



## **Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our Modern World**

*James Carroll*

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## **Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our Modern World** James Carroll

James Carroll's urgent, masterly *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* uncovers the ways in which the ancient city became a transcendent fantasy that ignites religious fervor unlike anywhere else on earth. That fervor animates American history as much as it does the Middle East, in the present as deeply as in the past. In Carroll's provocative reading of the deep past, the Bible came into being as an act of resistance to the violence that threatened Jerusalem from the start. Centuries later, holy wars burned apocalyptic Jerusalem into the Western mind, sparking expressly religious conflict among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The heat stretched from Richard the Lionheart to Field Marshal Edmund Allenby, whose World War I conquest of the city relit the fuse for a war that still rages. Carroll's brilliant leap is to show how, as Christopher Columbus was dispatched from the Crusades-obsessed Knights Templar's last outpost in Iberia, the New World too was powerfully shaped by the millennial obsessions of the City on a Hill — from Governor Winthrop to Abraham Lincoln to Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan. Heavenly Jerusalem defines the American imagination — and always, the earthly city smolders. Jerusalem fever, inextricably tied to Christian fervor, is the deadly — unnamed — third party to the Israeli-Palestinian wars. Understanding Jerusalem fever is the key that unlocks world history, and the diagnosis that gives us our best chance to reimagine peace.

## **Jerusalem, Jerusalem: How the Ancient City Ignited Our Modern World Details**

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## Terence says

Unfortunately, I listened to this on Audio CD in the car and was unable to take even cursory notes so what follows is a list of impressions it made upon me and "things" that stuck in my mind.

\* As a whole, the book looks at the relationship between violence and religion. Carroll argues that religious practice developed because humans had to reconcile the necessity of violence (if only in killing animals to live) with the pangs of conscience that arose within them. That need to sacralize violence only became more important after the Agricultural Revolution c. 12,000 BC, which saw the rise of sacrificial cults. (He interprets the story of Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac as a myth justifying the end of human sacrifice, for example.)

\* But religion is like a game of whack-a-mole. It doesn't eliminate violence, it channels it into socially acceptable actions. It's in this context that he discusses the development of Christianity in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, setting it against the near constant state of revolt that afflicted Roman Judaea from about 60 to 138, when Bar Kochba's rebellion was savagely suppressed. The Jewish Christians were eliminated along with their nonbelieving Jewish cousins (the Romans not being big on doctrinal distinctions) and the Gentiles and Hellenized Jewish converts of the Diaspora carried on Jesus' legacy. The disastrous consequence (in Carroll's argument): Two millennia of anti-Semitism.

\* I wish he would have spent more time on a notion he raises in discussing America's relationship with Jerusalem and that's the infantilization of religion as an unintended consequence of the US's separation of church and state. This is common to Western civilization as a whole as the apparent separation between knowledge and faith becomes more pronounced but is most evident (according to Carroll) in America.

\* I was also fascinated by his discussion of how the notion of not sacrificing the youth of a nation (his interpretation of Abraham & Isaac, see above) was turned on its head to justify just that, particularly in the context of the First World War, Zionism and the current Islamist reliance on suicide bombers.

In the end, I enjoyed the book (though not enough to track down a physical copy - not at this time, anyway). Philosophically, Carroll and I are often on the same page, and his idea of "good religion" mirrors my own. But I think that's its problem when it comes to speaking to a broader audience. Carroll can be very persuasive in his interpretations of what the Bible is "really" saying but - in the end - he can muster no greater justification for them than others whose interpretations differ. I'm reminded of Stephen R. Prothero's *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter*, where that author argues that the "God" of the world's major religions is not the same entity. And even within a religious tradition, "God" means different things to different people. Carroll's "God" and his "religion" will appeal to certain people but will remain unconvincing - if not downright blasphemous(1) - to others.

Recommended if only because of the provocations Carroll offers to our considered understanding of religion. In that regard, he's particularly good for the ancient Israelite material and the European Reformation; he's relatively light, however, on Islamic and doesn't even consider non-Western Christian movements.

(1) In his final chapter, Carroll gets all New Age-y and mystical, writing statements of seemingly profound wisdom that turn out upon reflection to not say much at all. And - to the dismay of Christian readers, at least

- rejects the need for salvation entirely. This last part is the weakest section of the book, no question.

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### **Peter says**

Informative and dense at times. The last chapter makes it a keeper.

