

Refuting Reza Aslan's 'Zealot - The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth'

by Ralph H. Sidway

But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!

— 2 Cor 11:3-4

What had really happened was the mighty deed of the Redeeming God, his ultimate intervention in the stream of historical events. One should not divorce the "fact" and the "meaning" — both are given in reality.

— Fr Georges Florovsky

The sense that a radical change had taken place in world history and human life was the most basic and outstanding trait of the early Christian community as described in Acts and St. Paul's epistles. — Fr Alexander Schmemmann

The overriding result of modern critical investigation has firmly established that the Jesus of the Gospels belongs to history, not to mythology, and that "the quest for the historical Jesus" gives concrete context to our theological statements and thus does play a useful role in theology. — Veselin Kesich

I. Introduction

The response to Reza Aslan's book [Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth](#), has been pronounced and strong. Any major title which claims to reveal or shed light on the "real" or "historical" Jesus is immediately of interest, and can be quite polarizing. This book makes some radical claims about Jesus Christ which are diametrically opposed to the Orthodox Christian faith, and therefore present a real challenge to us. At the same time, it provides us with a "teachable moment," as we can become better grounded in our own understanding of the "historical Jesus" by doing a little studying and then responding to the claims of this latest bestseller.

There are other Orthodox sources also to be recommended as we tackle this subject. Fr Lawrence Farley has written a very strong essay countering Mr. Aslan's book (originally published at the [OCA website](#)), and there is an outstanding [video of a talk by Fr John Behr](#) from 2012 which actually addresses the claims of the book more than a year before its publication.

For those who long for a more expanded Orthodox text on the “historical Jesus,” I would strongly recommend [The Jesus We Missed](#), by Fr Patrick Henry Reardon (Ancient Faith Publishing). “Reardon travels through the Gospel narratives to discover the real Jesus, to see him through the eyes of those who knew him best—the apostles, his community, believers who vividly portrayed him in stories filtered through their own faith. Through these living, breathing accounts, we contemplate who God’s Son really was and is—and we understand how he came to redeem and sanctify every aspect of every human life.”

To provide further scholarly resources for those interested, I have appended below my essay three pertinent selections from Fr Georges Florovsky, Fr Alexander Schmemmann, and Professor Veselin Kesich, all three of which refute key aspects of Mr. Aslan’s main claims: (1) that the Gospels do not present history; (2) that Jesus saw his movement as a revolutionary one in this world, not in a messianic, spiritual, eschatological sense; and (3) that we cannot trust any of the New Testament sources nor the witness of the early Christian Church in trying to understand who Jesus really was.

I should also note that this has turned into quite a wide-ranging article, with embedded links to yet further resources, covering a good deal of territory, all of which is applicable to Orthodox Christians seeking to defend their faith against the many assaults of modern textual and historical criticism, and the annual “real Jesus” articles published by TIME, CNN and whoever else wants to turn a quick profit around Christmas and Easter.

If nothing else, exploring these questions will give us some solid footing, so that we can better engage with friends and family who may tend to be persuaded by the claims of “modern scholarship,” being unaware of the depth of Orthodoxy’s self-awareness of her own traditions concerning the formation of the New Testament scriptures, and her understanding of the “historical Jesus,” the Word of God, who became incarnate at a specific time and place in order to accomplish, in the vivid words of Fr Georges Florovsky, God’s “ultimate intervention in the stream of historical events.”

It is my hope that this article will prove to be a helpful resource for my brothers and sisters in the building up of our faith.

II. Is *Zealot* a Muslim view of Jesus?

In the mainstream media, a great deal of fuss has been made over Reza Aslan being a Muslim, with some claiming that he has merely put forth the Islamic teaching on Jesus.

In point of fact, although Mr. Aslan is a Muslim, he does not, in his book, present the traditional Islamic teaching on Jesus. For example, the Koran claims Isa (the Islamic name for Jesus) was never crucified (Sura 4:157), whereas Mr. Aslan seems to accept that the crucifixion occurred, based on the testimony of not merely the Gospels, but also the Jewish historian Josephus (late 1st century) and the Roman Tacitus (mid 2nd

century). The Koran presents Jesus not as a revolutionary (Mr. Aslan's theory), but as a Muslim prophet. Mr. Aslan thus has a different purpose in writing his book.

Much has been made of Reza Aslan's Islamic faith, but I think it more pertinent to point out his position as a [Board member of the National Iranian American Council \(NIAC\)](#), which [has been established in court as a lobbying group for the Islamic Republic of Iran](#).

Mr. Aslan's status as a de facto foreign agent for the Shiite extremist regime in Iran is important, for it indicates the likelihood of an agenda behind his book. On the talk shows, he is billed as a historian and scholar, and he is clearly well educated and articulate. But his alignment with Iran is rather troubling, especially as it manifests in his defense of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a [liberal reformer](#), and his open support for the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) and the [terrorist organization Hizballah](#). These allegiances alone should provoke some circumspection regarding the message of his book.

III. A Mistaken View of the Bible

Be that as it may, it is the substance of Aslan's book upon which it stands or falls. From the [publisher's website](#) for *Zealot*, we get the overview:

Two thousand years ago, an itinerant Jewish preacher and miracle worker walked across the Galilee, gathering followers to establish what he called the "Kingdom of God." The revolutionary movement he launched was so threatening to the established order that he was captured, tortured, and executed as a state criminal.

