

A Review of Warren Carter's *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*

(Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), main body, including introduction, 1-179 pages; notes pages 181-220; bibliography pages 221-241; selective general index pages 243-244; author index pages 245-249. Paperback

Introduction

In approaching this review of Warren's book, *Matthew and Empire*, I thought I would explore a bit to see what else he has been up to. It is common to meet his good cheer and smiling face in passages of hotels and convention centers of SBL meetings. But what lies behind this gentle scholar? Checking into the library I found quite an array of publications, and if I remember correctly, recently I have seen in a brochure an advertisement of a multi--authored book to which he has contributed a chapter. This does not count his articles in major journals. It seems that he has a ghostwriter to assist him--surely he cannot produce as much as what goes by his name. Or else, there is a productive community of the beloved Carter somewhere in mid-Missouri. At least every two years, it seems, he has published something (2 in 1994; 1 in 1996; 1998; and 2000, etc.). One contains more than 600 pages. In all, he has published so far the following on Matthew's Gospel: exegetical techniques for handling it, a great deal of what might be termed "postmodern"—i.e., social science criticism, a variety of reader responses (audience oriented, socio-political & religious readings),

narrative/story, and the like, as well as a commentary and topics related to Matthew, such as parables and Sermon on the Mount.

Purpose and Thesis of the Book

Carter has worked on the theme of this book for some time, having published a number of articles, which in other versions serve as the material of some chapters of this book. He wrote this book in part because of a perceived lacunae—or as he puts it on page one: “Overlooked in this discussion, and almost completely absent from it, is the simple observation that the Gospel [i.e., Matthew] comes from a world dominated by the Roman Empire.” And on page five: “Matthew’s Gospel does not seem to many contemporary readers to refer to the Roman Empire only because often we cannot supply the assumed imperial experience and knowledge.” Support for the project was keen but with one enduring remark—“show me a text.” Consequently, he provides a survey of Roman Imperialism in part 1. From parts 2-3, he moves ever forward, showing how this information connects with not only the world of the audience but with the world of the text. Certain narrative portions are chosen to demonstrate the connection between Roman Imperial background and the assumed audience as hinted at in the

text. So he wishes to argue “that Matthew’s Gospel contexts and resists the Roman Empire’s claims to sovereignty over the world” [p. 1].

Overview of Contents

Matthew and Empire contains three parts; in the first part Carter provides an analysis and synthesis of the Roman Empire in topical manner. This part lays a foundation for the rest of the book.

Part two also is topically developed but is done in a manner so as to connect the Matthean themes of Christology and soteriology with Roman theology to show how Jesus is sovereign over Rome.

The third part, consisting of four chapters, directly connects narrative portions with Roman Imperialism. This part consummates his purpose and thesis and shows how this information can be usefully employed to understand Matthew’s audience.

Method

Let me paint this part of the review with broad-brush strokes and say something about his methodology. I am not quite sure that Carter would agree wholeheartedly with Malina’s categorization about genre. On the back cover, Bruce Malina says, “Carter has written an excellent, eminently readable piece of social history.” I completely agree. And more than likely

this is as close as one can get to identifying Carter's approach and the genre of his book. This is not a sociological approach wherein he attempts to either critique or apply some of its methods or models such as functionalism. Nor is it a Matthean anthropology on the first gospel's community such as something Malina himself has contributed towards.¹ Carter himself notes that the genre of this book is different from his "commentary" *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (p. 3).² His method is anchored in a narrative approach with specific attention paid to the audience: "In other words, the 'authorial audience' is a 'contextualized implied reader' not so much present in the text as presupposed by the text. I reconstruct this audience partly from textual features (e.g., a Greek text attests they knew about this language and at least someone could read it aloud) and from an examination of the interrelation between the text and context in which the work was produced" [p.4]. This book is a nice blend of methods, especially social scientific, narrative, and reader criticism. In short, this is a post-modern work well done.

It is in this light that I want to make a few remarks about Carter's historical reliability as compared to the straightforward anthropological

¹ B. J. Malina and J. H. Neyrey, "Comparing U.S. Values with the Mediterranean View," in the Appendices of *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1988), 145-51.

² Carter has worked out the Jewish side of Matthew in this commentary. I have not had a chance to work through it, however.

approach of Malina and colleagues. As a social history (though part one is more of a social description), *Matthew and Empire*, is based on more solid data than Malina's approach.

