Folks: Those of you who profess to be Christians: Do you really know who he was in real life?

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Excerpt from: *Zealot: The Life And Times Of Jesus Of Nazareth*

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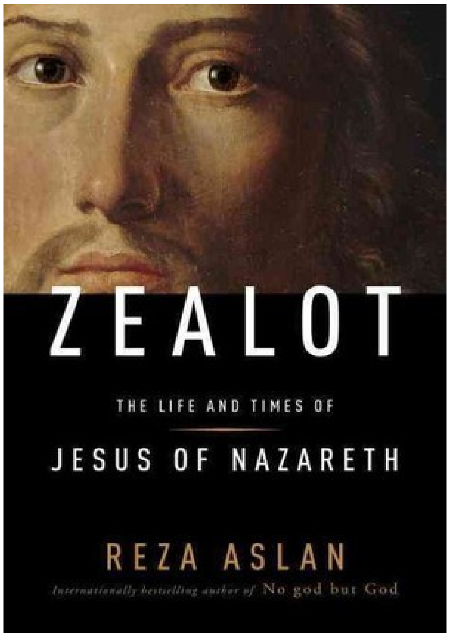
Introduction

It is a miracle that we know anything at all about the man called Jesus of Nazareth. The itinerant preacher wandering from village to village clamoring about the end of the world, a band of ragged followers trailing behind, was a common a sight in Jesus' time — so common, in fact, that it had become a kind of caricature among the Roman elite. In a farcical passage about just such a figure, the Greek philosopher Celsus imagines a Jewish holy man roaming the Galilean countryside, shouting to no one in particular: "I am God, or the servant of God, or a divine spirit. But I am coming, for the world is already in the throes of destruction. And you will soon see me coming with the power of heaven."



The first century was an era of apocalyptic expectation among the Jews of Palestine, the Roman designation for the vast tract of land encompassing modern day Israel/Palestine as well as large parts of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Countless prophets, preachers, and messiahs tramped through the Holy Land delivering messages of God's imminent judgment. Many of these so-called "false messiahs" we know by name. A few are even mentioned in the New Testament. The prophet Theudas, according to the book of Acts, had four hundred disciples before Rome captured him and cut off his head. A mysterious charismatic figure known only as "The Egyptian" raised an army of followers in the desert, nearly all of whom were massacred by Roman troops. In 4 b.c.e., the year in which most scholars believe Jesus of Nazareth was born, a poor shepherd named Athronges put a diadem on his head and crowned himself "King of the Jews"; he and his followers were brutally cut down by a legion of soldiers. Another messianic aspirant, called simply "The Samaritan," was crucified by Pontius Pilate even though he raised no army and in no way challenged Rome — an indication that the authorities, sensing the apocalyptic fever in the air, had become extremely sensitive to any hint of sedition. There was Hezekiah the bandit chief, Simon of Peraea, Judas the Galilean, his grandson Menahem, Simon son of Giora, and Simon son of Kochba — all of whom declared messianic ambitions and all of whom were executed by Rome for doing so. Add to this list the Essene sect, some of whose members lived in seclusion atop the dry plateau of Qumran on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea; the first-century Jewish revolutionary party known as the Zealots, who helped launched a bloody war against Rome; and the fearsome bandit-assassins whom the Romans dubbed the Sicarii (the Daggermen), and the picture that emerges of first-century Palestine is of an era awash in messianic energy.

It is difficult to place Jesus of Nazareth squarely within any of the known religiopolitical movements of his time. He was a man of profound contradictions, one day preaching a message of racial exclusion ("I was sent solely to the lost sheep of Israel"; Matthew 15:24), the next, of benevolent universalism ("Go and make disciples of all nations"; Matthew 28:19); sometimes calling for unconditional peace ("Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God"; Matthew 5:9), sometimes promoting violence and conflict ("If you do not have a sword, go sell your cloak and buy one"; Luke 22:36).

