

## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide.* By Warren Carter. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006, 148 pp., \$16.00, paper.

Warren Carter, professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas, is one of the leading scholars in the field of imperial-contextual analysis of the NT. This excellent yet highly accessible volume provides a substantial introduction to the importance of understanding NT events in light of their context within the Roman Empire. Carter's current research has focused on the process of interaction between the NT communities and the dominant values of Roman imperial ideology. His recent works include *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical/Michael Glazier, 2003); *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2007); "Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as 'Lights Out' Time for Imperial Rome (Matthew 24:27-31)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 467-87; "Proclaiming (in/against) Empire Then and Now," *Word and World* 25 (2005): 149-58; and "Matthew and Empire," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59 (2005): 86-92. Carter's work is situated within the postcolonial approach to NT studies which seeks to read the texts "from below." His approach also draws upon audience-oriented criticism which seeks to understand how texts were received as they were interpreted by their audience. He skillfully combines these two approaches in this work. Though most of Carter's work has focused on the Gospel of Matthew, his mastery of the broader NT corpus is evident in *The Roman Empire and the New Testament*.

Chapter 1, "The Roman Imperial World," provides an introductory description of the structure of the Roman imperial system. Carter argues the Roman Empire is ever present in the NT and that the NT writers are not unified in their approach or evaluation of the empire. He also notes two realities that hinder our understanding of the presence of the empire in the NT: the unification of religion and politics in the empire and a general lack of knowledge about the Roman world. Rigid hierarchy and economic disparity were two key aspects of the structure of the Roman Empire during the Principate. The Roman Empire was thoroughly hierarchical and male-dominated. The emperors required military support and alliances with the ruling elites to maintain power. The imperial cult served to further stratify society and provide a sense of divine approval on the reign of the emperor. Carter notes how elite values supported the hegemonic conception of ruling power and "hierarchical societal structure" (p. 10). The negotiation necessary to survive as a nonelite was significant, and various coping mechanisms emerged—one in particular, "hidden transcripts" (p. 12)—that were vital to a non-violent form of protest to the inequalities leveled against the well over ninety percent of the population that were part of the nonelites.

Chapter 2, "Evaluating Rome's Empire," looks at how some of the NT writers evaluated the Roman imperial system. Carter provides a much needed corrective to the tendency within NT studies to homogenize the integration and evaluation of the empire by NT texts. There is actually a variegated approach to empire, distinctive of the various authors and the parts of the empire in which their recipients dwelt. Carter notes however there is consistency of evaluations concerning Rome "in relation to

God's life-giving purposes" (p. 16). This is an important component of Carter's survey in that imperial-contextual analysis of the NT is often somewhat wrongly accused of minimizing theological concerns. The first approach to evaluation, Carter suggests, is "the empire is of the devil" (p. 16). This approach understands the Roman Empire as part of the cosmic struggle between good and evil and is seen in the Gospels (e.g. Jesus' temptation, Luke 4:1–13; the demon named "Legion," Mark 5:1–20) and the book of Revelation (e.g. chaps. 12–13). This evaluation understands no redeeming value in the Roman imperial system. The second approach is "Rome's world is under judgment" (p. 18). This is an apocalyptic framework in which the earthly rule of Rome is understood to be passing away (e.g. 1 Cor 2:6–8). The next two approaches foreground the concept of practices that subvert the empire through "acts of transformation" and the establishment of "alternative communities" (p. 20). These alternative communities may develop alternative economic structures (1 Cor 16:1–4), power relations (Matt 20:24–28), and transformation of the unjust political structures within the empire (Luke 4:18–19a). A final approach emphasizes "submitting to, praying for, and honoring the emperor" (p. 22). Carter understands this approach as an accommodation to empire (e.g. 1 Pet 2:13–17) and leaves open the possibility "that 1 Peter is encouraging Christian participation in honoring the emperor . . . while recognizing that their real commitment is to Christ" (p. 23). Carter weaves an intricate tapestry of strategies of "survival, protest, accommodation, and imitation" within earliest Christianity concerning the Roman Empire and provides a plausible reconstruction of the nature of the negotiation that was occurring within nascent Christian communities.