This anthropological approach begins with a 20th century model of Mediterranean societies. This method studies, builds, and then extracts models to use in interpreting ancient Mediterranean peoples. Others have criticized this approach for this reason, and it is a weakness of the method. Critics believe that the use of these modern models have forged a foreign interpretative grid over the structures of ancient communities. I have sympathy with both sides of the issue. Malina has noted that flexibility does not damage the results but rather enhances them when compared to an absence of application of social scientific criticism to the interpretative process. On the other hand, the use of modern models to interpret older cultures has caused some to suspect social scientific criticism. There are no objective controls to guide the process. Joel Green in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke in the NIC series published by Eerdmans, for instance, has carefully employed a social science approach without this grid.

Admittedly, it is very difficult to analyze ancient cultures that no longer exist. Depending on the site, one is left with few ancient documents and some other data that come from archaeological remains. It is always

helpful, though, to attempt to put the data in a broad context by using as many extant sources as possible. Near sightedness that comes from selective sources is not user friendly to the interpreter.

This is where Carter rises to the occasion. He uses a wide-ranging array of sources. By not employing an anthropological, such as Malina's, or a sociological model, he avoids the pitfall of both.

However, I would like to raise one question; though Carter does not employ contemporary models (the method precludes it) to reconstruct the Matthean community in its Roman environment in ancient Antioch, his method can fall under the same criticism. He extracts information from a variety of sources deriving from different times, places, and authors to recreate the world of this Matthean community. While I believe that this is good methodology and well done, because in general terms this is very helpful to apply to a specific situation. The details/data will work to better assist one's understanding. In fact, others are arriving at many of the same conclusions but from a different angle. For instance, at last November's SBL meeting in Denver, Gary Gilbert arrived at similar conclusions about Roman imperial theology and Luke-Acts.³

³ Gary Gilbert, "When Map is Territory: Geographic Images as Expressions of Political Power," Presented in Sunday PM "Social History of Formative Christianity and Judaism Section." According to Gary, the paper should be published this spring in a major journal.

Nonetheless, conclusions must always be tenuous. I am thinking about what Frederick W. Norris, extracted from a paper read in another context and placed in a focused format, said in a chapter about Antioch in the *Social History of the Matthean Community*:

The great Hellenistic histories of the city are lost.⁴

Most of our written sources deal only obliquely with Antioch as they tell of other things. With the exception of John Malala's sixth-century C.E. world chronicle, which includes parts of the city's archives from throughout its history, and Libanius's fourth-century C.E. *Oration* 11, which praises the metropolis and thus gives us a look at one rhetorician's view of its life over the course of its existence, we have little written record of its days. John Chrysostom's sermons tell us many things about its social history but they are too late for first-century interests.

For those concerned with the social history of the Matthean community in Roman Syria, the evidence from or about Antioch is meager or totally lacking.

⁴ Glanville Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 35-38.

Disappointingly, however, there is no specific archaeological information know to me that would link the Gospel of Matthew with Syrian Antioch. The coin evidence used by B.H. Streeter proved to be of little value since that type of issue was not restricted to the city. Streeter's main argument rests upon the assumption that a Gospel as important as Matthew must come from some large urban center with great influence.⁵ Such an assumption is improvable on the basis of the information we have. Even on the level of proposed models for interpretation, church history will not sustain the presupposition that influential writings must come from large urban centers."⁶

I have two questions: 1) Has the scene changed since this was published?" 2) Are Streeter's arguments valid or not, as Norris says? Carter does refer to coins of Antioch on page 44 where he writes, "Since Augustus and Tiberius, coins minted in Antioch bore the image of the emperor. Claudius and Nero increased the witness to Roman sovereignty by minting

⁵ Referring to B.H.Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 500-528, esp. 504.

⁶ Frederick W. Norris, "Artifacts from Antioch," *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. David L. Balch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 249.

coins that not only bore the emperor's name and titulature in Latin, but which identified Antioch and the governor's name in Greek." But Carter quotes from Downey who published in 1961, whose work obviously predates Norris considerably.⁷

Yet, another perspective exists. Craig Keener in his recent tome on Matthew notes: "A recent collection of essays argues that the canonical Gospels were written for the whole of ancient Mediterranean Christianity rather than for specific communities (see Bauckham 1998b)." He proceeds a bit later with: "Nevertheless, at least some Gospel writers seem to have addressed primarily a particular range of ideal audience within the ancient Mediterranean world; . . . But looking for Gospel audiences and their locations is not the same as reconstructing detailed "communities" (Barton 1998:194)."⁸ And Keener goes on to see a primarily Jewish audience.

Show Me a Text

Now may I say a word about interfacing Roman Imperialism with Matthean text? In this third part, Carter takes several passages and explores them as test cases. It is especially the first one, chapter 6, "Evoking Isaiah:

⁷ Glanville, Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 181-82, 183, 186-88, 206, 215.

