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Aslan synthesizes  
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scholarship to create  
an original account.”  
—*The New Yorker*

“A lucid, intelligent  
page-turner.”  
—*Los Angeles Times*

# ZEALOT

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF  

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JESUS OF NAZARETH

REZA ASLAN

*Author of No god but God*

## **Praise for Reza Aslan's *Zealot***

“Meticulously researched ... This book challenges many long-held assumptions about the man whose life and teachings form the foundations of Christianity. Aslan is not the first author to consider the case of the historical Jesus, but his jargon-free, unprejudiced, reader-friendly presentation of both Scripture and history will ensure that this message will reach a large lay audience.”

—*The Times of Israel*

“Aslan’s insistence on human and historical actuality turns out to be far more interesting than dogmatic theology.... This tough-minded, deeply political book does full justice to the real Jesus, and honors him in the process.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“A bold, powerfully argued revisioning of the most consequential life ever lived.”

—Lawrence Wright, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*

“Be advised, dear reader, Sunday school this isn’t. Yet Aslan may come as close as one can to respecting those who revere Jesus as the peace-loving, turn-the-other-cheek, true son of God depicted in modern Christianity, even as he knocks down that image.... Aslan is steeped in the history, languages and scriptural foundation of the biblical scholar and is a very clear writer with an authoritative, but not pedantic, voice. Those of us who wade into this genre often know how rare that is.... Fascinatingly and convincingly drawn.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“Fascinating ... [Aslan’s] literary talent is as essential to the effect of *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* as are his scholarly and journalistic chops.... A vivid, persuasive portrait of the world and societies in which Jesus lived and the role he most likely played in both.”

—*Salon*

“Reza Aslan’s powerful new *Zealot* paints a vivid, accessible portrait of Jesus.... a coherent and often convincing portrait of who Jesus was and what he wanted.”

—*Tablet*

“The story of Jesus of Nazareth is arguably the most influential narrative in human history. Here Reza Aslan writes vividly and insightfully about the life and meaning of the figure who has come to be seen by billions as the Christ of faith. This is a special and revealing work, one that believer and skeptic alike will find surprising, engaging, and original.”

—Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*

“Aslan brings a fine popular style, shorn of all jargon, to bear on the presentation of Jesus of Nazareth.... He isn’t interested in attacking religion or even the church, much less in comparing Christianity unfavorably to another religion. He would have us admire Jesus as one of the many would-be messiahs who sprang up during Rome’s occupation of Palestine, animated by zeal for “strict adherence to the Torah and the Law,” refusal to serve a human master, and devotion to God, and therefore dedicated to throwing off Rome and repudiating Roman religion.... You don’t have to lose your religion to learn much that’s vitally germane to its history from Aslan’s absorbing, reader-friendly book.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“Jesus of Nazareth is not the same as Jesus Christ. The Gospels are not historical documents.... Why has Christianity taken hold and flourished? This book will give you the answers.... A well-researched, readable biography of Jesus of Nazareth.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Parts an important curtain that has long hidden from view the man Jesus.... Aslan develops a convincing and coherent story of how the Christian church, and in particular Paul, reshaped Christianity’s essence, obscuring the very real man who was Jesus of Nazareth. Compulsively readable and written at a popular level, this superb work is highly recommended.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“In *Zealot*, Reza Aslan doesn’t just synthesize research and reimagine a lost world, though he does those things very well. He does for religious history what Bertolt Brecht did for playwriting. Aslan rips Jesus out of all the contexts we thought he belonged in and holds him forth as someone entirely new. This is Jesus as a passionate Jew, a violent revolutionary, a fanatical ideologue, an odd and scary and extraordinarily interesting man.”

—Judith Shulevitz, author of *The Sabbath World*

# ZEALOT

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*The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*

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Reza Aslan



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Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword.

