

In this post I would like to continue with some of the historical mistakes in Aslan's Zealot. When reading these, do bear in mind that I also had positive things to say about the book.

As in the previous post, I would like this one to focus on historical errors, or historical claims that have no basis in either our ancient sources or modern scholarship. I will not be discussing, in this post, the mistakes Aslan has made about the New Testament. That will be my next post.

- Aslan wants to argue that John the Baptist may have been an Essene (I think there's no way that's true, but the idea has been floated ever since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls; still, John's baptism for remission of sins is completely different from what was going on among the Essenes, who believed in lengthy periods of ritual purification, not a one-time baptism in view of "repentance." But thinking he was an Essene is not a flat-out mistake; it's just a historical hypothesis. The mistake is this:). In doing so Aslan argues that this view might be supported by the fact that "John is presented as going off into the Judean wilderness at a young age" (p. 84). That's not true. I might have reserved this comment for my next post on errors related to the NT, except there is another source for John the Baptist - Josephus (Antiquities, 18, 5, 2). Neither source says a word about John's age when he went to the wilderness (and neither connects him in any way with the Essenes - but that's not a pure mistake on Aslan's part).
- Aslan - in order to heighten the horrific relations between Pilate, governor of Judea, and his Jewish subjects - claims that "in his ten years as governor of Jerusalem, he had sent thousands upon thousands to the cross with a simple scratch of his reed pen on a slip of papyrus" (p. 148). Aslan is making this up. Our sources for Pilate are: (a) the New Testament Gospels; (b) Josephus; (c) Philo of Alexandria (a prominent Jewish philosopher of the first century); (d) an inscription bearing Pilate's name, discovered in Caesarea in 1961; (e) several coins minted during his rule. In NONE of these sources is there any reference at all to Pilate crucifying "thousands and thousands" of Jews. In all these sources, there is reference only to three crucifixions, Jesus and the two crucified with him. We have no idea how many Pilate condemned to crucifixion.

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