

## Review of Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations*. New York: T&T Clark International, 2008.

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In a follow-up to his *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), Warren Carter argues that the Gospel of John “seeks to make normative for Jesus-believers a distanced relationship to Roman imperial power in provincial Ephesus, resisting those who negotiate the empire with a much more accommodated societal participation” (p. ix). In the introduction, Carter notes that he assumes, but does not argue, that John was read in Ephesus around the end of the first century CE and should, therefore, be read in connection with “cultural intertextuality” which “involves locating this Gospel text ‘within (the text of) society and history’, placing this specific text ‘within the general text (culture) of which [it is] a part and which is in turn part of [it]’” (x, quoting Julia Kristeva, “The Bounded Text”, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. L. Rondiez [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980], 36-37). Carter also mentions the vast number of important Johannine studies, noting those important works that he has engaged, and offering potential further topics for exploring this Gospel’s work of imperial negotiation.

In chapter one, Carter assesses two dominant readings of John’s Gospel, the individualized-spiritualized and the sectarian-synagogal, both of which he deems inadequate due to their lack of engagement with the Roman imperial context. These approaches, Carter notes, tend to over-emphasize the individual over the community, the spiritual over the social, and the separation from society over engagement with it. Regardless of what one thinks about Carter’s emphasis on the imperial context, the questions he raises here regarding these two reading strategies should not be ignored.

At the end of chapter one, Carter notes “two big communities” that are “crucial for the interactions of John’s Jesus believers” (p. 15). These two communities, the synagogue and the Roman Empire, are the focus of the next two chapters. In chapter two, Carter argues that the synagogal reading is not sustainable and that the synagogal community in which John’s Jesus believers participate was “at home in and accommodated to Roman power even while observant of some distinctive practices” (p. 19). Carter elaborates upon some of the questions he raised in chapter one and adds to the discussion important studies by Barclay (*Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996]), Trebilco (*Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991]), and Harland (*Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003]), each of which demonstrates the existence of some interaction between Greco-Roman culture and Jewish synagogues. Carter provides four additional examples of Jewish interaction with the Greco-Roman culture (an honorific inscription in Pergamum [pp. 31-32], the Julia Severa Inscription from Akmonia [pp. 32-33], the imitation of honorary titles [pp. 33-34], and the “god-fearer” monument in Aphrodisias [pp. 34-35]) and three examples from the New Testament (Revelation [pp. 39-41], 1 Peter [pp. 41-42], and Acts 19 [pp. 42-43]) that attest to Jewish and Jewish Christian participation in Greco-Roman society.

In chapter three, Carter explores “Expressions of Roman Power in Ephesus”. He offers a modified (though it is not clear how it is modified) form of the agrarian-aristocratic-commercialized empire developed by Lenski and Kautsky (p. 53). Carter delineates this model by explaining its various facets

including small bureaucracy, Roman alliances with local elites, economic control, taxes, military power, and patronage. In the second major division of chapter three, Carter explores how these facets of the model were manifested in Roman Ephesus, particularly through attention to imperial building programs and coinage. Chapter three concludes with attention to the Roman presence in John's Gospel and by raising the question of the level of interaction between John's audience and Roman power in Ephesus in connection with the important studies of Halliday and Scott, and postcolonial theory on the interaction between the powerful elite and the powerless non-elite. This chapter provides an excellent source for understanding the Roman context of early Christianity and modern socio-linguistic, peasant, and postcolonial approaches.

In chapter four, Carter focuses on a "common strategy . . . utilized by other Jews and Greeks to negotiate Roman power", namely, "a turn to the past" (p. 93). Carter discusses several ways that Greeks and Jews "turned to the past" in order to negotiate their present. For example, Carter analyzes the donation of C. Vibius Salutaris to the city council and citizens of Ephesus, the depictions along the wall of the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias, and Jewish interpretations of Abraham and Moses. Carter appeals to social memory theory to suggest that remembering always involves some reconstruction based upon present circumstances, thus John's Gospel appeals to past figures of Abraham and Moses, remembering them as figures who are subservient to Jesus, who is "the authoritative revealer of God's purpose", rather than Abraham or Moses.