Chapter 3, "Ruling Faces of the Empire: Encountering Imperial Officials," describes the nature of the interaction of these early Christ-followers with the various Roman imperial ruling authorities: "emperors, client kings, governors, and soldiers" (p. 28). Carter looks at seven different references in the NT to the emperor. His interpretation of "pay back to Caesar the things of Caesar and to God the things of God" (Mark 12:13–17) reveals how a postcolonial, audience-oriented approach to the text can provide brilliant interpretive insights. Carter detects an "unofficial transcript" at work in Jesus' subversive response to the ruling elites aligned with Rome and argues that "Jesus' instruction . . . is a dignity-restoring act of resistance that recognizes God's all-encompassing claim" (p. 29). The client kings, the Herodian dynasty, are seen as unsympathetic figures in the NT narrative, behaving as unscrupulous provincial elites actively resisting God's work in Judea and Galilee (e.g. Matt 2; Mark 6:14–28; Acts 12:1–5). Jesus, on the other hand, "is presented as a king who represents God's just and triumphant purposes" (p. 37). Roman governors were another face of the empire; these individuals were appointed by the emperor or the senate and served as functionaries to assure the proper collection of taxes and the extension of the Roman rule of law throughout the provinces. Carter builds on his earlier work on Pilate, mentioned above, to provide an illustration of the nature of the interaction of a governor over those whom he ruled (Matt 27:11–26). The soldiers were the face of the empire that most people living under the Roman Empire encountered. Carter concludes this chapter with a disconcerting postcolonial insight concerning the pervasiveness of military imagery in early Christian discourse even though Jesus' instructions forbade the use of violence (e.g. Matt 5:41; 26:53; John 18:36).

Chapter 4, "Spaces of Empire: Urban and Rural Areas," identifies the countryside and cities as spaces of Roman dominance and as places in which negotiation of empire often occurred. This chapter provides an excellent example of the application of critical spatial theory as practiced by Henri Lefebvre and Edward

Soja. Space is not an empty partner in the construction and negotiation of identity, and Carter looks at how the embedded power discourses were embodied in the material structures of empire. He evaluates how power discourse occurred within the nexus of urban-rural topography and applies these insights to the Gospel communities, the Pauline communities, and the cities in Revelation. Paul's rhetorical vision for group formation was impacted by the material structures of empire, and Carter notes it is not clear if his communities agreed with his vision for communal formation "or preferred other ways of negotiation" (p. 63).

Chapter 5, "Temples and 'Religious'/Political Personnel," continues the critical spatial analysis that was begun in the previous chapter, this time focusing on ritual space, temples, and the nature of Roman religion. Carter begins by correcting the faulty assumption that a public/private binary existed in Roman antiquity. Roman imperial religion was political, corporate, and public. Temples were not seen as isolated religious institutions. They reinforced Roman imperial propaganda, established civic identity, and were tools of political, economic, and social exploitation. Carter evaluates the role that Roman imperial ideology played in the Jerusalem temple, noting Josephus's remark that "[s]acrifices were offered in the temple *for* but not *to* the emperor and Rome" (Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.416, emphasis original; p. 66). This serves as a good example of the negotiation necessary to maintain Judean identity in the midst of Roman domination. Jesus' conflicts and teaching concerning the Jerusalem temple are surveyed and Carter shows how the early Christ-followers' experiences, as described in Acts, with the Jerusalem temple cohered with that of Jesus. Paul's negotiation of ritual space is evaluated in the context of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. This section is vital to understanding the nature of civic religion in the Roman east and provides significant insight into the way in which nested-identities were negotiated within the Roman Empire. Carter describes the results of this negotiation, suggesting "they [early Christians] must live in this multireligious world, finding their own faithful place in it without necessarily expecting to overturn its civic and imperial structures" (p. 77). Carter then focuses on the ritual observances within the imperial cult throughout the Roman Empire and discusses the nature of negotiation as seen in 1 Peter and Revelation. Roman religious discourse required significant negotiation within earliest Christianity. Carter, in this chapter, notes three predominate ways in which this negotiation with Roman religion occurred: some early Christ-followers chose opposition, some accommodation, and others possible active participation.