MATTHEW 10:34

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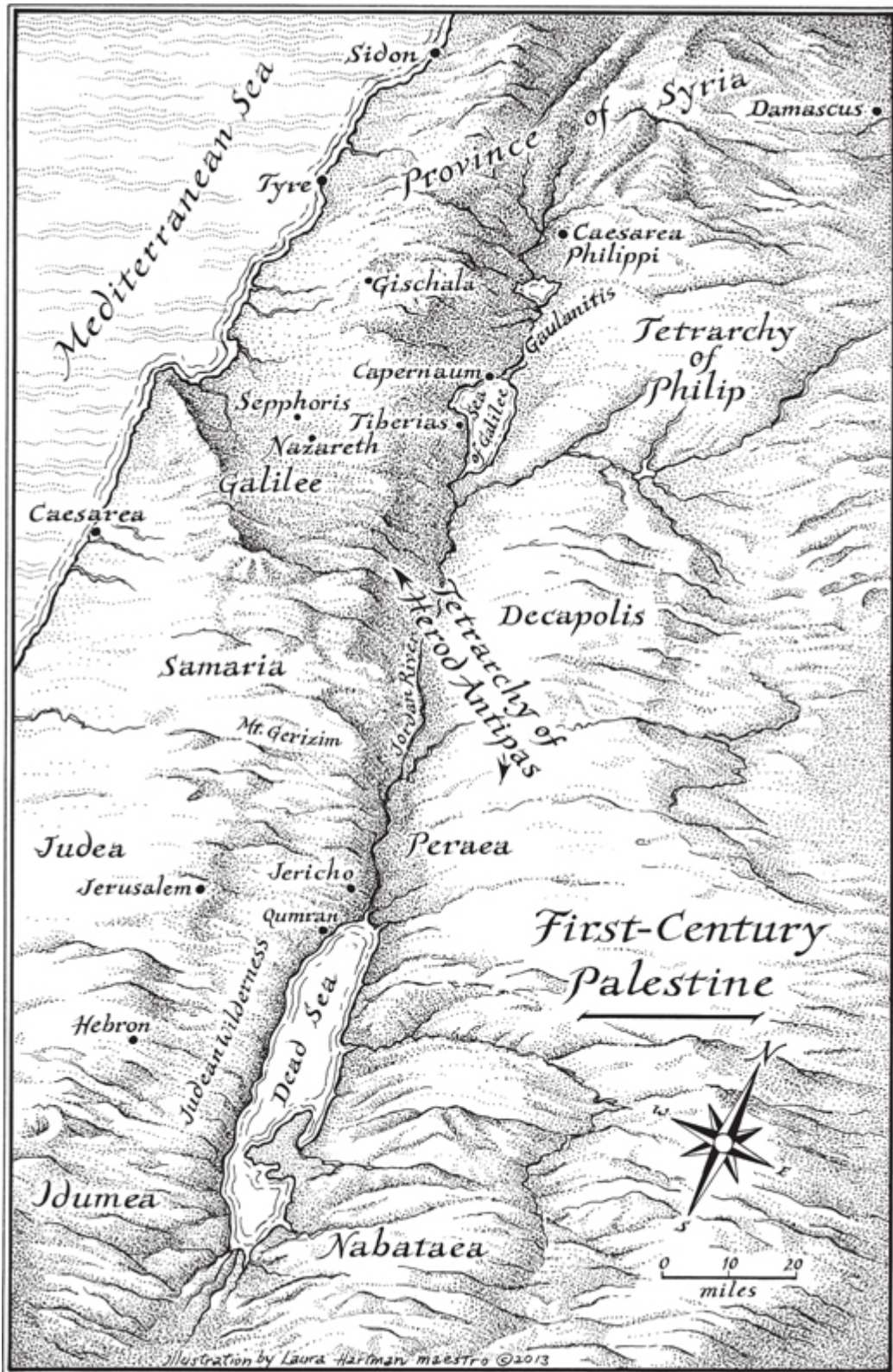
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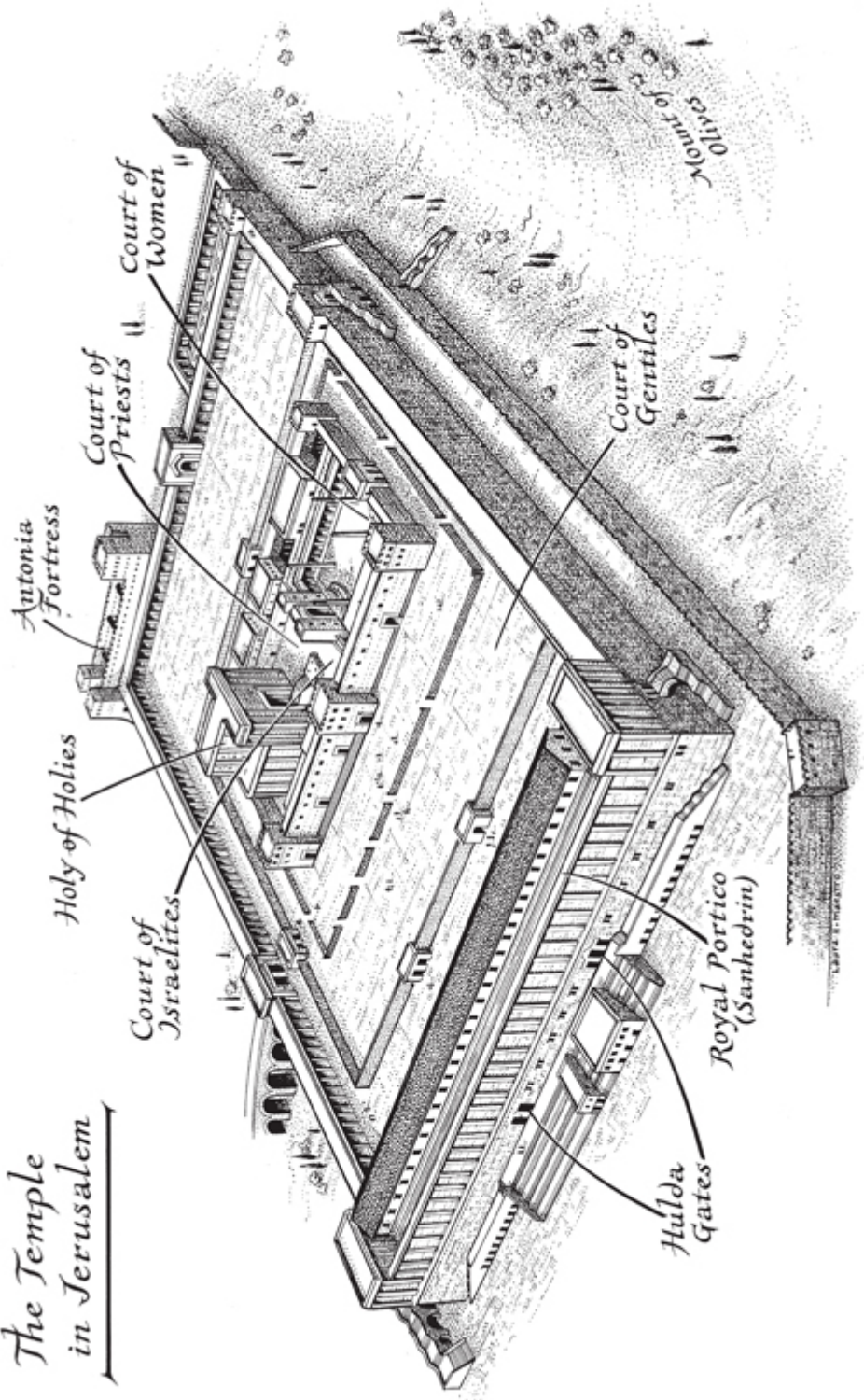
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*The Temple  
in Jerusalem*