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### **Chris says**

Despite what its title suggests, this is not primarily a book about Jerusalem, in either that city's historical reality or its ideological valence. It is a history of violence among Christians, Muslims, and Jews, narrated to cast sacrifice and salvation as theological villains. In its mode as popular history, this is a rousing read, ably told with an eye for detail. When doing popular theology, it was, to me at least, bluntly offensive.

I have not read Constantine's Sword, but its many readers tend to find it ethically compelling. On the basis of this book, I can see why. The anger underneath this book is wholly legitimate. Christian violence (to pick on my own tradition) is a terrible scandal. I am inclined to welcome books that reveal that scandal, as they can spur Christians to repentance.

Carroll's rhetorical reach, however, exceeds his theoretical grasp. He relies heavily on a small clutch of other authors for much of his history and religion. His Islam is Reza Aslan's, his Puritans Perry Miller's, and his anthropology of religion (on which he relies most heavily of all) begins and ends with Rene Girard. Of course this is a popular history, but I am not faulting Carroll for his lack of footnotes here: He is quite properly clear about his sources. But he presents those sources, which can breathe of a certain complacent midcentury liberalism, as prophecy.

To pick on a matter where I've done a little reading: Carroll critiques the Puritans for their intolerance and imperialism, relying largely on Miller. Fair enough: No doubt there are some audiences who still think the Puritans were kindly eccentrics in buckled shoes. His chapter on 19th-century revivalism cites interviews with Skip Stout and Jon Butler. Very well, he took a swing through New Haven. But if he had actually read any of Stout's classic work on Puritan preaching, he would have seen a compelling case against Miller's ideologically freighted simplifications of the Puritans. There are excellent reasons for Americans today to be critical, like Miller and Carroll, of the Puritan inheritance, but simply repeating Miller won't do.

The central chapters on the Crusades seem stronger. When Carroll writes what he actually knows, he tells a ripping good story, one with some ethical force of its own beyond his periodic moralizing. A book closer to this one's title, centered on particular acts and modes of violence rather than the problem as a whole, could have been very strong. The one we have, however, ends with a set of high-handed prescriptions for "Good Religion" (e.g.: Stop preaching salvation; preach instead that everyone is already saved by God's love!) The pitch for this probably made it look like a blockbuster, but somewhere along the way, Carroll found himself with a credo instead. This is clearly the book he wanted to write-- its narrative argument proper begins, no joke, with the Big Bang and Lascaux-- but I wish I could have read the one he'd pitched instead.

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## **Michael E. says**

Could not finish. This book isn't really "history", but rather a collection of suppositions and subjective opinions. There were too many places where the author put forth an unsubstantiated hypothesis forward as if it were proven fact.

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## **Jonelle says**

I selected this book because I thought it might give me some historical and cultural background on Jerusalem. But, I quickly learned that it was much, much more than that. Not only does Carroll touch on Jerusalem's history, the book explores what he calls "Jerusalem fever" and how Jerusalem has come to symbolize and define so much of what has and is happening in America, the Middle East and Europe.

One reviewer said that the book "brims with splendid insights." I agree. Any book that begins with the Big Bang, then continues on with Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac through the founding of Christianity and Islam, to Charlemagne, John Winthrop and the Puritans to the Holocaust, Adolf Eichmann's trial, and the current state of affairs in Israel and Palestine, is either a mess or a tour de force. This one is more in the tour de force category.

His last chapter left me with a lot to think about...What is good religion? It celebrates life, not death; it means deepening our present experience, without any particular regard for its consequences hereafter; it recognizes God's Oneness, with love and unity among all creatures; it is concerned with revelation, not salvation; it does not coerce; and in the future the experience of God may occur more often outside the traditional realm of religion - such as art or science.

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## **Andrew Marr says**

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem’ was the outcry of Jeremiah in his Lamentations, and of Jesus when he was rejected by the leadership in in the holy city. James Carroll’s searingly excellent book is an extension of this outcry with historical, theological and spiritual depth.

This book is not so much a history of Jerusalem as a history of the idea of Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of the imagination. The history of the city itself, of course is deeply affected by the ideas and imagination projected on it, almost always to its detriment. Jerusalem is an image of the ideal, the perfect city and yet this great ideal has shed more blood than could fill an ocean and at the present day the ideal threatens the survival of humanity and the planet we live on. How can this be?