Within decades after his shameful death, his followers would call him God.

Sifting through centuries of mythmaking, Reza Aslan sheds new light on one of history's most influential and enigmatic characters...

Ah, there you have the narrative: Jesus the preacher starts a "revolutionary movement," is executed as a criminal, then *decades later* is exalted by his followers as God, the truth about him subsequently obscured by "centuries of mythmaking." This is familiar modernist fare, yet another effort to reveal the "Jesus of history," who could not possibly be the Jesus of the Gospels.

As I probed Mr. Aslan's book, I found, to my surprise, that Aslan claims to have been, during his youth, a convert to Evangelical Christianity. This may indeed explain somewhat his disillusionment, as he writes in his Author's Note:

The bedrock of evangelical Christianity, at least as it was taught to me, is the unconditional belief that every word of the Bible is God-breathed and true, literal and inerrant.

The sudden realization that this belief is patently and irrefutably false [according to his college studies], that the Bible is replete with the most blatant and obvious errors and contradictions—just as one would expect from a document written by hundreds of hands across thousands of years—left me confused and unmoored. And so, like many people in my situation, I angrily discarded my faith as if it were a costly forgery I had been duped into buying.

This is of course not the correct way to view the Bible, as Orthodox Christians know.

The Scriptures are indeed God-inspired, but they are written by men. As such we believe them to be inerrant as to the *message*, while not requiring them to be literally true in terms of every historical detail. Factual inaccuracies or contradictions do not alarm us, as we understand the Scriptures in terms of the image they present to us. As Fr Georges Florovsky has written (see appended text below for the full context):

The Evangelists and the Apostles were no chroniclers. It was not their mission to keep the full record of all that Jesus had done, day by day, year by year. They describe his life and relate his works, so as to give us his image: an historic, and yet a divine image. It is no portrait, but rather an ikon — but surely an historic ikon, an image of the Incarnate Lord. — Fr Georges Florovsky, [Revelation and Interpretation](#)

Aslan's caricature of the Bible actually represents an *Islamification* of the Scriptures, which turns the Bible into a Christian Koran, a fallacy which Fr Stephen Freeman ably rejects [here](#). (Fr James Bernstein discusses the New Testament and the Church in a related article [here](#).)

Interestingly, after rejecting Christianity, Mr. Aslan at this point in his Author's Note turns back to his ancestral faith: Islam. Good heavens why!

A college scholar should have readily discovered the historical image of Muhammad as portrayed by the canonical Islamic sources to be at the very least alarming and off-putting. A rejected and persecuted preacher, claiming to have direct revelations from God which no other person can possibly verify, flees to a new city, only to re-emerge as a brutal warlord, conducting numerous raids on caravans and larger battles, beheading some 700 Jewish men and boys after one particular victory, taking women as war booty, and marrying a six year old little girl along the way, before returning to his home city with an army of 10,000... This is the religion chosen by a college scholar who rejects Christianity supposedly on historical grounds?

Something doesn't sound quite right here.

Perhaps the implicit message Mr. Aslan seeks to convey to the reader is that Christianity could not withstand the harsh glare of modern scholarship, while Islam can. But the facts already don't support Aslan's developing narrative.

IV. Reza Aslan's Answer to the Christological Question

Mr. Aslan next writes that he has “constructed his narrative” (his very words) of Jesus “the Jewish peasant and revolutionary,” who “became so much more real to me than the detached and unearthly being I had been introduced to in church.” He claims to now be “a more genuinely committed disciple of Jesus of Nazareth than [he] ever was of Jesus Christ.”

This is certainly his right, and indeed, the story of Reza Aslan is simply a modernist answer to the Great Christological Question posed by Jesus to His disciples: “Who do men say that I am?”

Importantly, according to the Gospel accounts, none of the answers the disciples relate indicate people thought Jesus was a revolutionary zealot. It apparently wasn't on their radar screen. “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Mt 16:13-16). But when Jesus asks finally — “But who do *you* say that I am?” — it is Peter who first makes the confession of faith: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Other problems with Aslan's answer to the Great Question immediately surface in his selectively literal approach to the Gospel accounts. He ignores scriptural context, mistaking paradox and pedagogy for contradiction, hyperbole for extremism, claiming (for example) that Jesus taught “racial exclusion” (“I was sent solely to the lost sheep of Israel”; Mt 15:24), even “promoting violence and conflict” (“If you do not have a sword, go sell your cloak and buy one”; Lk 22:36), and so on.

A little exploration of the Church Fathers would shed a great deal of light on the supposedly difficult sayings of Jesus. He seems to reject the Canaanite woman so as to give her the opportunity to prove her faith and persistence, and then immediately heals her daughter. To the disciples' exclamation of “Here are two swords,” Jesus dismisses their misunderstanding with a brusque, “Enough of this!”

Taking Gospel passages out of context in order to knock down their whole witness is not sound scholarship. We can appropriately apply to *Zealot* the visual metaphor St Irenaeus' employed [against the heresies](#) of his day:

They boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures; and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavour to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support.