The problem with pinning down the historical Jesus is that, outside of the New Testament, there is almost no trace of the man who would so permanently alter the course of human history. The earliest and most reliable nonbiblical reference to Jesus comes from the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (d. 100 c.e.). In a brief throwaway passage in the Antiquities, Josephus writes of a fiendish Jewish high priest named Ananus who, after the death of the Roman governor Festus, unlawfully condemned a certain "James, the brother of Jesus, the one they call messiah," to stoning for transgression of the law. The passage moves on to relate what happened to Ananus after the new governor, Albinus, finally arrived in Jerusalem.

Fleeting and dismissive as this allusion may be (the phrase "the one they call messiah" is clearly meant to express derision), it nevertheless contains enormous significance for those searching for any sign of the historical Jesus. In a society without surnames, a common name like James required a specific appellation — a place of birth or a father's name — to distinguish it from all the other men named James roaming around Palestine (hence, Jesus of Nazareth). In this case, James' appellative was provided by his fraternal connection to someone with whom Josephus assumes his audience would be familiar. The passage proves not only that "Jesus, the one they call messiah" probably existed, but that by the year 94 c.e., when the Antiquities was written, he was widely recognized as the founder of a new and enduring movement.

It is that movement, not its founder, that receives the attention of second-century historians like Tacitus (d. 118) and Pliny the Younger (d. 113), both of whom mention Jesus of Nazareth but reveal little about him, save for his arrest and execution — an important historical note, as we shall see, but one that sheds little light on the details of Jesus' life. We are therefore left with whatever information can be gleaned from the New Testament.

The first written testimony we have about Jesus of Nazareth comes from the epistles of Paul, an early follower of Jesus who died sometime around 66 c.e. (Paul's first epistle, 1 Thessalonians, can be dated between 48 and 50 c.e., some two decades after Jesus' death). The trouble with Paul, however, is that he displays an extraordinary lack of interest in the historical Jesus. Only three scenes from Jesus' life are ever mentioned in his epistles: the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23–26), the crucifixion (1 Corinthians 2:2), and, most crucially for Paul, the resurrection, without which, he claims, "our preaching is empty and your faith is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). Paul may be an excellent source for those interested in the early formation of Christianity, but he is a poor guide for uncovering the historical Jesus.

That leaves us with the gospels, which present their own set of problems. First of all, one must recognize that, with the possible exception of the gospel of Luke, none of the gospels we have were written by the person after whom they are named. That is true of most of the books in the New Testament. Such so-called pseudepigraphical works, or works attributed to but not written by a specific author, were extremely common in the ancient world and should by no means be thought of as forgeries. Naming a book after a person was a standard way of reflecting that person's beliefs or representing his or her school of thought. Regardless, the gospels are not, nor were they ever meant to be, a historical documentation of Jesus' life. These are not eyewitness accounts of Jesus' words and deeds. They are testimonies of faith composed by communities of faith written many years after the events they describe. Simply put, the gospels tell us about Jesus the Christ, not Jesus the man.

The most widely accepted theory on the formation of the gospels, "the Two-Source Theory," holds that Mark's account was written first sometime after 70 c.e., some four decades after Jesus' death. Mark had at his disposal a collection of oral and perhaps a handful of written traditions that had been passed around by Jesus' earliest followers for years. By adding a chronological narrative to this jumble of traditions, Mark created a wholly new literary genre called gospel, Greek for "good news." Yet Mark's gospel is a short and somewhat unsatisfying one for many Christians. There is no infancy narrative; Jesus simply arrives one day on the banks of the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. There are no resurrection appearances. Jesus is crucified. His body is placed in a tomb. A few days later, the tomb is empty. Even the earliest Christians were left wanting by Mark's brusque account of Jesus' life and ministry, and so it was left to Mark's successors, Matthew and Luke, to improve upon the original text.