Carroll finds the groundwork for an answer to this troubling question in the thought of René Girard. The anthropological insights into mimetic desire and the resulting rivalry often arising from it is most apt a framework for working through the troubled history of the city on the hill. Carroll’s introduction of Girard’s thought is concise, pointed, and highly insightful even for those familiar with Girard’s thought. (See "Violence and the Kingdom of God" <http://bit.ly/SwYVuH>)

The sacrifice of Isaac, imagined to have been nearly committed on the rock where the temple was later built, is another underlying motif of the book and is a powerful illustration of how God’ revelation of peace and love gets twisted towards violence. A story that almost certainly was intended to reveal the wrongness of human sacrifice got twisted to praising the obedience of Abraham being willing to sacrifice his son which then lead humanity to be willing to sacrifice its children, not just “half the seed of Europe” but at least half

the seed of the whole world, “one by one” in the words of Wilfred Owen’s powerful poem on this story. See my post “Abraham out on Highway 61 at <http://bit.ly/ZPDZqS>”

The Jerusalem of the imagination is narrated through the Jewish establishment of the city as the capital of Judah, a city that became loved when it was lost during the Babylonian exile. It is the city where Jesus ended his preaching ministry and died under the Roman authorities. It is the city the first Moslems wanted because of their share in the tradition of Abraham and the prophets. It is the city that swirled through the Christian imagination, spurring a virulent anti-Semitism that reached its climax in the Shoah. Jerusalem inspired the crusading ideal that lead millions of soldiers and civilians to their deaths. The Battle Hymn of the Republic powerfully sings this violent ideal of the crusade in its purple poetry and Hubert Parry’s noble hymn tune gives force to the ideal of conquering the holy city anew.

It is not possible to do justice to the scope and depth of this book. Anyone interested in religious studies, theology, history, human culture and almost anything else would do well to give the reading of this book a high priority and to read it slowly, carefully and thoughtfully. I do not agree with quite every detail in Carroll’s analysis. Some of his interpretations of the New Testament seem to confuse the content with its reception history, although his analyses of the reception history is fully accurate. The overall thrust is highly compelling and will give every reader, whether Jewish, Christian, Moslem, atheist, or anything else a stiff challenge to one’s thinking, imagination, and relationship to violence, most especially supposedly “noble,” “redemptive” violence.

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### **Jamie VW says**

Don’t be confused by the title - this is not a history of Jerusalem, it is a work of theology, communal psychology and the strains of violence embedded in the Abrahamic faiths that has created religious mythology that brings us to today’s versions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

I’m biased because I took the class at Brandeis that was, in its essence, this book taught by James Carroll - but he is truly the theologian, albeit an unusual one who may not like that term applied to him, that I feel most in tune with. A novelist by trade, this book is beautiful in its ephemeral nature, allowing the reader to apply his or her own background to the reading of this meandering through history, without having to keep up with an onslaught of facts and dates. History is narrative for Carroll, more of a web of connections transcending time and space. All that we are - in terms of politics, religion and society - is built on human psychology and to interpret existence through any other lens is to miss the larger point. He argues for a constant reformation - of religion, of society - and that nothing is beyond critique, but nothing is beyond repair either and that religion has, as he aptly quotes Fromm and whom I paraphrase, has the genius to create and the genius to destroy. We can make truly beauty out of religion - and out of the lessons of the Bible - but we have tended not to, not because of inherent flaws in God and spirituality, but because of human nature, power dynamics and group psychology.

There has to be a sort of suspension of expectations in reading this book, Carroll asks a lot of you the reader, as he did us students, because he is not a pedant by any stretch, but rather offers his beliefs and thoughts as a touchstone to form your own. You make of it what you will. It takes a lot of humbleness, openness and curiosity to do so. But if you can, I think you will really find it meaningful.

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## **BookSweetie says**

NAMED A BEST BOOK OF 2011 BY KIRKUS REVIEWS AND PUBLISHERS' WEEKLY.

The beginning almost derailed me -- it's a book group pick, so I dug deep to keep going.

I am now midstream and it's flowing with fewer whirlpools of confusion, now that I have moved into an area of history a bit more familiar to me than the ancient biblical era where the book began.

More thoughts later.

