

**Review of John T. Carroll, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction*
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John T. Carroll's recent book, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction*, is a welcome addition to the growing number of biblical studies textbooks that discuss all four canonical gospels in one book. While other reputable options exist (i.e. Stanton 2002 and Powell 1998), Carroll's book is accessible while also providing a great deal of necessary background concerning the historical, social, and political setting for each gospel. Additionally, Carroll incorporates current trends in biblical scholarship into this book and explicitly connects the gospels to current social, political, and ethical conversations. Major strengths of this book include Carroll's clear style of writing, helpful lists and charts included in each chapter, his discussion of relevant contemporary issues, and the online resources available for students and instructors.

The textbook is divided into three parts: 1) Jesus and the Gospels: Context and Approach; 2) Four Portraits of Jesus: The New Testament Gospels; and 3) Coherence and Connections: Thematic Probes for Twenty-First-Century Readers. The substance of the book is found primarily in the second part which includes four chapters dedicated to each canonical gospel. The first and third parts, however, are quite beneficial as the first provides background information and the final chapter connects the gospels to contemporary ethical issues.

In the first chapter, Carroll situates the Gospels within first-century Judaism and the early Greco-Roman empire. Carroll admits the complications and ambiguity surrounding the meaning of "Judaism" during this time period, citing integral works such as *Border Lines* by Daniel Boyarin (2004). He then defines a number of terms significant to understanding Jewish identity and practice in the first century. After these helpful descriptions, Carroll notes the reality and severity of imperial domination by Rome of ancient Palestine. In the second chapter, Carroll addresses the emergence of gospels as literature and the question of the historical Jesus, briefly mentioning a few extracanonical gospels such as the Gospel of Thomas. His brevity in dealing with these texts is explained: "With most yet not all scholars, I regard these extracanonical accounts as generally unreliable profiles of the character, message, and activity of Jesus for purposes of constructing a historical account" (22). This pronouncement leads him to introduce the question of the "Historical Jesus." Carroll then incorporates discussions of gospel as a genre, the formation of the canonical gospels, and the synoptic problem. This chapter ends with an overview of biblical criticism as well as contemporary approaches to reading the gospels. In the conclusion, Carroll gracefully admits that his "individual reading of the Gospels may find helpful challenge and even correction when placed in dialogue with other readings offered by persons whose social location, cultural formation and methods of analysis differ from mine" (44).

In the second section of the book, "Four Portraits of Jesus," Carroll devotes a chapter to each of the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. All four chapters address historical questions such as authorship, date of composition, and possible setting. Carroll then identifies a number of themes, narrative techniques, and motifs within the gospel and expands upon them using carefully chosen examples from the text. For example, in chapter three, Carroll introduces the "sandwiching" or "intercalation" integral to Mark's gospel and provides three specific examples (5:21-43; 6:7-32; and 14:54-72, 58-59). When outlining examples and lists, Carroll includes helpful charts that succinctly outline the information he includes. In a section describing Mark's tendency to highlight the failure of Jesus' disciples, Carroll provides a chart listing eight "seemingly minor characters [who] embody more appropriately the character of discipleship" (74). Several female characters are included in this chart such as the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30. Later, when discussing Matthew's use of Mark as a source, Carroll provides examples of Matthew's presentation of the disciples as depicted more favorably than the disciples in Mark's gospel (104).

When turning to the Gospel of John, in chapter six, Carroll notes: "John's Gospel marches to the beat of a different drummer than the Synoptic percussion section" (192). Indeed, the chapter moves carefully through John's gospel pointing out aspects that differ from the synoptic gospels as well as a few commonalities. One particularly strong part of this chapter is Carroll's description of the scene between Jesus and Pilate in chapters 18 and 19. Through an outline that stages each "scene" as "inside" or "outside," the reader is able to visualize this interaction that leads to Jesus' final hour in John's Gospel (211-4). This chapter concludes with a brief yet essential acknowledgement of the "potential of this Gospel to generate readings that foster anti-Judaism" (239).

The final chapter, "From Ancient Gospels to the Twenty-First Century," begins with a list of current events that were happening while Carroll was writing this book. Included in the list are references to the Black Lives Matter movement, the Syrian refugee crisis, global Islamophobia, leaders who ignore climate change, and even presidential candidates who "spout angry rhetoric of exclusion and xenophobic contempt" (243). In response, Carroll asks: "What do the Gospels have to say to us in the midst of all this human ugliness?" (244). Answering that question is difficult, but Carroll addresses its complexity through a discussion of current trends in scholarship such as a focus on empire or issues of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, Carroll argues that the central message in the gospels is one of hope – even in the midst of oppression. The final paragraph of the book includes this thought-provoking remark: "In the context of the United States today, I submit that a critical test of the adequacy of an ethically responsible interpretation of the Gospels is how it positions readers to respond to the persistent racism and the fear of others who are different that plague U.S. American society" (257). These final words are a challenge to students to find ways to use the empowering aspects of the gospels as a form of ethical activism.

A major strength of *Jesus and the Gospels* is the website that accompanies this textbook (<http://jesusandthegospels.wjkbooks.com/>). Beneficial for both instructors and students, this website includes maps, chapter summaries, questions to guide class discussions, and even flashcards for students to use when studying for exams. A sample syllabus is provided that uses Carroll's book alongside other

helpful resources (i.e. Smith 2015 and Levine 2007) and all the charts included in the book are available for download.

Overall, Carroll's *Jesus and the Gospels* is an excellent resource especially for those teaching a course on the gospels. While this book covers the topics and information necessary for a student to begin a serious study of the canonical gospels, this reviewer hoped for more specific inclusion of feminist scholarship and more interaction with extracanonical gospels. For example, in the chapters on Mark and Luke, Carroll helpfully includes a section including gender analysis of the gospels and discusses recent conversations about the masculinity of Jesus (Conway 2008 and Wilson 2015). Yet, no specific examples of feminist scholarship are given in these same sections. In fact, in the discussion about women in Luke (a debatable topic among feminist scholars), the footnote neglects to mention several important feminist scholars whose work is integral to this discussion (i.e. Schaberg 1998). Yet, as Carroll mentions himself, a viable option is to assign Carroll's book, make use of the fantastic online resources, and then supplement this text with an additional monograph or articles written by scholars who have a differing social locations and perspectives.

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