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Reza Aslan's Zealot (2013) presents the ways in which the life of Jesus of Nazareth was "revised" ex post facto by the Gospel-writers or evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and how it was that Rome's suppression of the Jewish Revolt of 66 C.E. catalyzed the very writing of the Gospels (70–120 C.E.) and the propagation throughout the Greco-Roman Diaspora of the revisionist views of Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, which stressed the divinity of Jesus while attempting to reconcile or downplay the prophet's political revolutionism, directed against Rome and the Jewish ruling class, as summarized in the Kingdom of God he proclaimed. Aslan provides many historical correctives both to the presentation of the Gospels and the dogma institutionalized by the various Christian churches, yet his own account of Jesus as Zealot would likely be improved by engagement with Christian anarchist thinkers such as Leo Tolstoy.

Professor Reza Aslan's Zealot is in large part the story of how the life of Jesus of Nazareth was "revised" ex post facto by the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. While

Jewish themselves, these early Christians wished to break definitively with their mother religion in the wake of the brutal counter-insurgent campaign waged by Rome against the Jewish Revolt that had been launched in Palestine in 66 C.E., only to be finally put down when the Romans destroyed the Temple and ravaged Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Indeed, it was in this year or the very next one that the first Gospel, written by Mark, was composed; the rest of the gospels were written later, between 90 and 120 C.E. Aslan makes clear that the birth of Christianity was not the end sought by Jesus or his closest disciples, including Simon (Peter) and his brother James, but was rather the result of the unflagging efforts of Saul (later Paul) of Tarsus, who in his missionary epistles to the Greco-Roman gentiles stressed the divinity of Jesus, thus transforming the rebel-prophet Jesus into Christ the messiah, a "Romanized demigod" (171).

In this way, the ascendancy of Pauline Christianity was largely due to historical circumstance: with the "Jerusalem branch" of Jesus' followers wiped out by the Roman attack on Jerusalem, Paul's vision of Jesus was the only one left standing, with the exception of the hypothetical Q document on which Matthew and Luke were based (214). Plus, as Aslan observes, Paul's views certainly permeate in Luke and John (215). According to the author, this geographical shift from Jerusalem to the Greco-Roman Diaspora implied the opportunistic transformation of the historical zealot Jesus into a pacifist and of the Kingdom of God he had proclaimed into an ethereal matter reserved for the afterlife. As Aslan notes, such conscious manipulation of history cannot be dissociated from the virulence of European Jew-hatred over the past two millennia, as inspired by the evangelists, who portray the Jewish rabble and/or their corrupt leaders as responsible for Christ's execution, with Pilate merely "washing his hands," when in fact Jesus was murdered by the State, the occupying

and the harmonization of means and ends are among the most innovative of Christ's teachings. In this vein, while in no way uncritically advancing pacifism, one wonders if Aslan would also call Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., or their followers "fools."

In sum, Aslan has certainly provided a thought-provoking account of the "life and times" of Jesus of Nazareth. He places one of history's most fateful personalities directly within the political and economic realities that led him on the path of anti-colonial, proto-socialist rebellion. In so doing, the author implicitly condemns the depoliticized image of Christ that has been propagated by the various institutionalized churches which arose over the past two millennia to officially "represent" Christianity—however fundamentally essentially all of these churches have departed from the essence of Christ's teachings, summarized by Tolstoy as being the proclamation of "universal brotherhood, the elimination of national distinctions, the abolition of private property, and the strange injunction not to resist evil by violence."2 As a biographical and philosophical examination of the world-historical Jewish prophet who demanded that his disciples "call no man [their] father upon the Earth [… and] neither be called masters" (Matthew 23:9–10), Zealot bears a great deal of contemplation, discussion, and action.

the national-liberation struggle against the Romans and the concept of divine sovereignty. Nevertheless, he describes how Christ's revolutionism influenced his brother James, known as "the Just," who too would be executed for championing the cause of the oppressed (197–212).

One final matter to discuss from Aslan's volume is the author's dismissal of the evangelists' imputing to Christ a stance of pacifism and the espousal of non-resistance to evil by violence. In Matthew 5:38–44 and Luke 6:27–29, Jesus includes within his Sermon on the Mount a critique of the established lex talonis stipulating "an eye for an eye" and in its place presents the injunction to "turn the other cheek" and "love your enemies." Aslan rejects these teachings as fabrications, for they contradict his account of Christ's zealotry; he clarifies his view that Jesus was "no fool" when it came to social change, meaning that he "understood" that force would be necessary to realize the Kingdom of God (120–2). Aslan cites Christ's statement that he had "not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34) to support the line of argumentation, though he entirely decontextualizes this statement—with the image of "sword" incidentally being translated in Luke 12:51 as "division" to express the same idea—for in Matthew the very next lines read as follows: "I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother […]. He that loveth father or mother [or child] more than me is not worthy of me […]. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:35–8). Hence, while it is evident that Christ's critique shares much in common with zealotry in terms of the question of the Roman occupation—as reflected, verily, in the prophet's warning to his apostles that they would likely face execution for joining him—it is far less clear that Jesus agreed with the violent tactics used by zealots against Rome. Indeed, next to the commandment to love one's neighbor, the calls for non-violent non-cooperation

power of Rome.