In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth... Their manner of acting

is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed...

In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavour, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions. — ([Against Heresies, 1.8.1](#))

There is nothing new under the sun: Reza Aslan rearranges the scriptural mosaic (even proudly using his own translation from the Greek), mixing it with other sources, to change the image of Jesus in the Gospels into that of a common revolutionary. Aslan tries to turn the image of the King into that of a dog.

V. Modern Textual and Historical Criticism

As one might expect, Mr. Aslan relies heavily on modern textual and historical criticism in his effort to discredit the Gospels. Even so doing, he employs a considerable amount of creativity in his presentation.

For example, his estimates of the date ranges for the composition of the Gospels are at the far late end of the most extreme modern theories, trying to squeeze the writing of the Gospels to the very tail end of the apostolic era and beyond. He presents Mark as the earliest, but places it after 70 AD and the destruction of Jerusalem, whereas many scholars date Mark before the fall of Jerusalem due to internal textual clues alone. Similarly, Aslan dates Matthew and Luke to 90-100 AD, some twenty to thirty years later than most estimates (some even place Matthew as early as 50 AD). The Gospel of John he places between 100 and 120AD, in spite of scholarly consensus of a fairly precise date of 96 AD.

The late date for Luke likewise goes against both the internal scriptural witness and the tradition. Tradition holds that the Virgin Mary was one of Luke's primary witnesses, which certainly is supported given the details of the annunciation, nativity and infancy narratives in his Gospel. Luke's compilation of sources and eyewitness testimony took place over a period of time, much of it in the company of Paul only twenty years or so after Christ's ascension. For instance, we know Luke traveled with Paul on his later missionary journeys, as beginning in Acts 16:10, he begins using the plural "we" to relate their travels, and does so thereafter. As Luke was thus a "fellow laborer" with Paul, there may in fact be a strong link between Luke's Gospel account and Paul's preaching, as indicated by Eusebius in his Ecclesiastical Histories ([Book III, Ch. 4, v.8](#)):

And they say that Paul meant to refer to Luke's Gospel wherever, as if speaking of some gospel of his own, he used the words, "*according to my Gospel.*" [cf. Rom 2:16, 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8]

Many in the Church posit a similar link between Mark's Gospel and Peter's first letter. [Fr Patrick Henry Reardon has written an especially invigorating article](#) tracing this strongly substantiated connection, which also dates the writing of both the Gospel of Mark and 1 Peter to 64 AD:

As for the Gospel of Mark, our earliest references to it indicate that it came into being in the aftermath of the Neronian persecution, during the course of which Peter himself perished. According to the consensus of the earliest witnesses, Mark wrote his gospel with a view to preserving and handing on Peter's preaching about Jesus. These witnesses, speaking with one voice from around the Mediterranean Basin, include Papias of Hierapolis, the Anti-Marcionite Prologue, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria—all of them between A.D. 130 and 210.

Thus, the First Epistle of Peter and the Gospel of Mark belong to two stages in a crisis that followed the fire in Rome during the year 64: Peter wrote as the Neronian persecution was soon to begin, and Mark wrote in the ongoing context of it. Both writers, that is to say—and Mark under the tutelage of Peter—appealed to the example of the persecuted Jesus to instruct and encourage his persecuted followers during that crisis.

So the Orthodox Church has quite a great deal of scholarship with which to refute moderns who seek to cast aspersions on the historicity, authorship and dating of the New Testament writings.

VI. Problems with “Q” and the “Two Source” Theory

Aslan also posits the questionable (if not completely discredited) “two source” theory for Matthew and Luke, with Mark as one source, and a hypothetical Q (German for *Quelle*, or *Source*) as the primary source for the sayings of Jesus. Scholars (such as in the *Jesus Seminar*) have worked to create a proposed Q text by comparing similar passages in Matthew and Luke (which are not found in Mark) and working backwards.

According to the theory, Q is presupposed to be a “sayings gospel” only, without any significant deeds or miracles, and lacking a Passion/Resurrection narrative, which the theory holds to be made up of later accretions and legends.

However, there are insurmountable problems with Q, chief among them that there is absolutely no manuscript evidence for it. However, if Q was important to the early Christian community, and was the source for two of the three synoptic Gospels, it seems most unlikely that the early community would not have strived to preserve it along with the “Memoirs of the Apostles,” as the Gospels and letters from the Apostolic era were called until late in the second century.

Furthermore, although we begin to see references by the apostolic fathers to the four Gospels in the latter half of the first century (St Ignatius, bishop of Antioch from 67-107, mentions Matthew's Gospel in his writings), and Paul alludes to "my gospel" as early as 55, there is no reference to a Q or "sayings" source in any early Christian writings whatsoever.

Regarding the details of Q theory, close examination of the similar passages in Matthew and Luke reveal they are not so similar after all; only in one instance is there 100% conformity between two verses. In all remaining similar passages, the similarity plummets to a sub-50% correspondence, sometimes as low as ~20%.

Q proponents also claim supposed similarities of Q with the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* (which contains sayings of Jesus, but no Passion/Resurrection narrative), in order to "prove" the existence of another early "sayings gospel" and to assert there existed a diversity of opinion about Jesus within the early Christian community, with many rejecting Jesus' divinity and not basing their discipleship upon his death and resurrection.

