the 4th century had the wherewithal to collect all of these and shove them in a cave for us to find 1,500 to 1,600 years later. These are enormously interesting; they are enormously helpful in telling us about Christianity.

They don't tell us anything about the historical Jesus, because they are 200 years removed from the historical Jesus. To be perfectly frank, neither does the gospel of John. I don't use the gospel of John. The vast majority of Jesus scholars ignore John because it's just too late. Really, to be honest, many of them also ignore Matthew and Luke. There is a strain within Matthew and Luke called "Q" (it's a long story) that people use, but really, what we rely on mostly is Mark, the first gospel because it's the earliest gospel. Does that necessarily make it more historically accurate? No! But we have to create some limits, we have to think of something that would make us more reliant on something, and the best thing that we can think of is earliest. Earliest gets most weight.

Audience: Could you talk about Jesus the exorcist?

RA: We brought that up and we just dropped it, didn't we? It's really interesting, and hard for the modern mind to wrap itself around. We have more evidence of Jesus as a miracle worker/exorcist than we have evidence of anything else about him, including his birth and death. Let me emphasize what I mean here. I don't mean to say that we have evidence of Jesus' miracles; we don't have evidence of his individual miracles. What I mean to say is that the one thing that everybody agreed upon, his detractors and his followers, his enemies and his friends, the early Christian community and the pagan and Jewish apologists that wrote against it: the one thing that everybody takes for granted is that he was an exorcist and a miracle worker. No one ever doubts that, no one ever questions it. The people who wrote against Jesus didn't say "Oh, he was a charlatan." They said he was an exorcist and a miracle worker, but he wasn't God.

The reason for this is that Jesus lived in a world that was steeped in magic and miracle. He certainly wasn't the only traveling exorcist. In fact, one thing that's really interesting is that this is a land that was teeming with traveling miracle workers and exorcists. Indeed, it was a pretty well-paid position. It was an actual profession, it was your job: this guy's a tekton, this guy's an exorcist. These guys would walk from village to village. Bear in mind that in Jesus' time illness was understood as a manifestation of demon possession. If you're sick, you're sick because you have a demon. Whether that causes leprosy, or blindness, or epilepsy, it's all the same. These two were fluid categories. But this was a well-paid profession! People walked around making a very good living healing people and exorcising demons out of people. That's not what is interesting or unique about Jesus; in our mind it is, in our mind what makes Jesus unique is that he did these miracles. Not really, there were a lot of people walking around, we know their names, and some of them were way more famous than Jesus.

What set Jesus apart from the rest was that he was doing it for free. This was unprecedented - the idea that you were just giving these things out! Let me explain what I mean. Those of you familiar with the gospel stories know what happens. Every time Jesus goes into a city or a town, this mass of poor, sick people come up to him to

get healed. We think, from our vantage point 2,000 years later, that this mass of poor, sick people were coming to him to get healed because they were sick. No, no, no. They were coming to him to get healed because they were poor! And they couldn't afford to be healed by the exorcist who charged. That's what set Jesus apart. In fact, he says repeatedly in the gospels, and he actually commands his disciples this way too, he says this is a gift that God has given to you so you give it out for free. And that was...unheard of, the fact that Jesus was just giving this out. What's even more interesting is that there was a message behind it. That it wasn't just that Jesus was saying, "Hey, here's a free exorcism!" What he was saying was that this free exorcism is a sign of the Kingdom of God. In other words, this new world order that Jesus was envisioning, that he was preaching, that he referred to as the Kingdom of God, that this new order was one in which healing was free. In which being liberated from demons was free, that you don't have to pay for those kinds of things. That was absolutely revolutionary in his time.

Audience: You've touched on a lot of it, but I don't understand how the religious community believes that Jesus did all the things, like raising someone from the dead. It's in the gospels, and I don't see that because it's in the gospels that it means it's true. It may not be. Probably not. The miracles that set Jesus apart and probably gave him certain power were things that no one else has been able to do. And even though there are some people who have been written about, who have done miracles, by and large they weren't as accepted as those of Jesus. So did he actually do those miracles?

RA: Well, see again, that's not the question that a historian is allowed to answer. That is a question of faith. What a historian can tell you is that this was the claim. That he wasn't the only one doing these things. And by the way, there are still people walking around in tent revivals, healing people and making them walk and all that stuff. You can watch it late at night on TV if you want to. I don't know how to describe the context of a world in which magic and miracle are a part of every day life. That's just the world in which Jesus lived. A person of faith would say that is the providence of God, that that is the hand of God at work. A person without faith would say this is mass psychosis, that it's just a communal placebo effect that was being seen. I think both of those are pretty good answers, I don't know which one is right. I believe in God, so obviously I'm open to some pretty crazy and absurd possibilities.