Aslan makes clear that Jesus was crucified for sedition—indeed, that crucifixion was the punishment reserved for political offenders, and that the two prisoners executed alongside Christ on Golgotha were "bandits" (lestai), not "thieves." The author places Jesus' rebellion within the context of the times, echoing the demands and fate of similar anti-Roman messianic figures and the movements they led from the century leading up to the general Revolt, such as the bandit chief Hezekiah, Judas the Galilean, "the Samaritan," and "the Egyptian" (79). Ironically enough, Aslan argues that Jesus was effectively John the Baptist's disciple, for Christ adopted John's ascetic-defiant announcement of the Kingdom of God, and even shared the same fate as his master at the hands of the State (80–9).

In addition, the author provides a compelling clarification of Jesus' well-known proclamation regarding the need to "render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and render unto God what belongs to God" (Mark 12:17/Matthew 22:21/Luke 20:25). Though this line has often been used to rationalize Christian subordination to the State, its meaning is in fact quite revolutionary, as demonstrated by the evangelists' recording of the audience's reaction, "amazed at him." In response to the question posed by the Pharisees or their spies about whether Jews should agree to pay tribute to Rome, Jesus requests to be shown a denarius, an imperial coin, and asks "whose image and inscription hath it?" In response to his listeners' correct identification, Christ tells the audience that the symbolic coin must be returned to Caesar, to whom it belongs, just as the land of occupied Palestine must be rendered holy, emancipated from the yoke of Roman occupation (76–8). Though the national-liberation zealot movement as represented by the Zealot Party would not formally be founded for another three decades after the death of Christ, Aslan observes that Christ's

view of the denarius and Caesar clearly communicates the prophet's affinity for the philosophy of that movement. Of course, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God being at hand should be interpreted similarly as a fundamental challenge to the established system of clerical-military domination, for "God's rule cannot be established without the annihilation of the present leaders" (119).

Hence, Aslan clearly acknowledges that the "Kingdom of God is a call to revolution, plain and simple" (120). However, in his discussion of this insurgent concept, Aslan calls into question what is perhaps most radical within Christ's teachings: the affirmation that the "greatest commandment" is to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:39). Aslan writes that Jesus' declaration of this maxim was meant to be applied only to members of the Jewish nation only, and thus should not be understood as a universal humanistic declaration of equality and solidarity (120–2). "There is no reason to consider Jesus's conception of his neighbors and enemies to have been any more or less expansive than that of any other Jew of his time" (122). To support this claim, Aslan argues that Christ's clarification that he came not to destroy Mosaic law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17) necessarily means that the prophet must have endorsed chauvinist conceptions about peoples other than Jews. However, this claim is somewhat imprecise; it is unclear why Christ's affirmation of the Golden Rule, if directed primarily toward Jews, could not also dialectically apply to gentiles or humanity in general. Beginning three centuries before Christ, the Stoics had identified the innateness of human equality and the unity of humankind through natural law.1 In parallel, four or five centuries before Christ, Buddha had developed the concept of the common struggle of all suffering beings. Christ's "new commandment" for his followers to "love one another" (John 13:35) self-evidently

shares a great deal with these other egalitarian philosophies.

Related to the question of Christian, Buddhist, or Stoic egalitarianism is Aslan's presentation of the Kingdom of God. Aslan intimates that Christ's proclamation of the Kingdom of God was "neither purely celestial nor wholly eschatological," but rather real and physical, such that Jesus envisioned himself ruling a reconstituted, liberated Israel in God's name, with the twelve apostles serving as his lieutenant-governors (118–25). The accusation of Christ's having proclaimed himself King of the Jews (INRI), was, according to the Gospels, the "evidence" for the charge of sedition on which he was executed. Yet Aslan also discusses the translation of a line unique to John that may have been uttered by Christ during his interrogation by Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this order [or system]" (John 18:36) (116). Usually translated as not being "of this world"—and hence understood as being reserved for the afterlife—Christ's "kingdom" in this sense presents a very different vision of social organization, whether we think of the classical eastern Mediterranean or the world of our own day. This is particularly the case if we juxtapose this heretical declaration with the prophet's condemnation of private property, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5–7), the parables about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37) and Lazarus and the wealthy man (Luke 16:19–31), and the apocalyptical vision of Judgment Day, when the rich would be cast into hell, while the oppressed and those promoting mutual aid would be saved (Matthew 25:31–46)—to say nothing of his physical clearing of the Temple in Jerusalem of the money-changers (Mark 11:15-19/Matthew 21:12-17/Luke 19:45–48). Though Aslan recognizes Christ's revolutionary vision, he does not explicitly acknowledge the Kingdom of God's proto-communist character or the materialist metaphor of Christ's healing of the sick free of charge, preferring to associate the former concept with