Reza Aslan stakes his book's legitimacy on this theory, likewise asserting that the gnostic texts (including and especially *Thomas*) "demonstrate a dramatic divergence of opinion" about Jesus. I'll explore this idea of his further below in my section on the Gnostic Texts, but we'll consider it here also in the context of Q.

Eta Linnemann in her essential article, [*The Lost Gospel of Q - Fact or Fantasy?*](#), discusses these issues:

Does the *Gospel of Thomas* indeed prove how the oldest gospel, the alleged Q, was shaped—consisting mainly of sayings, with no passion or Easter reports?

Let me answer with another question. If a young man is leading a rock band, does this prove that a deceased person of his grandfather's generation played rock music, too? Of course not, even if it were known that the deceased was a musician.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is mentioned or quoted by some church fathers in the first decades of the third century. Recent scholarship dates its earliest possible original composition at about AD 140 (though the only complete manuscript is a Coptic translation dating from around AD 400). Even if this hypothetical dating be correct, that is more than seventy years after our canonical gospels. By that time the true gospels and the very expression euangelion (gospel) were well-established: understandably a new creation like Thomas would try to traffic in this good name by claiming the "gospel" title. But nothing here supports the theory that *Thomas* was a model for, or even a co-belligerent of, Q in the AD 35– 65 time span.

The *Gospel of Thomas* is not just "noncanonical." Every church father who ever mentioned it called it heretical or Gnostic. From a Gnostic writing we cannot expect interest in Jesus' death and resurrection since Gnosticism repudiates both as the

early church understood them. So how can a heretical writing rightly be taken as the prototype for constructing canonical ones?

It is important to recall here that an actual “Q gospel” sans passion and Easter narratives does not exist. It is rather extracted from Matthew and Luke—which in every form known to us do contain the passion and Easter material.

William R. Farmer has recently suggested why the heretical *Gospel of Thomas* is being pushed to play so large a role in reconstructing early Christianity:

Because Thomas is a late-second to fourth-century document, by itself it could never be successfully used to lever the significance of Jesus off its New Testament foundation. Similarly, the sayings source Q, allegedly used by Matthew and Luke, by itself could never be successfully used to achieve this result. But used together, as they are by a significant number of scholars, Thomas and Q appear to reinforce one another. — *Wm R. Farmer, The Gospel of Jesus: The Pastoral Relevance of the Synoptic Problem (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 3f.*

You cannot erect a playing-card house with a single card. You might lean two cards together as long as no wind blows. But can you live in such a house of cards? — *Eta Linnemann, “The Lost Gospel Of Q—Fact Or Fantasy?,” Trinity Journal 17:1 (Spring 1996): 3–18.*

Eta Linnemann’s full article is too lengthy to include here (but it is highly recommended, and very readable, if technical in places), but her conclusion warrants our attention:

The motive is clearly perceptible. Q (with *Thomas’* aid) gives a biblical basis for persons who do not accept Jesus as the Son of God, reject his atoning death on the cross, and deny his resurrection. Then, in copyright-infringement fashion, these same scholars combine their newly minted biblical basis with early church diversity to justify calling themselves “Christians” despite their aberrant convictions.

By trumpeting the claim that today’s new Q-Christians are in sync with earliest historical origins, while traditional Bible believers hallow “the result of early Christian mythmaking,” they lay down an effective smoke screen that enables them to keep their posts as ostensible professors [or authors] of Christian origins...

But we are not obliged to follow “cleverly devised tales” (2 Pet 1:16). The canonical gospels exist. Q does not. The heretical, second century *Gospel of Thomas* is not binding (unless we are Gnostics). Whether on historical or theological grounds, there is no reason to give up the canonical gospels as the original and divinely inspired foundation for our faith. — *Ibid.*

Reza Aslan is thus not the first to accuse orthodox Christianity of “mythmaking,” as we have seen in Linnemann’s critique. For Reza Aslan then, selling the reader on the Q theory is vitally important, as accepting Q reduces the relative validity of the four Gospels because the non-existent Q supposedly predates them.

Ultimately, like all proponents of Q and *Thomas*, Aslan fails to make his case for overturning the traditional view of the formation of the Gospels, i.e., that the evangelists compiled oral traditions and stories from actual eyewitnesses, in order to craft their narratives about Jesus the Christ, and that these oral traditions and narratives — preserved from the very beginning of the Christian community — provided accurate descriptions of Jesus' mighty works ("dynamis"), his Passion, and his Resurrection.

VII. Oral Tradition and the Forming of the Gospels

The likelihood of *accurate* transmission of Jesus' deeds and sayings by his closest disciples is extremely high; they lived and traveled with him for three years, and we may safely assume that he was in the habit of conveying his message with a certain consistency as he set out in his ministry to the "lost sheep of Israel." In other words, he repeated himself often. We also note that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide his disciples into all truth, as well as to enable them to call to mind all that he said and did (Jn 14:26, 16:14). The early importance of this oral tradition is seen in the selection by the apostles of a replacement for Judas:

"Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." (Acts 1:21-22)

In a culture which actively practiced oral transmission of the history of families, teachings and genealogies, we should be surprised neither at the *relative consistency* of the general synoptic view when Matthew, Mark and Luke are "viewed together" (the Greek, *synoptic*, means "seen together"), nor at the *minor inconsistencies* among them even when they are telling the same basic story.