⁸ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Raids: W William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 45.

Why Summon Isaiah in Matthew 1:23 and 4:15-16?" about which I want to make a few comments.

First, about the methodology. Counternarrative [*sic*] arises when the narrative is read in light of the oppressive, reconstructed Roman world of the implied audience. The narrative worlds of the ancient text, the narrative world of Jesus, and that of the implied audience overlap, or become fused. This narrative, thus, provides an enduring solution to the "implied" enemies of God's people. But it is the audience that controls the meaning of the narrative. Read in this way, counternarrative is a subversive action. The narrative thus both encourages the believer in her oppressed situation as well as to focus on how to handle it. The biblical texts, along with the clothing of the narrative, appear in some sort of intertextual form, either explicitly or implicitly. This approach reminds me of what Louis Martyn did some years ago in his *History & Theology in the Fourth Gospel* when he read the debates of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel as reflecting (and running parallel to) the debates in the Johannine community's day.

Now, may I make some comments on some of the details of his reading of this section? I think that to read the narrative this way has great possibility. I had long seen the citation of Isaiah 7:14 as being very important to the 1st Gospel. But Carter rightly focuses on the Isaianic

citation in 4:15-16 as the bracket for the first citation in Matthew 1:23.

What I disagree with in this section is his reading in which he brings forward the imperial Roman situation as the dominant theme. I would reverse the emphasis in this narrative portion—I would move Rome to the background and Matthew's salvation history scheme in Jewish context to the forefront.

First, I would interpret Isaiah 7-9 a bit differently. He is right to see chapters 7 and 9 working like a bracket, especially for Matthew. But I think Matthew intends his audience to take this narrative bracket differently. The deep themes of Isaiah 7-9 focus not on the tyranny of foreign oppressor but on the faithlessness of Ahaz and the people of Israel, and God's judgment upon Judah. The first time "Immanuel" is used (7:14), the prophet pronounces judgment upon Ahaz for his lack of faith. The child will then be a symbol of God's judgment (7:13-25). The next time the term occurs is in 8:8. This portion parallels the chapter 7 judgment material. In Chapter 8 (1-8), "Immanuel" closes the judgment section. But at 8:9, the first verse of the poetic section (9-10) where the third occurrence of "Immanuel" is, the mood shifts from judgment to salvation. This anticipates a further articulation of God's forthcoming promises of salvation recapped in (9:1-2 (English)), the text that Matthew cites in chapter 4.

Moreover, “sin” in Matthew 1:21 bears more attention than what is given to it. In Matthew’s narrative, it does not solely refer to the political oppression of Rome, although that is part of it, I think. Rather, it refers to the judgment of God on faithless Israel who has broken the covenant. Roman oppression is just part of that sinful situation. Sin is further defined in 4:23-25 and repeated again at 9:35-38. This sinful condition, denoting a pitiful condition of alienation and being manifested in a variety of ways (demon possession, leprosy, sickness, marginalization, and etc.), comes in the wake of God’s judgment.

Further, the words “salvation” and “savior” do not occur in Matthew, which is significant. These words are typical of Hellenistic and Roman rulers. But Matthew ignores them—why? The author of Luke-Acts does use these terms and thus more directly refocuses sovereignty from Caesar to Jesus.

Salvation in the first narrative portion of Matthew focuses on the Isaianic motif of the 2nd exodus, and the Christology of this narrative is quite pointed. Especially, scholarship has neglected an area of Christology in Matthew 2:15, that alludes to Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.” This Christology presents Jesus as the new Israel. In Matthew 1-4, Jesus, God’s Messiah, traverses the path of ancient Israel—from Canaan to

Egypt to the land. And he is tempted along the way, too, but in contrast to historical Israel he does not stumble. Matthew 1-4 is among the most overt NT witnesses to the new exodus theme.

Usefulness of This Book

While I have raised several issues regarding this book, and they are minor ones, I believe, I want to go on record that I heartily agree with Carter's methodology. It is sound, it is well thought out—he has laid out his techniques in a clear manner. Not only is his method thought out and articulated carefully, it is based on historical moorings while engaging in current discussions. He has worked his way clearly through the book, accomplishing well his purposes. I would like to end by providing some of the ways I use this book.

1. It is one of the best, readable, succinct sources to recommend to students of an overview of the Roman world.
2. Carter's work helps to correct a longstanding misinformation about *Pax Romana*.
3. It is an excellent model for a variety of methodologies.

4. It provides a number of valuable secondary and primary sources.
5. The format of the book is itself useful.