Two decades after Mark, between 90 and 100 c.e., the authors of Matthew and Luke, working independently of each other and with Mark's manuscript as a template, updated the gospel story by adding their own unique traditions, including two different and conflicting infancy narratives as well as a series of elaborate resurrection stories to satisfy their Christian readers. Matthew and Luke also relied on what must have been an early and fairly well distributed collection of Jesus' sayings that scholars have termed Q (German for Quelle, or "source"). Although we no longer have any physical copies of this document, we can infer its contents by compiling those verses that Matthew and Luke share in common but that do not appear in Mark.

Together, these three gospels — Mark, Matthew, and Luke — became known as the Synoptics (Greek for "viewed together") because they more or less present a common narrative and chronology about the life and ministry of Jesus, one that is greatly at odds with the fourth gospel, John, which was likely written soon after the close of the first century, between 100 and 120 c.e.

These, then, are the canonized gospels. But they are not the only gospels. We now have access to an entire library of noncanonical scriptures written mostly in the second and third centuries that provides a vastly different perspective on the life of Jesus of Nazareth. These include the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Secret Book of John, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, and a host of other so-called "Gnostic writings" discovered in Upper Egypt, near the town of Nag Hammadi, in 1945. Though they were left out of what would ultimately become the New Testament, these books are significant in that they demonstrate the dramatic divergence of opinion that existed over who Jesus was and what Jesus meant, even among those who walked with him, who shared his bread and ate with him, who heard his words and prayed with him.

In the end, there are only two hard historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth upon which we can confidently rely: the first is that Jesus was a Jew who led a popular Jewish movement in Palestine at the beginning of the first century c.e.; the second is that Rome crucified him for doing so. By themselves these two facts cannot provide a complete portrait of the life of a man who lived two thousand years ago. But when combined with all we know about the tumultuous era in which Jesus lived — and thanks to the Romans, we know a great deal — these two facts can help paint a picture of Jesus of Nazareth that may be more historically accurate than the one painted by the gospels. Indeed, the Jesus that emerges from this historical exercise — a zealous revolutionary swept up, as all Jews of the era were, in the religious and political turmoil of first-century Palestine — bears little resemblance to the image of the gentle shepherd cultivated by the early Christian community.

Consider this: Crucifixion was a punishment that Rome reserved almost exclusively for the crime of sedition. The plaque the Romans placed above Jesus' head as he writhed in pain — "King of the Jews" — was called a titulus and, despite common perception, was not meant to be sarcastic. Every criminal who hung on a cross received a plaque declaring the specific crime for which he was being executed. Jesus' crime, in the eyes of Rome, was striving for kingly rule (i.e. treason), the same crime for which nearly every other messianic aspirant of the time was killed. Nor did Jesus die alone. The gospels claim that on either side of Jesus hung men who in Greek are called lestai, a word often rendered into English as "thieves" but that actually means "bandits" and was the most common Roman designation for an insurrectionist or rebel.

Three rebels on a hill covered in crosses, each cross bearing the racked and bloodied body of a man who dared defy the will of Rome. That image alone should cast doubt upon the gospels' portrayal of Jesus as a man of unconditional peace almost wholly insulated from the political upheavals of his time. The notion that the leader of a popular messianic movement calling for the imposition of the "Kingdom of God" — a term that would have been understood by Jew and gentile alike as implying revolt against Rome — could have remained uninvolved in the revolutionary fervor that had gripped nearly every Jew in Judea is simply ridiculous.