This is essentially the conclusion of renowned New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn, who asserts that Galilee of Jesus' time was essentially an *oral* culture. Only scribes and rabbis were literate; most ordinary folk gained their learning through hearing the spoken word, in synagogue and in town. These are the very people from whose ranks came Jesus' disciples.

Dunn challenges our modern epistemology, indicating how difficult it is for us to conceive of a culture without books, in which learning is accomplished primarily through hearing, and that in a primarily communal, group setting:

Our memories are generally so unreliable, that we can scarcely appreciate a society where only the memory could be relied on to retain important information. And yet, that is what we must do when we try to access the information which gives us the

clearest picture of what Jesus actually did and said. — (J.D.G. Dunn, [*Jesus, Paul and the Gospels*](#), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2011)

Dunn goes on to conduct a straightforward analysis of the Synoptic Gospels, discovering in them shared episodes, sayings and interactions which harmoniously point to the same person, whom he calls the *characteristic Jesus*. The features of this *characteristic Jesus* are resoundingly consistent across Matthew, Mark and Luke (and in different form in John as well), reflecting a *factual, historical Jesus* at the core of what Dunn calls the *Jesus tradition*, which preceded the writing of the Gospels. In other words, the Jesus of the Gospels *is* the Jesus of history.

Importantly, the practice of oral tradition and memorization did not end with the first century. It was common for Orthodox Christian monasteries in the fourth century and beyond to require their novices to memorize the entire Book of Psalms before being accepted into the community. Orthodox monasteries to this day read the entire Psalter each week (and twice a week during Great Lent!), via structured Kathismata, this liturgical repetition leading to varying degrees of memorization.

We see this in parish life too. Orthodox Christians who maintain a regular rule of prayer and attend even only Saturday evening Vespers and Sunday Liturgy will be able to quote from memory several different Psalms. Many Christians in our own time can quote “chapter and verse,” and those who may not be able to cite the location are still able to call to mind considerable Biblical content.

In Islam the practice of memorizing the entire Koran (a text approximately the same length as the New Testament) continues to be a pious achievement for Muslims to this day, a fact Mr. Aslan is no doubt familiar with. It seems not a little disingenuous that he would reject oral tradition within Christianity while being an adherent of a religion which itself extolls oral tradition and memorization.

Within the Church, the strength and validity of the oral tradition can be seen in that it was actually preferred as the *living witness of the Apostles’ testimony*, to the apostolic written tradition (what we know now as the New Testament) up until the late second century, when St Irenaeus countered the heretical teachings of Marcion (who used a version of Luke’s Gospel which he had severely edited, and only select letters of Paul, which he then distorted to back his position) by putting forth a list of accepted apostolic writings.

Over the next two to three centuries the canon of scripture as we know it today was confirmed by various fathers and councils throughout the Christian world, always by referring to the apostolic testimony, and the confirmation of the New Testament texts by the disciples of the apostles. The above-mentioned article by Fr James Bernstein, [*Which Came First, the New Testament or the Church?*](#), discusses this process in more detail.

VIII. Paul, Liturgy, and the Historical Jesus

Elsewhere, Aslan claims that the Apostle Paul “displays an extraordinary lack of interest in the historical Jesus,” as if Paul’s limited presentation of history in his letters somehow takes away from the validity of the New Testament writings.

This is completely backwards, as Paul vigorously stands on the historicity of the Resurrection, stating, “If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty” (1 Cor 15:14), a verse Aslan acknowledges, yet the point of which he completely misses (or rather dismisses).

Of course, Paul’s letters were never intended to be a systematic account of the Christian faith, much less of the life of Jesus, but were written to address specific crises, situations or teachings in the recipient churches. The form of Paul’s letters clearly assumes the existence of a strong oral tradition based on the apostolic kerygma. Paul often says as much, referring to his earlier preaching of the gospel, urging (for example) the Thessalonians to “keep the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thess 2:15).

Indeed, the Gospel resurrection accounts confirm the tradition St Paul hands down in 1 Cor 15:3-8 (written circa 55 A.D., barely more than twenty years after Christ’s resurrection and ascension):

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. — 1 Cor 15:3-8 NKJV

Likewise, Paul’s account of the institution of the Eucharist in 1 Cor 11:23-26f confirms the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke *it* and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same manner *He* also *took* the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. — 1 Cor 11:23-26 NKJV

The form and brevity of these passages reveal them to be creedal and liturgical formulae; far from glossing over the historical foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

they rest firmly upon it, upon the preaching of the Apostles and the witness of the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord.

Orthodox Christians will attest to how memorable is the Liturgy, where one comes to know the entire divine service (sometimes even the priest's prayers) by heart, all of which are deeply ancient confessions of faith. This is how the earliest Christians lived and handed down their faith, "continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread [the Eucharist], and in prayers [the liturgy]" (Acts 2:42).