But I will say this: that to your earlier question: I think the best skill that we can learn is how to read the gospels. We come from a world in the 21st century in which we assume that Biblical literalism, the notion that the Bible is literal and inerrant, is just sort of an inherent part of belief in the Bible. It isn't. The concept of Biblical literalism in the 2,000 year history of the New Testament is a little more than 100 years old. Let me just say that one more time: in the 2,000 year history in which the gospels have existed, the idea that what you are reading in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is literal and inerrant is a little more than 100 years old. It was the result of a very interesting movement, a

backlash to Christian liberalism and the Scientific Revolution at the end of the 19th century by a group of American Protestants who began a movement that was launched by a series of tracts that were written called “The Fundamentals” and that is where we get the term “fundamentalism” from. It’s a very new phenomenon. That’s not how Christians have historically read the gospels. It’s certainly not how the Church fathers who collected the gospels read them, and it’s absolutely not how the gospel writers themselves intended them to be read. I go through great lengths in the book to explain what I mean by that.

I’ll put it in the simplest way possible: the gospels are absolutely replete with historical errors and with contradictions. The gospel of Matthew says that Jesus was born in 4 B.C. The gospel of Luke says Jesus was born in 6 A.D. That’s ten years difference! Which one was right? Now, let me ask you a much more important question than which one is right: do you think that the Church fathers who in the 4th century decided to put both Matthew and Luke in the canonized New Testament didn’t bother to read them first? They didn’t notice that they have different dates for Jesus’ birth? They didn’t notice that the gospel of John absolutely contradicts the entire timeline of Matthew, Mark, and Luke? They didn’t notice that there are two completely different genealogies for Jesus in Matthew and Luke? Of course they did! They didn’t care, because at no point did they ever think that what they were reading was literally true! They would not even know what you mean when you use the word “history.” The word “history” as defined as an accumulation of empirically verifiable facts and events is wholly a product of the modern world. That definition of history, that everyone in this room shares, is barely 300 years old. For the ancient mind, history had very little to do with facts. It had everything to do with truth, which we, as products of the Scientific Revolution, think are the same thing. We think that truth and fact mean the same thing. Indeed, science tells us, “that which is true is that which can be factually verified.” But that’s not what the ancient mind thought. They were not as interested in the facts of Jesus’ life as they were in the truth revealed by Jesus’ life. When they constructed these stories about Jesus, and I mean that quite literally, they constructed these stories. If you asked them, “Did this really happen?” they wouldn’t even understand the question! What do you mean did this really happen? You’re missing the point! The point isn’t “Are these facts true?” the point is: what does this story reveal about the nature of who Jesus is. It’s an incredibly difficult thing for us to understand, but it is the key to understanding how to read the New Testament, how to read the gospels, and indeed how to read all scriptures in sacred histories.

TM: We have a Bishop from the Greek Orthodox Church, he gets the last question.

Audience: Why would you, Dr. Aslan, begin by saying we know so very little about Jesus? We know he was Jewish, we know that he was arrested by the Romans, we know that he was killed by the Romans for sedition or treason, that’s all – and then you spent

the last hour telling us about Jesus based on the gospel narratives. It's like O'Reilly's book, because you politicized it, you did the same thing. You said this is not a theological thing, and then if you look at it he only picked and chose those things that made his point. And with all due respect, I think you did the same thing. Why would you, for example, say that scholars only use the gospel of Mark as a way to see the truth when Mark never knew Jesus, he never experienced Jesus, he was a disciple and associate of Paul twenty years later, and he has credibility and he was not even one of the apostles. Mark is an evangelist, but he was not Matthew, Luke, and John, who were actual apostles of Jesus. Why did you come to this with a preexistent agenda? Which I think some of us have sniffed out with some of your political things about free healthcare which I think is inappropriate for a serious scholar like you to bring into a connection with Jesus believing in free healthcare and feeding the poor and all that taking it out of context because he also said the poor: you should always have with you, you will not always have me. This social justice thing, you're taking things out of context. I look forward to reading a book by you about Mohammed. God bless you.

