

Reza Aslan Defends Controversial New Book on Jesus

For the third time, Jesus is about to change Reza Aslan's life.

As a teenager, Aslan turned to Jesus in an evangelical youth group, where becoming a Christian made him feel like a real American.

He later studied Jesus of Nazareth in college, which led Aslan to a doctorate in the sociology of religion.

Now Aslan's controversial new book about Jesus is about to make him a best-selling author. *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* has already reached No. 1 on . It's the latest in a long line of controversial and profitable books about the so-called historical Jesus.

Aslan said he wants to show the power of Jesus as a flesh-and-blood human being, rather than the savior of the world. That Jesus has gotten lost in 2,000 years of church history, he said.

But critics say that Aslan has simply created his own version of Jesus. And they question whether the author, a practicing Muslim and creative writing professor, is qualified to write about Jesus.

Aslan said his interest in Jesus started at age 15, when he joined a Young Life group in his home state of California. But over time he began to feel that the Jesus he learned about in church wasn't as interesting as the actual Jesus of Nazareth.

"He seemed more real to me," said Aslan. "I wanted to have the kind of relationship with this man that I felt I could never

have with the celestial Christ.”

For Aslan, the defining moment of Jesus’ life takes place not on Easter but a week earlier, on Palm Sunday, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the cheers of thousands. Then he drove the moneylenders out of the temple, according to the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Those two acts were meant to spark a revolution, Aslan said.

“He took on the religious and political powers of his day on behalf of the poor and the dispossessed, the marginalized and the weak,” he said.

Aslan believes that Jesus was a hero even though his revolution failed, at least for the moment. Jesus knew he’d probably be crucified for his actions, Aslan said, but that didn’t stop him. Like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. or Abraham Lincoln, Jesus’ death turned him into a larger-than-life figure.

“That is the fundamental difference between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ of faith,” he said. “Jesus the Christ is defined by his resurrection. Jesus the man is defined by his death.”

After his death and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem some years later, Aslan argues, Jesus’ followers reinvented him as a gentle spiritual teacher who taught love rather than revolution.

That kind of spiritual teacher was more appealing than a Jewish revolutionary. The redefining helped spread Christianity around the world. But Jesus the man got lost along the way, said Aslan, who says that most of the accounts of Jesus in the Bible aren’t historically accurate.

His words and his teaching have been stripped of their context and transformed into abstract ethical principles that all

people can abide by," he said. "If you want to know who Jesus himself was, you have to start with the fundamental fact that he was a product of his world."

The Rev. John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California, agrees that understanding Jesus' context is important. A good place to start, he said, is by actually reading the New Testament.

Ortberg, whose book "Who is this Man?" also depicts the life of Jesus, said that Jesus' first followers were attracted by how he lived and what he taught. Then they came to see him as the Son of God, he said.

"There's very little evidence that Jesus has a radically different teaching than what the early church believed," he said. "I think it is difficult to argue that Jesus saw himself as a political zealot messiah."

Understanding Jesus' historical context makes sense, said Josh Graves, the preaching minister at Otter Creek Church in Brentwood, Tenn.

Graves rejects Aslan's claim that the Bible's depiction of Jesus is inaccurate. But he does think Aslan has done Christians a favor by writing about the world Jesus lived in.

"The more that mainline and evangelical Christians get into the New Testament and the history of that world, the better," he said. "There's too many American versions of Jesus walking around that don't work."

Aslan's faith as a practicing Muslim caused controversy during a recent interview on the Fox News online program "Spirited Debate." The show's host asked the author why he, as a Muslim, wanted to write about Jesus. The interview video went viral and led to accusations that Fox was Islamophobic.

It also boosted book sales. Random House, Aslan's publisher,

reportedly added a second printing of 50,000 additional copies after the interview aired.

Boston University religion professor Stephen Prothero said that Aslan's perspective as a Muslim may have influenced his writing. He said that the picture of Jesus in "Zealot" seems more like a failed version of the Prophet Muhammad than the figure depicted in the Bible.

Prothero also said that outside of the Bible, there's not enough historical evidence to write about a modern biography of Jesus.

"We just don't know enough about Jesus," he said.

So it's no wonder that Aslan's book is controversial.

"Even people who were present in the life of Jesus couldn't make up their minds about who he was," said Darrell Gwaltney, dean of the School of Religion at Belmont University. "And they were eyewitnesses."