IX. The Gnostic Texts

Of course, no modern book on the "historical Jesus" would be complete without reference to the spurious gnostic gospels written in the second and third centuries. To his credit, Aslan gets the date ranges correct here, but he deliberately conflates their testimony with that of the four Gospels, writing:

They demonstrate the dramatic divergence of opinion that existed over who Jesus was and what Jesus meant, even among those who claimed to walk with him, who shared his bread and ate with him, who heard his words and prayed with him.

Now obviously, texts written in the second century and later (such as the *Gospel of Thomas* mentioned above, and other gnostic texts) could not have been composed by those who walked and ate with Jesus, and who received his teachings. Whereas we have already considered the Orthodox view of the oral tradition and the formation of the four Gospels, which dates back to Pentecost.

The "divergence of opinion" Aslan would have us believe is so dramatic, is perfectly logical: the early Christian Church retained the Apostolic teaching and understanding of Jesus (what we call the "mind of the Church"), and continued "walking with Him" after His resurrection from the dead. [As Fr John Behr shows](#), it is actually through the opening of the scriptures, and through the breaking of the bread, that the disciples "eyes were opened," and that they knew and grew in communion with the Risen Lord (see Luke 24:27-35). And this is how the Church rejected later spurious writings and teachings, which did not resonate with the Apostolic teaching, the mind of the Church.

Regarding Aslan's curious mention of those who "prayed with Jesus," this deserves special comment on an important aspect of the Gospels, which concerns Jesus' relationship to God the Father. When Jesus is praying to the Father he calls him "*Abba*," the familiar, intimate form used by children in their home (see *Kesich*, below). When referring to the Father, he always says "*My Father*." But he teaches the disciples to pray saying, "*Our Father*" (in Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer; in Luke it is simply "Father"). Perhaps the strongest example of the uniqueness of Jesus' relationship to his Father occurs after his resurrection, when Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, "Go to My

brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to *My* Father and *your* Father, and to *My* God and *your* God'" (Jn 20:17).

So for Aslan to subtly insert this phrase about the evangelists "praying with Jesus" seems like a sly attempt both to distort the witness of the Gospels concerning how Jesus prayed, and to conceal the uniqueness of His relationship as Only-Begotten Son to His Father, versus our adopted relationship as children of God through Him.

X. Conclusion: Reza's Zealous Mythmaking

Thus in conclusion, in an ironic twist on his publisher's blurb, we see it is actually Mr. Aslan who has been *sifting through his own mythmaking*, and while now claiming to be following the "real" Jesus, is really *a disciple only of his own imagination*, coupled with discredited modern historical criticism.

This leads us to the real "meat" of our study, excerpts from three revered Orthodox Christian scholars and theologians. With all we've discussed up to this point, it will be easy to apply the following passages to specific claims and premises of Mr. Aslan and, in general, to the modern spirit of faithlessness and unbelief.

From Fr Georges Florovsky, [Revelation and Interpretation](#)

Fact and meaning, history and mystery; Fr Georges Florovsky presents a highly cadenced and memorable apologia for the great claim of the Christian Church, of God's "ultimate intervention in the stream of historical events."

The Gospel is history. Historic events are the source and the basis of all Christian faith and hope. The basis of the New Testament is facts, events, deeds — not only teaching, commandments or words. From the very beginning, from the very day of Pentecost, when St. Peter as an eye-witness (Acts 2:32: "whereof we are all witnesses," *martyres*) witnessed to the fulfilment of salvation in the Risen Lord, apostolic preaching had emphatically an historical character. By this historical witness the Church stands.

Creeds have an historical structure too, they refer to the events. Again, it is a sacred history. The mystery of Christ is precisely in that "in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9). This mystery cannot be comprehended within the earthly plane alone, there is another dimension too. But historical boundaries are not obliterated, not dimmed: in the sacred image historical features are clearly seen. Apostolic preaching was always a narrative, a narrative of what had really happened, *hic et nunc* ["here and now"]. But what happened was ultimate and new: "The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14)

But they are no less historical for that, no less factual. On the contrary, they are more historical — they are ultimately eventful. They cannot obviously be fully ascertained except by faith. Yet this does not take them out of the historical context. Faith only discovers a new dimension, apprehends the historical datum in its full depth, in its full and ultimate reality.

The Evangelists and the Apostles were no chroniclers. It was not their mission to keep the full record of all that Jesus had done, day by day, year by year. They describe his life and relate his works, so as to give us his image: an historic, and yet a divine image. It is no portrait, but rather an ikon — but surely an historic ikon, an image of the Incarnate Lord. Faith does not create a new value; it only discovers the inherent one. Faith itself is a sort of vision, "the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1: St. John Chrysostom explains *elenchos* precisely as *opsis*). The "invisible" is no less real than "visible" — rather more real. "And yet no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3). It means that the Gospel itself can be apprehended in all its fulness and depth only in spiritual experience. But what is discovered by faith is given in very truth...

They are no less historical narratives and bear witness to what had really taken place, in space and in time. If "by faith" we discover much more than what can be detected "by senses," this only discloses the utter inadequacy of "senses" in the knowledge of spiritual matters.