Why would the gospel writers go to such lengths to temper the revolutionary nature of Jesus' message and movement? To answer this question we must first recognize that almost every gospel story written about the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth was composed after the Jewish rebellion against Rome in 66 c.e. In that year, a band of Jewish rebels, spurred by their zeal for God, roused their fellow Jews in revolt. Miraculously, the rebels managed to liberate the Holy Land from the Roman occupation. For four glorious years, the city of God was once again under Jewish control. Then, in 70 c.e., the Romans returned. After a brief siege of Jerusalem, the soldiers breached the city walls and unleashed an orgy of violence upon its residents. They butchered everyone in their path, heaping corpses on the Temple Mount. A river of blood flowed down the cobblestone streets. When the massacre was complete, the soldiers set fire to the Temple of God. The fires spread beyond the Temple Mount, engulfing Jerusalem's meadows, the farms, the olive trees. Everything burned. So complete was the devastation wrought upon the holy city that Josephus writes there was nothing left to prove Jerusalem had ever been inhabited. Tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered. The rest were marched out of the city in chains.

The spiritual trauma faced by the Jews in the wake of that catastrophic event is hard to imagine. Exiled from the land promised them by God, forced to live as outcasts among the pagans of the Roman Empire, the rabbis of the second century gradually and deliberately divorced Judaism from the radical messianic nationalism that had launched the ill-fated war with Rome. The Torah replaced the Temple in the center of Jewish life, and rabbinic Judaism emerged.

The Christians, too, felt the need to distance themselves from the revolutionary zeal that had led to the sacking of Jerusalem, not only because it allowed the early church to ward off the wrath of a deeply vengeful Rome, but also because, with the Jewish religion having become pariah, the Romans had become the primary target of the church's evangelism. Thus began the long process of transforming Jesus from a revolutionary Jewish nationalist into a peaceful spiritual leader with no interest in any earthly matter. That was a Jesus the Romans could accept, and in fact did accept three centuries later when the Roman emperor Flavius Theodosius (d. 395) made the itinerant Jewish preacher's movement the official religion of the state, and what we now recognize as orthodox Christianity was born.

This book is an attempt to reclaim, as much as possible, the Jesus of history, the Jesus before Christianity: the politically conscious Jewish revolutionary who, two thousand years ago, walked across the Galilean countryside, gathering followers for a messianic movement with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God but whose mission failed when, after a provocative entry into Jerusalem and a brazen attack on the Temple, he was arrested and executed by Rome for the crime of sedition. It is also about how, in the aftermath of Jesus' failure to establish God's reign on earth, his followers reinterpreted not only Jesus' mission and identity, but also the very nature and definition of the Jewish messiah.

There are those who consider such an endeavor to be a waste of time, believing the Jesus of history to be irrevocably lost and incapable of recovery. Long gone are the heady days of "the quest for the historical Jesus," when scholars confidently proclaimed that modern scientific tools and historical research would allow us to uncover Jesus' true identity. The real Jesus no longer matters, these scholars argue. We should focus instead on the only Jesus that is accessible to us: Jesus the Christ.

Granted, writing a biography of Jesus of Nazareth is not like writing a biography of Napoleon Bonaparte. The task is somewhat akin to putting together a massive puzzle with only a few of the pieces in hand; one has no choice but to fill in the rest of the puzzle based on the best, most educated guess of what the completed image should look like. The great Christian theologian Rudolf Bultmann liked to say that the quest for the historical Jesus is ultimately an internal quest. Scholars tend to see the Jesus they want to see. Too often they see themselves — their own reflection — in the image of Jesus they have constructed.

And yet that best, most educated guess may be enough to, at the very least, question our most basic assumptions about Jesus of Nazareth. If we expose the claims of the gospels to the heat of historical analysis, we can purge the scriptures of their literary and theological flourishes and forge a far more accurate picture of the Jesus of history. Indeed, if we commit to placing Jesus firmly within the social, religious, and political context of the era in which he lived — an era marked by the slow burn of a revolt against Rome that would forever transform the faith and practice of Judaism — then, in some ways, his biography writes itself.

The Jesus that is uncovered in the process may not be the Jesus we expect; he certainly will not be the Jesus that most modern Christians would recognize. But in the end, he is the only Jesus that we can access by historical means.

Everything else is a matter of faith.

From *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* by Reza Aslan
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