

Yesterday I resumed my posts on Reza Aslan's best-selling hit Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth, and plan to have several more posts on it, as I explain what I like about the book and about what problems I see in it. But I need to take care of a couple of other concerns first, before launching into a direct discussion.

The first has to do with this blog. A number of people on my facebook page have expressed frustration that the only way to get my comments is to join the blog, which costs money. I completely understand the complaint, but need to explain why I am doing things this way (apologies for old-timers for whom this is old-news).

I do this blog for a lot of reasons, but by far and away the most important and pressing is to raise money for charity. That is the *raison-d'être* of the entire enterprise. If this endeavor was not making significant money to help the hungry and the homelessness, I simply wouldn't be doing it.

Let me explain a bit further. There are lots of bloggers out there, and almost all of them do it for free. In my field, my sense is that bloggers feel that they have knowledge and views that they want to share with the world at large, and this is a great way to do it. For me that is a completely subsidiary reason for blogging. I do it for the money. And none of the money - ZERO - makes it into my pocket. All of the money, every dime, goes to charities that deal with the poor, the hungry, and the homeless.

Of course, to get to that goal, I share my knowledge and my views, and I do think that's important too. But it's not important enough to make me want to devote an hour a day to the endeavor, which is typically about what it takes. If it were not for the charity angle, I would be oh-so-content and happy spending that hour doing my own research and writing my books. I certainly need another hour a day; in fact I need about 8-10 more hours a day, as possibly you do too.

The membership fee may seem a lot for a blog, and I know some people simply cannot afford what it costs - which comes out to roughly \$2 a month. But if you can afford it, I do my very best to make it worth the cost. You actually get a LOT for that amount of money. I post 5-6 times a week. And my posts average about a thousand words. That's roughly a book-length's worth of content every six months. I try to keep the content meaty, and I present it at different levels - usually just good ole lay-person's level, even though the material I'm dealing with can be very complicated. One of my subsidiary goals is to make scholarly knowledge about the historical Jesus, the New Testament, early Christianity, and so on accessible to the non-scholar. And part of it is to show what it is scholars actually do with their lives.

An additional useful feature of the blog is that it is possible to comment on my posts, and I respond to the comments when commenters ask me to do so. We will soon be setting up an option for commenters to dialogue back and forth more freely and easily with each other.

So I completely understand if someone does not want to spend that kind of money on a blog. And I know that some people simply don't have the money; if you're in that situation, I'm sorry - I wish there were some other way for me both to achieve my goals and to allow you in on the action. For those of you who have the money, realize that it is less than a Starbuck's coffee a month, or, say, about a gallon of gas every two months. So I hope

people won't be too frustrated by my "teasers" where I give part of a post for public consumption, but keep the entire posts for "members only." Given my purpose in doing the blog, I think it has to be that way. If you enjoy the teasers and want to read more - join up if you can! We'd love to have you, you'd get a lot for your money, and you'd be doing a good deed for the world.

Now, my two clarifications about Aslan. First, it has not been clear to everyone that I have not actually said anything very critical about Aslan or the book yet. My main evaluative comments have been that he writes extremely well, he's read a lot, he has an interesting thesis. I have pointed out that the thesis has been around a long time (that's just a piece of information), that he is not a scholar in the field (more on that below), and that he makes a lot of mistakes. In a couple of posts I'll start to detail some of these mistakes - they're the sort of thing that non-experts would make, so there's not much surprise in them. But I haven't been overly critical of anything. (At least I haven't *meant* to be!)

On his scholarship. Here's an issue that simply doesn't want to die. A number of readers have pointed out to me that it's not fair to say he does not have credentials in the field, because he has a PhD in sociology of religion. Yes, he does. And that would provide him with credentials to write a book on the sociology of religion. But his historical Jesus book is not a sociological analysis. It's a historical study based on an examination of the New Testament Gospels. The credentials for that kind of study have nothing to do with sociology of religion. They have to do with expertise in ancient (esp. Roman) history, New Testament studies, early Christianity, and so on - things on which he does not have any particular expertise, apart from having read a lot.

Let me put it like this: in my Department of Religious Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill I have colleagues who are experts in Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism; some work on medieaval Christianity or religion in the Americas or religion and cultural studies; some are anthropologists, some are historians; and so on. All of my colleagues are top-flight experts in their fields of study, all of them have national and many of them international reputations in the field. And not one of them is qualified to write a book about the historical Jesus.

Again, I am NOT saying the Aslan should not have written a popular book. All of this matter of credentials was in response to a direct question asked of me, on the blog, about whether Aslan is a scholar in the field in which he is writing in this book. My answer is no, and I've been trying to explain why. That doesn't mean that the book is necessarily wrong or bad. It simply means that one needs to approach it knowing that the author is not an expert in the field. Does being an expert matter? Sometimes it does. When I go to the dentist, I want an expert. Sometimes it doesn't. When I decorate my Christmas tree, it really doesn't matter how well I've been trained to do it. What about when writing a book? Different people will have different answers.

In my subsequent posts, I'll begin to detail what I like about Aslan's book and what I see the problems to be.



[Aslan's Zealot: Some Positive Comments](#)

[Aslan's Zealot: To Start With...](#)