For what had really happened was the mighty deed of the Redeeming God, his ultimate intervention in the stream of historical events. One should not divorce the "fact" and the "meaning" — both are given in reality.

The Church is itself an integral part of the New Testament message. The Church itself is a part of revelation — the story of "the Whole Christ: head and body" (*totus Christus: caput et corpus*, in the phrase of St. Augustine) and of the Holy Ghost. The ultimate end of revelation, its telos, has not yet come. And only within the experience of the Church is the New Testament truly and fully alive. Church history is itself a story of redemption. The truth of the book is revealed and vindicated by the growth of the Body.

From Fr Alexander Schmemmann, [The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy](#)

Fr Schmemmann writes here of what we might call the "continuity of apperception" of the early Christian community. His exposition of the mind, praxis, and self-consciousness of the young Church convincingly disproves Aslan's theory that the evangelists wrote the Gospels in order to conceal Jesus' zealot revolutionary mission and recast him as God. Rather, the Gospels are based on the earliest narratives of the Faith, the carefully tended oral tradition preserved through liturgy and communion as the disciples shared their new, transfigured life in Christ together, week after holy week, year after year.

There were many similar sects and religious factions in the Jewish world of that era. It was a period of religious and political excitement, of a heightening of the hopes and expectations connected with Israel's national destiny and the biblical prophecies of the ultimate triumph of the chosen people. The time of the final revolt against the hated Roman rule was approaching; the destruction of Jerusalem was near at hand. "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). The question the disciples addressed to their departing Master burned deep in Jewish hearts. But for the Christians (and at first almost all of them were Jews) their own faith was the answer, for the confession of Jesus as the Christ was central to it, and in bringing their own kindred to the Messiah they saw their first goal, for He had come to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."

[There is] a fact which seems strange to us now: the first community in Jerusalem not only did not separate itself from Judaism, but even preserved Jewish religious forms intact in its own life. The apostles observed the appointed hours of prayer and all the ritual injunctions concerning food; when St. Paul came to Jerusalem, he agreed without objection to a request by St. James and the presbyters that he perform the ceremony of ritual purification...

Although we do not at first see any sharp break with Judaism, this does not mean, as some historians once thought, that Christianity began to experience its own radical newness only later, after entering the Greco-Roman world; that only then, under the influence of that world, did it create its "original" pattern of life and organization. The fact is, this sense that a radical change had taken place in world history and human life was the most basic and outstanding trait of the early Christian community as described in Acts and St. Paul's epistles.

But we must understand that for the Christians of Jerusalem the preservation of the Jewish religious tradition and mode of life was not a mere survival of the past from which they were released as they grew in understanding of their own faith. On the contrary, they observed the tradition because for them it all bore witness to the truth of their faith...

Christ Himself had declared His work to be the fulfillment of the Scriptures: "Thus it is written...thus it behoved..." (Luke 24:46). "You pore over the scriptures...it is of these I speak as bearing witness to me" (John 5:39). The old accustomed words and ancient rites were now radiant with new light, and in them Christians were always discovering new points to confirm the truth and plenitude of the New Testament. St. Matthew's Gospel, written in the Judeo-Christian milieu, was later to express this fundamental Christian belief in the Old Testament as prophecy and doctrine about Christ.

So new and so holy was this company that joining it is already defined in the Gospels as a new birth, accomplished through a symbolic act. This is baptism, the liturgical immersion in water of the new Christian, which commemorates and symbolizes Christ's death and resurrection...

The early Church lived by the experience of baptism, men were brought to it by the call of the Gospel preachings; the community's liturgical life was bound up with baptism, and the symbols and allegories of the earliest Christian paintings on the walls of the catacombs testify again and again to the tremendous power of regeneration the first Christians experienced in the baptismal water.

But if this new life begins with baptism, the central act of the community, in which it professed its essential nature as Christ's kingdom, was the breaking of bread...

All the records of the time which have come down to us testify that then, as always, Christians believed that in the breaking of bread they were united with Christ Himself...

The breaking of bread took place from house to house, at gatherings of the community separate from its attendance at the Temple. And the special day of the Eucharist was the first day of the week, the day following the Sabbath, on which, according to the apostles' testimony, Christ had risen. Christians call this day the "Lord's day." Here was perhaps the most vigorous expression of the early Church's awareness of herself as an absolutely new beginning which was leading Christians beyond the framework of the traditional religion.

During the three centuries that preceded Constantine, the Christian holy day was not a day of rest but an ordinary working day. It was not the "seventh" day, which men since ancient times had reckoned as the final day of the week; it was the following day. In this conscious departure from the earlier emphasis of the week, the Church bears witness to the fact that her own life, as it flows onward in this world, is a foretaste of that eternal day which dawned on the morning of the first victory over death. "For ye are dead," said the Apostle Paul, "and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:3f.).

From Veselin Kesich, [The Birth of the Church, AD 33-200](#)

Professor Kesich's high-level narrative of Jesus' person, teachings and deeds, sketches a vivid picture for us of how startlingly different Jesus was from the norms and expectations of the times in which he conducted his earthly ministry. It was Jesus' uniqueness which made him so memorable, but it is his resurrection from the dead which began the real transformation of his disciples, and launched the Christian Church on its journey through history.