## **Author's Note**

When I was fifteen years old, I found Jesus.

I spent the summer of my sophomore year at an evangelical youth camp in Northern California, a place of timbered fields and boundless blue skies, where, given enough time and stillness and soft-spoken encouragement, one could not help but hear the voice of God. Amidst the man-made lakes and majestic pines my friends and I sang songs, played games, and swapped secrets, rollicking in our freedom from the pressures of home and school. In the evenings, we gathered in a firelit assembly hall at the center of the camp. It was there that I heard a remarkable story that would change my life forever.

Two thousand years ago, I was told, in an ancient land called Galilee, the God of heaven and earth was born in the form of a helpless child. The child grew into a blameless man. The man became the Christ, the savior of humanity. Through his words and miraculous deeds, he challenged the Jews, who thought they were the chosen of God, and in return the Jews had him nailed to a cross. Though he could have saved himself from that gruesome death, he freely chose to die. His death was the point of it all, for his sacrifice freed us all from the burden of our sins. But the story did not end there, because three days later, he rose again, exalted and divine, so that now, all who believe in him and accept him into their hearts will also never die, but have eternal life.

For a kid raised in a motley family of lukewarm Muslims and exuberant atheists, this was truly the greatest story ever told. Never before had I felt so intimately the pull of God. In Iran, the place of my birth, I was Muslim in much the way I was Persian. My religion and my ethnicity were mutual and linked. Like most people born into a religious tradition, my faith was as familiar to me as my skin, and just as disregardable. After the Iranian revolution forced my family to flee our home, religion in general, and Islam

in particular, became taboo in our household. Islam was shorthand for everything we had lost to the mullahs who now ruled Iran. My mother still prayed when no one was looking, and you could still find a stray Quran or two hidden in a closet or a drawer somewhere. But, for the most part, our lives were scrubbed of all trace of God.

That was just fine with me. After all, in the America of the 1980s, being Muslim was like being from Mars. My faith was a bruise, the most obvious symbol of my otherness; it needed to be concealed.

Jesus, on the other hand, *was* America. He was the central figure in America's national drama. Accepting him into my heart was as close as I could get to feeling truly American. I do not mean to say that mine was a conversion of convenience. On the contrary, I burned with absolute devotion to my newfound faith. I was presented with a Jesus who was less "Lord and Savior" than he was a best friend, someone with whom I could have a deep and personal relationship. As a teenager trying to make sense of an indeterminate world I had only just become aware of, this was an invitation I could not refuse.