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## **Kathy Kattenburg says**

I love James Carroll's out-of-the-box thinking, and his thoughtful and compassionate approach to social and religious issues. In this book he makes the case that religion and violence are intimately connected. And here is the out-of-the-box thinking: Carroll's view is that human beings created and historically have used religion as a way, not to justify violence, but to end it. Obviously, violence does not end violence, it only leads to more violence, but this, Carroll says, is the deeply ingrained belief that "ignited our modern world" of wars, murder, terrorism, and retaliatory, escalating circles of violence. He focuses on the three great monotheistic religions, which is why the book is titled *Jerusalem Jerusalem*. There are two Jerusalems: the actual physical 3,000-year-old city, and the imagined, invented, ideological city of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The actual city goes back to a thousand years before Christ, when King David decided to build a temple on the spot where the Hebrew people came to offer sacrifices to God --- a high hilltop called Mount Moriah. Jerusalem is the city that grew around this Temple, which was destroyed and rebuilt after the Babylonian exile, and then permanently destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The war launched by that destruction between Rome and the Jews, lasted 65 years and was second only to the Holocaust in its savagery and consequences for the Jewish people. Indeed, it can be argued (and James Carroll did, in *Constantine's Sword*) that the Roman occupation and destruction of Jerusalem was even more consequential for the Jews than the Holocaust, because it led directly, through the next two millennia, to the Holocaust -- made the Holocaust possible.

*Jerusalem Jerusalem* has been criticized for being all over the map, for trying to cover too much instead of focusing more narrowly on Jerusalem itself. But I think these criticisms miss the point of what Carroll was trying to accomplish, which was to show how the whole of recorded human history, up to and including our present time, has been shaped by the "original sin," so to speak, of connecting violence to sacrificial propitiations to end violence. I think he succeeded admirably.

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## **Sarah Finch says**

This is not a history book per se. Rather, this is an extended meditation on history, like the written version of a graduate-level theology seminar. A former Catholic priest, Carroll tracks Jerusalem and the ripples that have emanated from it throughout history. Not content to simply dwell on Abraham and Jesus and Umar and Saladin and Yitzhak Rabin, he also examines how the IDEA of Jerusalem has affected everyone from Christopher Columbus to Woodrow Wilson. He does not ask easy questions, and he seeks no easy answers -- in fact, the reader may walk away wondering if there are any answers to what he holds up to the light. If

anything, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" is a cautionary tale against religious fundamentalism, but not one that agitates for a more secular world. It is almost as if he is saying that religion would be a wonderful thing were it not for that pesky human nature.

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### **Gabrielle says**

Wow. First of all, this is one heck of an amazing history book. James Carroll captures about four millennia in just over 300 pages, and he does it with rich language, great examples, edifying passages from other scholars, and a sane and consistent voice. Second of all, I am DARN PROUD of myself for committing to this difficult subject and making it all the way through. I learned so much. I know I will return to this text many times in my life, and I am glad I took the time to take notes; subsequent reads or skims will be that much easier.

I am hoping to convince two scholars I know to create a discussion series on this book at my church. There are many questions I haven't answers for, and many topics that I want to share ideas about before making an opinion. A couple of passages (out of hundreds) I found brilliant: "Such is the curve of history that humans can never will the slaughter of someone else's children without finding their own babies dead at their feet" (p. 304). And "Thus the single-most compelling test facing the three monotheistic religions today is how they define the place of women...how women fare is how culture fares..." (P. 316).

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### **Richard says**

I was drawn to read about the story of Jerusalem after seeing the very good Ridley Scott film, "Kingdom of Heaven", about the fragile peace which existed between the Second and Third Crusades in the twelfth century. Scott had created a masterwork in the art of interjecting a heroic fictional character into historical times, and creating a believable interplay between the star character and famous people, in this movie as in his earlier "Gladiator." "Kingdom of Heaven", centered on Jerusalem, has a French blacksmith played by Orlando Bloom traveling to the Holy Land and experiencing firsthand the fanaticism, greed and jealousy against which Christian King Baldwin IV (The Leper) ruled until his death in 1185, and the resumption of hostilities and loss of Jerusalem to "Christendom" following the victory of Muslim leader Saladin at the epic battle of Hattin. Unfortunately, the earlier success of "Gladiator" may have encouraged the use of too much computer-generated battle bombast in this film, which even copied its much better predecessor's use of an eerie, too-futuristic for me, mask on one of the characters. It's an enjoyable film, nevertheless.