Our knowledge of the particulars of Jesus' ministry is found in the narration of the four Gospels, which are our main source for what Jesus said and did. So much depends on them that it is no wonder that they have been subjected for the past two hundred years to a thorough literary and historical investigation. Written between AD 65 and 95,

following the apostolic preaching and teaching, these founding Christian documents invite historical research.

The overriding result of modern critical investigation has firmly established that the Jesus of the Gospels belongs to history, not to mythology, and that “the quest for the historical Jesus” gives concrete context to our theological statements and thus does play a useful role in theology.

The evangelists, who belonged to the second Christian generation, incorporated into their Gospels traditions that had been circulating from the earliest period of the Christian community. They knew Jesus as the disciples had remembered and witnessed to him. Their main impetus for writing was to compile an account of what Jesus had said and done. Clearly, evidence in support of the four canonical Gospels as the founding documents of history and faith has been accepted by the prevailing number of scholars, despite the publicity of the Jesus Seminar and despite the current popular fascination with gnostic gospels and writings.

Jesus left a profound impact upon his audience, for he taught “as one who had authority, not as the scribes” (Mk 1:22). The scribes were those who had been trained by renowned teachers and were proud of their knowledge. Without a permanent residence, Jesus taught in synagogues, houses of his disciples, and even of Pharisees (Lk 7:36-50). He taught in hills as well as in the plains, in the open air as well as in the temple. What he taught he had lived. He criticized those who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from him. He did not teach about God, but made him known and present in his life and in his works.

By addressing God as *abba*, Father, Jesus expressed his close relationship with the “Father of Israel,” the creator and ruler of the universe, author of the law and maker of the covenant. It was customary among Jews at the time of Jesus to call upon God as *abinu* (our Father). The word *abba* was used within the family by children addressing their father. We do not know how a pious Galilean Jew who spoke Aramaic addressed God in his daily prayers, but we know that the term *abba* was not used in synagogue worship as it belonged to the circle of the family... By confessing the resurrected Christ as “Son of God,” the early Christians did not ascribe a new identity to Jesus but recognized what was implied in his regular use of *abba*.

Jesus’ contemporaries tried to understand who Jesus was by associating him with one of the figures of Jewish prophetic tradition. Some thought that Jesus was a prophet (Mk 6:15, 8:27; Lk 7:16; Jn 6:14)... The common people shared the view of his disciples, who saw him as “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (Lk 24:19). For the religious authorities, his opponents, he was a false prophet (Mk 14:65; Lk 22:63-64). And the Romans saw him as a dangerous pretender who might provoke an uprising against the occupying power...

To see Jesus as a prophet was an attempt to identify him, but it was not adequate. Jesus never used the prophetic introductory formula: “Thus saith the Lord,” to underline

that his prophecy was a message received from God and not a product of his own insight or wisdom. Instead he introduced his revelatory sayings with “*Amen*, I say to you,” as if he made pronouncements on the basis of his own authority, rooted in his intimate union with the Father, in his certainty of God’s presence and the closeness of his relationship with God.

It was usual to use the word *amen* to approve or agree with the statements of somebody else. By putting this word at the very beginning of his statements, Jesus confirmed the truthfulness of his pronouncements. The Fourth Gospel uses *amen* emphatically, repeating it in about twenty five examples: “*Amen, amen* I say to you,” as if to indicate the particular significance of his words...

After the Romans conquered Palestine in 63 BC, a surge of intense popular messianic expectation led to repeated rebellions against the new occupiers and heir subjects. Around the time of Jesus’ birth, a sizable force of Jewish rebels destroyed the royal palaces at Sepphoris and Jericho. Of all attempts to defeat and expel the Romans from Palestine, two Jewish-Roman wars (AD 66-70 and 132-135) proved particularly bloody and catastrophic for the population of Palestine; Bar Kochba led the last attempt in AD 132 to remove the Romans from this land. Rabbi Akiba, the best known rabbi of the period, proclaimed him “king, messiah.”

A century earlier, Jesus had repudiated this association of “messiah” with a triumphant political leader. Whereas his contemporaries were looking for a victorious, triumphant messiah, he was predicting his own suffering and death. Like the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, he was “wounded for our transgressions” (Mt 8:17). The post-Resurrection Christians saw Jesus’ life and ministry as a fulfillment of this prophecy. The suffering Messiah was raised up and exalted to sit at the right hand of God (Acts 2:32ff).

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus removed from the title “Christ” any political connotation. It enabled the followers of Jesus to confess him as the Christ sent and glorified by God. To share in his glory meant for them readiness to share in his suffering and death... Although his detailed predictions of his suffering were colored by post-Resurrection events, we cannot dismiss their core as non-historical.

The very moment of Jesus’ resurrection was not an observable event and could not be captured in categories of space and time. Therefore, the Gospels do not narrate it. They do present evidence for the resurrection, however. The post-resurrection appearances of the risen Jesus led the disciples to understand why the tomb was found empty and made them witnesses of the resurrection and leaders of the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem. The post-resurrection appearances do not belong to the category of ecstatic experiences, such as Paul described in 2 Cor 12:1ff, nor to any recognizable category of spiritual experience. Without them, there would have been no church or New Testament Scripture.