

In my post of yesterday I moved beyond the simple errors of Aslan's Zealot to discuss more substantive issues, taking his chapter "Zeal for your House" as both central to his argument (as he himself maintains) and highly problematic. Within the seven pages of this key chapter, I indicated that there are, by my count, six major problems, two of which I dealt with yesterday and the other four I will deal with here. Not only are some of the "historical" events that Aslan describes in this chapter almost certainly not historical, at least as they are narrated, both in the NT Gospels and in Aslan's summary (e.g., the Triumphal Entry and Jesus' success in shutting down the entire Temple complex; this is my first problem); and not only does Aslan fill in the gaps of our knowledge with fictional narratives that he himself has made up (this is my second), there are the following four problems, that here I deal with seriatim:

1. His reconstruction of events is riddled with internal inconsistencies that show it cannot be right. In particular, he wants to emphasize, as I just pointed out, that Jesus actually, historically, shut down the entire Temple cult in the presence of "a corps of Roman guards and heavily armed Temple police" (p. 74). This act, Aslan claims, would have been "punishable by crucifixion" (p. 75) But if he's right - why was Jesus not arrested on the spot and crucified? Did he miraculously disappear into thin air? Did no one know who was causing the disturbance when it was obviously no one but he? The inconsistency of Aslan's treatment is seen on the very next page, where he indicates that the Temple authorities later hatched "a clever plot to trap him" (p. 76) by asking Jesus a really tricky question. But if that's the case, then the authorities did know who was responsible for shutting down the Temple. If they knew, why didn't they arrest him? And why did they have to play word games with him in order to trap him? This entire reconstruction - predicated on Jesus' shutting down the Temple - simply doesn't work historically. And yet it is absolutely fundamental to Aslan's reconstruction.

**FOR THE REST OF THIS POST, log in as a Member. If you don't belong yet, YOU'RE ON THE OUTSIDE!!!**

1. His reconstruction of events is riddled with internal inconsistencies that show it cannot be right. In particular, he wants to emphasize, as I just pointed out, that Jesus actually, historically, shut down the entire Temple cult in the presence of "a corps of Roman guards and heavily armed Temple police" (p. 74). This act, Aslan claims, would have been "punishable by crucifixion" (p. 75) But if he's right - why was Jesus not arrested on the spot and crucified? Did he miraculously disappear into thin air? Did no one know who was causing the disturbance when it was obviously no one but he? The inconsistency of Aslan's treatment is seen on the very next page, where he indicates that the Temple authorities later hatched "a clever plot to trap him" (p. 76) by asking Jesus a really tricky question. But if that's the case, then the authorities did know who was responsible for shutting down the Temple. If they knew, why didn't they arrest him? And why did they have to play word games with him in order to trap him? This entire reconstruction - predicated on Jesus' shutting down the Temple - simply doesn't work historically. And yet it is absolutely fundamental to Aslan's reconstruction.

2. He repeatedly makes historical assertions that lack credible basis. I just indicated that "the Romans would have deemed" the shutting down of the temple "a capital

offense: sedition, punishable by crucifixion.” Where is the evidence for that? Why would the Romans care if a Jewish preacher opposed the Temple cult? Do we have any evidence from the Roman world of Romans caring about religious disputes internal to a conquered people? Is there any instance in which the objection to a sacred shrine (not of Rome, but of their subjects) is deemed a capital offense, precisely by the Romans? If so, this is the sort of thing Aslan should cite – at least in his notes!

3. Aslan argues that the central concern of Jesus – as seen in these stories – relates to a matter that in fact is never mentioned in any of these stories (only in his “summary” of them). In particular, he provides an interesting, but somewhat idiosyncratic, interpretation of Jesus’ response to the Jewish authorities who ask him whether they should pay tribute to Caesar. This is the famous case of Jesus saying “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and the things that are God’s to God.” Aslan tries to argue on the basis of the Greek that “render unto” literally means “give back to” (based on the etymology of the Greek word apodidomi). And since the coin is Caesar’s, but the land of Israel is God’s, then Caesar should get back his coins and God should get the land back, from the Romans. I find this to be a highly problematic interpretation for three reasons:

a. It is a facile interpretation of apodidomi, based on its etymology. Sometimes this word does mean “give back” something that once belonged to someone else. But that is not its typical meaning, as any study of the word in the Greek language generally or in its usage within the NT quickly shows. Etymology (apo = back; didomi = give; therefore: give “back”) is not the best way (or even a good way, usually) for determining what someone means when using a word. When you go out to pick your dandelions, you probably are not thinking that what you are doing involves “teeth of a lion” (the etymology – from the old French – of dandelion). The best way to see what a word means is to look at it in its range of contexts. apodidomi usually just means to give or pay something.

b. Aslan’s interpretation means that Jews \*should\* pay tribute to Caesar, which is at odds with his view that as a zealot Jesus did not think they should.

c. Most important – this is really the key – the idea that the “land” belongs to God and so should be given back to him simply doesn’t make sense as Jesus’ meaning. First, notice that the land is never mentioned in this passage. Where did Aslan get the idea that Jesus was talking about the promised land from this passage? He didn’t get it from the passage. He brought it into the passage. It’s simply never mentioned and not there. Moreover, it doesn’t make sense to say it’s there. Jesus is telling his Jewish questioners that they are to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. But the entire problem is that the Jewish people don’t have the land to give back to God. The Romans have it. How can Jesus tell the Jewish leaders to give back to God something that they don’t have? It doesn’t add up. And for a simple reason. Jesus isn’t talking about the land. That may be Aslan’s obsession, but it’s not Jesus’.

4. Similarly Aslan maintains that the fundamental charge against Jesus, leading to his death, is one that in fact never appears in any of our sources. He argues that because Jesus was zealous for the land to be returned to Caesar, this was “enough for the

authorities in Jerusalem to immediately label Jesus as a lestes,” that is as a bandit/zealot opposed to the political forces in control of his land. This then is what led to his arrest and crucifixion. And what’s the evidence that Aslan cites for the authorities designating Jesus as a lestes? None. And why? Because there is none. In none of our accounts of Jesus arrest, trial, and crucifixion is he ever called a lestes, by the Jewish authorities, by the Roman authorities, by his friends, by his enemies, by the Gospel writers, by himself, by anyone. So why does Aslan maintain that this is how Jesus was described by his enemies as the reason for killing him? Because it is central to his thesis. It is in fact his thesis.

The one saying of Jesus that could in \*theory\* be used to support the idea that Jesus was arrested for being a lestes is Mark 14:48 (also found in Matthew and Luke, taken from Mark, but not in John). This is when Jesus ask those coming to arrest him why they have come with swords as if to arrest a lestes. The point of this passage, though, is that Jesus doesn’t understand why they’ve come armed like this as if her were a lestes, when obviously he is not. So if the saying is historical, as Aslan thinks, then it is an explicit disavowal that Jesus was a lestes. But one could (and Aslan does) take the verse to mean that even though Jesus denied being a lestes, that is what the arresting authorities thought he was (so they came with swords). But that interpretation doesn’t work either, precisely because after his arrest, when Jesus is put on trial, it is decidedly not for being a lestes. Jesus was not executed for being a guerrilla soldier. He was executed for calling himself a king. There’s a big difference. And understanding why Jesus may have called himself king, and understanding what the Romans would have taken it to mean, are the keys to understanding Jesus’ death. As it turns out, nationalistic zeal to establish Israel as a sovereign state in the land has nothing to do with it. This I will show in subsequent posts.



[2009 Debate With Mike Licona: Can Historians Prove the Resurrection of Jesus?](#)  
[Aslan’s Key Chapter](#)