James Carroll's book appealed to my need to read more about the fabled city which sits at the center of so much controversy. His underlying theme is to tell the story of the source of "Jerusalem Fever", regarding the city where so many hopes and fears have been anchored over centuries, and the foundation point of so much of the world's religious imaginations; where three faiths began, at the sites of Solomon's Temple and the Hebrews' Holy of Holies, the scourging and murder of Jesus by the Romans, not the Jews (a central tenet of this book), and Muhammad's "mysterious night journey". (p. 123).

Carroll, a former Roman Catholic priest, is interested in more than a travelogue of the storied city. The scope of his study is truly, mind bogglingly cosmic, starting literally with the Big Bang and progressing through the eons until humans walked the earth, and very quickly found a way to deal with the big questions of why we

are here, and what do we represent regarding our place in this universe, by the application of sacrificial bloodletting. Carroll goes into detail to describe this "effervescence of sacrifice" (p. 233) which religion grew from and then directed in order to focus the violence outwardly, to enemies or scapegoats, and thereby protect the community. Jerusalem, as known today, has been the literal location of ancient, pre-Judaic sacrificial practices.

And these primitive impulses have never been purged. Carroll uses the quote from Thucydides, "Humans being what they are" (p. 224), meaning that mankind's attempts to solve the problem of violence have always resulted in even more violence, justified by the illusion that "yet more" would be the last. Remember how Woodrow Wilson vehemently kept America out of World War I, then led the country into joining the Allied cause and sending soldiers into murderous combat in 1918, in the "War to End Wars." In Carroll's scenario, the terrible losses of life in World War I were inevitable given mankind's cathartic need to engage in bloodletting, following such other examples of sacrificial war's sacrificial deaths as: "Agamemnon's to the Maccabees' to the Masada resisters' to Constantine's to Urban II's to Christopher Columbus's ..." (p. 220)..ranging up to Wilson's time, and projecting to the scientific-industrial looming apocalypse of nuclear war.

The place of Jerusalem in all this is not always literal. The spoken and unspoken fervor for the "City on the Hill" has been as instrumental in defining the mythology of the preeminence of the New World's New Jerusalem, America, as defined by such as the Puritans, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan and the end-of-the world evangelists as it has served as a rallying point in the Israeli-Palestinian Wars. And this is where I start to have some doubts with the book's direction, because I just naturally get skeptical at uncomplicated keys to all of world history. Having said that, I had a thoroughly enjoyable time reading this book. Carroll has a mastery of history. Each section of the book contains thought-provoking, accurate arguments to support the author's points. It is especially valuable in challenging the reader to reassess assumptions made from earlier learning.

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### **Donna says**

There was a lot of information covered in this book. Although it was interesting it went on a bit too long. Anyone who wants a history lesson on just about everything and how it goes back to the city on the hill this is the book for you. The book started "In the beginning," (cave paintings) and covered just about everything and everyone up to our present day. Good religion vs. bad religion. Included: Separation of church and state, the crusades, pilgrims and puritans and even witch hunts, the holocaust, the civil war of the US, the PLO and even a drunken Richard Nixon at the height of the Watergate investigation. That is just a few things I could remember. He covers a lot of the monotheistic religions, the three most important being Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Atheism is mentioned too. Wars galore are covered and God is on everybody's side. God is love why couldn't humans just except that and keep all the blood out of it. But alas, "religion and violence fuel each other with Jerusalem being ground zero of the heat" I am ready to read something a little lighter but it gave me plenty to chew on. Bossypants here I come.

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### **Daniel Kukwa says**

Incredibly dense (this is a read that takes time), but also incredibly fascinating & disturbing in equal measure. If you're looking for a thesis that truly captures the violent moral ambiguity of the human race, then

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this is the book to read.

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### **John Laliberte says**

Great insights in an incredibly complicated (and convoluted) history of the three monotheistic faith's (Islam, Jewish and Christian) and how Jerusalem has from the beginning of time been so central. This is more than a history book! Carroll not only provides a very detailed explanation of how the inter-connectivity, and equally important, their commonality can be found in their constant quest for holiness and peace.

What struck me about this book was how the evolution of the human understanding of God and the use of human sacrifice leading to peace – along with the reinterpretation and rediscovery of their history. How these faiths all progress in their understanding of God as a God of Peace and not violence (war), all the while they continued to solve their issues/challenges via increase warfare. The net result seems to be the image of God calling forth peace while humans box themselves into positions of violence. The final question seems to be, will humans “get it?”

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One of the best books I've read in a long time. Several sections were truly heart wrenching. I truly enjoyed the Conclusion: Good Religion!

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