Chapter 6, "Imperial Theology: A Clash of Theological and Societal Claims," discusses the nature of competing claims for supremacy between the propaganda of Roman imperial theology and the claims about God and Jesus. Carter provides an excellent introduction to Roman imperial theology, relying, for the first time in this book, on a significant amount of primary sources (e.g. Virgil's *Aeneid*, Seneca's *De Clementia*, Tacitus's *Annales*, Suetonius's *Vespasian*, Statius's *Silvae*, and Pliny's *Panegyricus*). These references provide the readers with a sense of the content of Roman imperial theology and comprise one of the strengths of this book. Rome claimed divine sanction for its empire, but the NT, Carter points out, directly disputes this central claim (e.g. Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 2:8; 8:6). Much of the vocabulary of early Christian discourse contained intertextual elements with Roman imperial vocabulary (e.g. good news, salvation, righteousness, and faith) and Carter notes there is evidence of subversion in some of this discourse (e.g. Rom 13:1-7; p. 92). Carter then summarizes similar evidence in the Gospels, noting that Jesus serves as God's agent and that his followers are to continue to follow his commands until he returns. This language resonated with Roman imperial ideology, and Carter makes a

strong case for the need to foreground the political implications of early Christian discourse.

Chapter 7, "Economics, Food, and Health," examines the economic realities and negotiation that occurred within the empire, especially in the areas of food, health, and other daily matters. Roman imperial power was expressed through these rather mundane economic and domestic experiences. Carter's approach to history "from below" is most clearly seen in this chapter, where he notes, "economic structures were exploitative and unjust" (p. 101). This conceptual blend serves as the interpretive framework for Carter's understanding of how early Christ-followers supported, fed, and cared for themselves and each other. Carter argues that in Matthew Jesus is editing the dominant script as it relates to wealth (Matt 19:21-29). James, Carter notes, is writing to "a community experiencing significant economic oppression" (p. 102). He is writing to them to encourage them to trust God for economic viability in the midst of an oppressive economic system. Carter provides a postcolonial, audience-oriented reading of James (pp. 103-105) that coheres well with the details of the letter. In Revelation, communities of faith are addressed concerning their complicity in sustaining certain aspects of the Roman economic system. Carter comes to this conclusion based on an innertexture element from Revelation 18 with Revelation 2-3. Food is discussed next, and Carter evaluates how meals and domestic space supported Roman imperial ideology, "[f]ood was about power" (p. 109). When the NT discusses food, a discourse of power is operative. Food shortages created political problems, and the ability to navigate food shortages became a vital political skill. Carter alludes to the possibility that "the impending crisis" in 1 Cor 7:26 referred "to a food shortage" (p. 111). Winter and Blue have argued for this as well, and there is no reason to doubt that this refers to the famine of AD 51. Carter concludes with a short section on health in the empire and notes that the prevalence of sickness in the empire argues for understanding "Jesus' healings and exorcisms" as being "direct confrontations with the effects of Roman rule" (p. 117). The NT writers were aware of the difficulties of daily life in the Roman Empire; however, they were also well aware that the power of the gospel offered assistance with those same difficulties. Carter's work in this chapter brings this fact into relief.