The moment I returned home from camp, I began eagerly to share the good news of Jesus Christ with my friends and family, my neighbors and classmates, with people I'd just met and with strangers on the street: those who heard it gladly, and those who threw it back in my face. Yet something unexpected happened in my quest to save the souls of the world. The more I probed the Bible to arm myself against the doubts of unbelievers, the more distance I discovered between the Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus of history—between Jesus the Christ and Jesus of Nazareth. In college, where I began my formal study of the history of religions, that initial discomfort soon ballooned into full-blown doubts of my own.

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, 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 spiritually 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. I began to rethink the faith and culture of my

forefathers, finding in them as an adult a deeper, more intimate familiarity than I ever had as a child, the kind that comes from reconnecting with an old friend after many years apart.

Meanwhile, I continued my academic work in religious studies, delving back into the Bible not as an unquestioning believer but as an inquisitive scholar. No longer chained to the assumption that the stories I read were literally true, I became aware of a more meaningful truth in the text, a truth intentionally detached from the exigencies of history. Ironically, the more I learned about the life of the historical Jesus, the turbulent world in which he lived, and the brutality of the Roman occupation that he defied, the more I was drawn to him. Indeed, the Jewish peasant and revolutionary who challenged the rule of the most powerful empire the world had ever known and lost became so much more real to me than the detached, unearthly being I had been introduced to in church.

Today, I can confidently say that two decades of rigorous academic research into the origins of Christianity has made me a more genuinely committed disciple of Jesus of Nazareth than I ever was of Jesus Christ. My hope with this book is to spread the good news of the Jesus of history with the same fervor that I once applied to spreading the story of the Christ.

There are a few things to keep in mind before we begin our examination. For every well-attested, heavily researched, and eminently authoritative argument made about the historical Jesus, there is an equally well-attested, equally researched, and equally authoritative argument opposing it. Rather than burden the reader with the centuries-long debate about the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth, I have constructed my narrative upon what I believe to be the most accurate and reasonable argument, based on my two decades of scholarly research into the New Testament and early Christian history. For those interested in the debate, I have exhaustively detailed my research and, whenever possible, provided the arguments of those who disagree with my interpretation in the lengthy notes section at the end of this book.

All Greek translations of the New Testament are my own (with a little help from my friends Liddell and Scott). In those few cases in which I do not directly translate a passage of the New Testament, I rely on the translation provided by the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. All

Hebrew and Aramaic translations are provided by Dr. Ian C. Werrett, associate professor of religious studies at St. Martin's University.

Throughout the text, all references to the *Q* source material (the material unique to the gospels of Matthew and Luke) will be marked thus: (Matthew | Luke), with the order of the books indicating which gospel I am most directly quoting. The reader will notice that I rely primarily on the gospel of Mark and the *Q* material in forming my outline of the story of Jesus. That is because these are the earliest and thus most reliable sources available to us about the life of the Nazarean. In general I have chosen not to delve too deeply into the so-called Gnostic Gospels. While these texts are incredibly important in outlining the wide array of opinions among the early Christian community about who Jesus was and what his teachings meant, they do not shed much light on the historical Jesus himself.

It may appear to the casual reader that I am haphazardly choosing which gospel verses are historically reliable and which are not. But in fact, the methodological tools for determining the historical accuracy of any given passage in the gospels have been in place for nearly two centuries. For example, there is broad consensus among scholars that an earlier passage (say, from the gospel of Mark) is more reliable than a later one (say, from the gospel of John). If a passage appears in all four canonized gospels—a phenomenon known as “multiple attestations”—then it, too, is more likely to be historically accurate. The same is true of a verse or passage that seems to contradict basic church doctrine. For instance, those passages in which Jesus emphasizes the exclusivity rather than the universality of his message are widely acknowledged to be historically reliable because they conflict with the early church's emphasis on the universality of Christianity. There are many more rules that have been adopted by scholars to help place the gospels in their historical context, but to put it in the simplest way possible: those passages that coincide with what we know about the political, social, and religious milieu of first-century Palestine are generally accepted as historical, while those that do not are rejected.

Although it is almost unanimously agreed that, with the possible exception of Luke-Acts, the gospels were not written by the people for whom they are named, for ease and the sake of clarity, I will continue to refer to the gospel writers by the names by which we now know and recognize them.

Finally, in keeping with scholarly designations, this text employs C.E., or Common Era, instead of A.D. in its dating, and B.C.E. instead of B.C. It also more properly refers to the Old Testament as the Hebrew Bible or the Hebrew Scriptures.