

One New Book for the Preacher

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James Carroll. *Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our World*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2011.

“Um, what’s this?” I looked over the new publications at a bookstore, now part of our memory, and came upon the above title. After a number of years and books, James Carroll is like an old friend. I know his story well from *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*, his memoir of the relationship with his father so strained by the war in Viet Nam (*Journal For Preachers*, Easter, 1998), and then *Constantine’s Sword*, his hefty chronicle of the problematic history of injustices wrought by Christians upon Jews. If one wants to know where Hitler’s kind of anti-semitism came from, *Constantine’s Sword* is a good place to start (*Journal For Preachers*, Easter, 2002).

“Well, let me see.” *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* is not as heavy as *Constantine’s Sword*. Substantial, but not gargantuan. I picked up the book without having read reviews or even knowing of its publication and looked at it cleanly for the first time. Thumbing through the pages, I thought of the current strife in the middle east, the hostilities between Israel and neighboring countries, and how long this unrest has been present in my mind. Certainly I can go back to the six day war in 1967, when I was serving on active duty and wondered if that event would extend my service. I remember reading of Harry Truman’s pride in the creation of the state of Israel, hearing references to the Balfour declaration, knowing that the British had something to do with Palestine, even flashing back to the crusader and Robin Hood movies of the early to mid 1950s and the sense of excitement I had about Richard the Lionhearted and his quest to retake Jerusalem. How could anybody remembered as “lionhearted” be anything other than pure good? Then there were all those years in the pulpit, scriptural references to the faithful “going up to Jerusalem,” to the adolescent Jesus staying behind in the Temple, the adult Jesus some twenty years later weeping over the city, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, would that I could take you under my wing . . .,” the raucous welcome on Palm Sunday, the intrigue and tragedy of the week to come, and at last the mystery of the resurrection.

“I think I’ll take this,” I said aloud to no one in particular. “I need to know more about Jerusalem,” and wondered why no one had written something like this before. After having read Carroll’s earlier memoir, I felt a certain kinship. He is my age, and his memoir makes sense in the chronicle of my own life. However, when I got to *Constantine’s Sword*, I found a good bit of Carroll’s personal history mixed into the history of Christian-Jewish relationships, and it was sometimes a bit distracting. I wondered to what extent Carroll would weave his own journey into his book/history/biography of Jerusalem.

The answer comes fairly early as Carroll writes of a time of discernment, 1973. He had been ordained a Roman Catholic priest for several years, was struggling with a number of issues and how he might best live out his sense of call, and arranged

for a retreat to Jerusalem to think through what his lifetime commitments could and would be. *Journal* readers and writers have all faced the question of what it means to be called, and we sympathize with Carroll as he wrestles with his questions even as we envy him his ability to struggle in what many of us will consider a privileged way.

Fortunately, Carroll uses his personal experience merely and briefly to introduce the reader to his own fascination with the ancient city. Once we understand the author's personal history, we move with him into his history of the world and the development of humankind. Certain portions of this seem unnecessary to the task, but we stick with Carroll because he has become an old friend, we like him, we admire his earnestness, and we have been reading him for a long time. He also does a good job. Some might skim over these portions, but he uses the ancient history to set up a time where Jerusalem and its culture of sacrifice come into being.

Those of us who have spent our working lives teaching and preaching the Bible will have a good bit of the biblical outline of Palestinian and Jewish history and culture within our memories. It was in the Babylonian captivity that the Jewish identity crystallized and that Jerusalem began to assume a new centrality of the mind in the national character. The return, the rebuilding of the city and the Temple, all tell of an evolving faith and identity. Carroll fills in some of the gaps, reminds us of the successful Maccabean rebellion in the time before the Roman occupation. At last we come not only to the Romans, but to the time after Jesus' life when, about 70 CE, the Temple and the city were destroyed, tens of thousands of rebellious Jews were killed in the most hideous ways, and those who could escape did escape to other parts of the middle East and the Mediterranean world. It is in this era that Carroll notes the beginning of what he calls the spiritualization of Jerusalem, e.g., although the Temple had been destroyed and there was hardly anything left of the former city, faithful Jews everywhere began to say at their seders, "Next year in Jerusalem." Jerusalem as it had been became an idea to be treasured, to be sought after, to be recaptured.

Whereas I was expecting a chronological timetable, a sequential historical development, what ensues is a biography of the *idea* of Jerusalem. We read of the American ideal rooted in John Winthrop's sermon, "A City on a Hill," and the English ideal in William Blake's poem set to Parry's music in the hymn, "Jerusalem," sung so recently at the British royal wedding. Carroll does not ignore the chronology. We get it that the Byzantine empire dominated the city until the Persians took it in 614, that the followers of Islam took it several years after the death of Mohammed; we have a brief summary of the crusades and know that the successors to Saladin held Jerusalem even as the Zionist movement arose in the later nineteenth century, and that Lord Allenby took it during the First World War. The Balfour Declaration, issued in 1917, stated British support for the idea that there should be "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, and even Jews understood that the British intended for such a Jewish state to be a fief in the British Empire. With chronology in a distant background, Carroll examines and re-examines the ideas of war and violence in the name of God, the incongruity of the three monotheistic religions all taking their hostility out on each other, the regrettable events perpetrated by those who embraced the principles of non-violent faiths. As a Christian, he continues his personal penance begun in *Constantine's Sword* for the atrocities of our Christian forebears to both Jews and Muslims. Carroll's chronology accelerates as the Zionist movement takes hold and

Jews return to Palestine, particularly in their escape from German aggression in the 1930s and as refugees and death camp survivors relocate at the conclusion of World War II. His treatment of the dispossession of native Palestinians is not incidental. And his treatment of the 1961 trial of Adolph Eichmann makes fresh a memory for people of a certain age.

“Centered on the holy city, we have been tracking the history not of religious violence but of an endemic human bipolarity that has often been pushed further into enmity, more savagely into war, by appeals to God. The pattern predates record keeping” (page 296). Thus Carroll begins his concluding chapter which culminates in his summary of what good religion would look like: “Good religion would celebrate life, not death.” “Good religion recognizes in God’s Oneness a principle of unity among all God’s creatures, a unity that is also known as love.” “Good religion is concerned with revelation, not salvation.” “Good religion knows nothing of coercion.” “In the new age, good religion may, paradoxically, have a secular character” (pages 310-317). As he expands on each of his points, we remember why we read Carroll and how he became such an old friend.