Chapter 8, "Further Dynamics of Resistance," explores three forms of resistance to the Roman Empire as seen in the NT: "imagining Rome's violent overthrow, employing disguised and ambiguous protest, and using flattery" (p. 120). Earliest Christianity followed Jesus' command concerning non-violence towards the Romans (e.g. Matt 26:52-53; John 18:36); however, their rhetorical vision still envisioned such a scenario. Paul, in 1 Cor 15:24 argued that God will destroy all empires; this is, however, intramural rhetoric. Carter notes, "Matthew envisions Rome's overthrow in 24:27-31 at the return of Jesus" (p. 122). One of Carter's most interesting interpretive choices, which is also in his *JBL* article mentioned above, is that "vultures" translated in v. 28 should be translated as "eagles" and that "Jesus' coming is 'lights-out' time for Rome" (p. 123). Carter sees similar imagery at work in Revelation and concludes "[t]hese imaginings are the in-group protests of an alternative community, directed against Rome but not made public or expressed openly to Rome" (p. 128). Carter suggests the earliest Christians also participated in disguised or indirect protest. While it is possible that these protests are there, the nature of their ambiguity and the lack of an objective standard by which to discern their presence require a cautious approach to uncovering this type of protest. Carter's final approach to resistance focuses on the rhetoric of flattery in Rom 13:1-7. Carter's solution is somewhat unsatisfying, and the existence of a "hidden transcript"

in Rom 13:1–7 better explains the nature of Paul's exceptional rhetoric in these verses. Carter's work in this chapter provides an insightful introduction into the nature of protestation in antiquity. The existence of accommodation and resistance simultaneously within a community of Christ-followers suggests there is more work to be done in this important area.

Carter's purpose is to show the reader how early Christians and NT writers negotiated the Roman Empire, and the chapters in the book are structured around those imperial realities (p. x). This volume fulfills that purpose and meets a vital need for those studying or teaching the NT and would serve as an excellent undergraduate textbook as well as for the general public. The Roman Empire is normally treated as part of a cursory survey of background material when discussing the various NT communities and their texts. Carter's work demonstrates that such an approach is unsatisfactory and leads to missing key interpretive frameworks. The presence of the Roman Empire is not a background issue; it is a foreground issue, one that must be engaged for a proper understanding of NT texts.

A number of strengths and weaknesses have been mentioned throughout this review; however, one more requires attention. Carter seeks to establish the Roman Empire as the context in which the NT unfolds. This fact is indisputable; however, Carter's work does not fully show that empire-focused questions were central in the mind of the NT authors or their auditors. This criticism is often raised when scholars engage in sustained imperial-contextual analysis of the NT. Carter is sensitive to this criticism and makes an effort to address theological concerns throughout the book. James Dunn, for example, recognizes imperial-contextual analysis as interesting but secondary to the theological concerns of the authors and their auditors. While Dunn's criticism is valid, he dismisses imperial-contextual analysis too quickly. Theological concerns in the NT, however, are also political concerns. The lack of evidence for sustained discourse concerning the empire is only an argument from silence, and Carter's book, while susceptible to these same criticisms, does make efforts to correct this short-coming within imperial-contextual studies. Criticisms of Carter's work are sometimes subsumed under a broader criticism of Richard Horsley's work. While there are significant similarities between the work of Carter and Horsley, especially in the area of contemporary contextualization of imperial-contextual analysis (e.g. the impact of the United States as an empire), Carter's work does not establish the same binary relationship between earliest Christianity that is evident in Horsley's work. Carter presents a more nuanced approach, one in which the degree of continuity with Roman imperial ideology is given its full textual consideration. This limits some of the broad-ranging conclusions evident in Horsley's work; however, it makes the conclusions that Carter does reach more plausible. This scholarly restraint and circumspection produces a highly accessible introduction to the Roman Empire during NT times and is recommended for students in biblical, theological, and religious studies.

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*2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness.* By R. Kent Hughes. Preaching the Word, ed. R. Kent Hughes. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006, 271 pp., \$24.99, hardcover.

R. Kent Hughes is a familiar friend to evangelical preachers, particularly those in pastoral ministries. In addition to fifteen other titles in the Preaching the Word commentary series, his books include *Disciplines of a Godly Man* and *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (co-authored with his wife Barbara). He serves



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