RA: I did write a book about the historical Mohammed. It was a massive bestseller, thank you and it's for sale outside. Those are very, very good questions and I do want to answer them. First of all, this goes back to where we started. Everything about Jesus except for those three things is speculation. Everything about him. But there are speculations about him that are more based on context, and research, and the history, and there are speculations that are less so. And I think that's a very important thing to talk about. Everything that I've said about Jesus are the "best guess" that we can have about him based less on anything that we know about Jesus, because we know very little about Jesus, but more about what we know about the world in which he lived. So, for instance, if he is, as I said, a Nazarene, if he is a tekton, if he is crucified, those things mean something when put into the context of his time and place. Now this issue of picking and choosing is a criticism that I hear a lot. And to be perfectly frank, there's quite an enormous difference between Bill O'Reilly and me: I actually have spent a good many decades studying this stuff, and Bill O'Reilly is a journalist. This is a very important thing: I am not picking and choosing things that I like from the gospels. I understand how someone not steeped in scriptural acts of Jesus would think that – well why are you ignoring this verse and accepting this verse? The truth of the matter is that 200 years of scriptural acts of Jesus and the quest for the historical Jesus has created the methodological tools necessary for us, as scholars, to have a pretty good sense of what in the gospels can be relied upon as more historically accurate and what cannot be. Now, those methodological tools are long complex, I can tell you a bunch of them, for instance, one of the tools that we use is called multiple attestations. So, for instance, if an event or a story or a quote of Jesus is found in all gospels, it is more likely to be historically accurate than if it's found in only one gospel. On the flip side of that, if something that Jesus says or does tends to stand out like a sore thumb, tends to actually

be in contradiction to the rest of the gospel, its more likely to be historically accurate than not. There are a whole host of tools, as I say, that scholars use.

Now these tools have been developed over the last two centuries and what they've created (they quite famously came to a pinnacle in something called the Jesus Seminar – this was an attempt in the 1970s and 1980s to bring all Biblical scholars together and come up with a color-coded version of the gospels that indicated the consensus on what is most likely something that's historical all the way to least-likely historical). Now, that is not to say that there is not still disagreement. There is, there is still a great deal of disagreement on particular verses or particular issues. But, for the most part there is a sense of unanimity among scholars about, at the very least, the methodology that's in place to decide what we can rely upon and what we can't. One of those key methodological means is timing. So as I said before, the gospel of John, which has a completely different chronology than the Synoptics, which was written way, way before John. The gospel of John begins with a clear and present statement that what you are reading has nothing to do with Jesus: "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and God was the word." This, right away, from Verse 1, you know that John is talking about something else entirely. The Synoptics never call Jesus God. Only in John does Jesus say that "I am the Father, I am God." So by the time you get to that, as a scholar, you know that this is stuff that I can't take very seriously.

What we do, primarily, is we use Mark, which you are absolutely right Father, is also not a very reliable text because it is not an eyewitness account of Jesus' actions, words, and deeds; it is a theological statement of faith. In other words, what I mean to say is that the gospels are not historical documents, they are theological arguments. The gospel writers already believed something about Jesus and they wrote their gospels to prove that belief, not to lay out the things that Jesus said or did, but to make an argument about who he was. And to your point, by the way, nobody who ever wrote a single word about Jesus that we have, ever met him. Nobody. Paul never met him; Mark never met him; Matthew was not written by Matthew, it was written by Matthew's community; John was not written by John, it was written by John's community. The apostles, like Jesus, were illiterate peasants. They could not read or write and they were long dead by the time the gospels were written. That's another thing that we have to remember as scholars that these are documents of faith they're theological arguments written by people who never met Jesus. This is the second generation of Christians, but we can still use them. That doesn't mean that they are useless; that we should toss them aside we can still use them. We can still go through them and tease out little bits of history, but to do that we have to constantly analyze those claims according to what we know of the history of the time.

For instance when the gospel of Luke says that in the year 6 A.D. the governor of Syria, Quirinius, decided to launch a census of the entire Roman Empire and this census forced

all subject peoples to uproot themselves from the cities in which they lived and travel to the of the cities of their forefathers, the cities of their father's birth in order to be counted and Jesus, therefore, Jesus' family left Nazareth and went to Bethlehem, where Joseph is from, and as they were waiting to be counted, Mary gave birth to Jesus. Well we know that that is just not true, it's just absolutely false. We know everything there is to know about Roman taxation law. As you can imagine, the Romans were pretty good about writing those things down when it comes to taxes. We know for a fact that yes, there was a census in the year 6 A.D. but it wasn't of the entire roman world, in fact it wasn't even of Galilee it was just of Judea, Perea, and Idumea so it wouldn't have had anything to do with Jesus at all and it any case in every document ever written about Roman taxation law there is no mention ever of this absurd idea that every once in a while every subject citizen of the largest empire the world had ever known would have to uproot himself and his family travel great distances to another city an wait for weeks to a Roman official to count him and his property which would've left back in the place of his home anyway. I mean that would've brought the entire Roman economy to a collapse, it never happened. So, we can say this is not historically accurate. It is not historically accurate because we know about the history of the time and this doesn't fit.

So there is a way to do this there is a way to tease historical information from the gospels but it begins with an acknowledgement that the gospels are not history, they are not a biography of Jesus, they are not even about Jesus; they are about the Christ. They are an argument made by people who already believe that Jesus was God, about why he was God. They are about who Jesus was, not what Jesus did.