Chapter five focuses on the genre of John's Gospel. Carter rejects previous attempts to argue that the Gospels are distinct genres that were unlike any genre in the ancient world as well as arguments that the Gospels are a patchwork of various genres. Recognizing, however, that there are various elements to John's Gospel, Carter argues for the genre of *bios*, and devotes the remainder of the chapter to a comparison of the elements of origin, great deeds, and death in John's Gospel and Tacitus's biography of Agricola. Here Carter agrees with Richard Burridge but also extends this argument by noting that the genre of *bios* is involved in a multifaceted work of negotiating the Roman Empire.

In chapter six, Carter discusses the plot of John's Gospel. After reviewing previous approaches that focus on the "structure" of John and some newer perspectives that focus on the narration of biographical sequence, and after reviewing some approaches to plot by noted literary critics (e.g. Northrop Frye, A. J. Greimas, Seymour Chatman) and the use of their work by biblical scholars, Carter proposes that John's plot be understood in terms of the end of the plot as the necessary consequence of conflict throughout the narrative. The remainder of the chapter provides an overview of John's Gospel from this perspective. This chapter in particular is highly recommended for those who would like to see how Carter's imperial critical reading works through the whole of the Gospel.

Chapter seven focuses on the titles used for Jesus in the Gospel of John and the ways they contribute to the Gospel's negotiation of the Roman world. Carter divides the titles into two groups, those used for the Roman Emperor and those not used for the Roman Emperor. Those not used for the Emperor, Messiah/Christ and Son of Man, are yet recognized as Jewish titles that were used in the context of Roman power in the first century. Those titles of Jesus that were also used for the Emperor, Shepherd, King, Saviour, Son of God, God, and Lord, are also discussed in light of their use in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature and epigraphy. This chapter is an important one in that it focuses attention upon the historical and cultural context of the christological titles used for Jesus, especially as they relate to contesting imperial power.

Chapter eight addresses the issue of eternal life. After summarizing Rome's "golden age" under Augustus's rule, "golden" that is for the elites, Carter discusses John's emphasis on "life", particularly "eternal life," and its relationship to first century eschatological expectations. For John, "eternal life" is both present and future, as well as material, political, and social. Linking eschatological

expectations with Jesus' signs in John's Gospel, Carter notes that material and bodily transformations are an indispensable part of God's life-giving purpose as manifested in the person of Jesus. In demonstrating that God through Jesus brings "eternal life" into the present, John contests Rome's claim to be the bearer of eternal life.

In chapter nine, Carter discusses John's use of Father for God and its parallels in Roman imperial rhetoric. Noting that Father language is used extensively for the Roman Emperor as well as other important (male) elites, Carter categorizes such usage into six areas: Savior and Benefactor of Life, Ruler of the World, Judge and Lawgiver, Creator of a people, Sender of agents, and Recipient of Honors. Carter then draws parallels with John's use of Father, noting that 109 of the 118 references to God as Father in John's Gospel fit readily into one or more of these six categories. The remaining 9 references concern Jesus' destiny regarding his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, references while also relate to Roman imperial rhetoric. John's use of Father language, though, does not simply imitate Roman usage. Instead, it contests Roman ideology and seeks to create a counter-community and reveal the "true" nature of Roman imperialism.

In chapter ten, Carter seeks to "make explicit an aspect of the imperial negotiation implicit in the discussion of the previous chapters" (p. 256), namely the creation of an alternative identity for John's Jesus-believers in Roman Ephesus. He does this by examining five aspects of identity: the sacred household/temple, faithfulness, loving service, greater works, and living as a community of friends. Though a detailed discussion of each is not possible here, Carter provides significant analysis of these facets of identity within the Roman world and raises important questions about the parallels with John's Gospel. Taken together, these five facets of identity may be viewed as the foundation upon which an alternative identity for John's Jesus-believers may be constructed, an identity that is more distanced from the more accommodationist identity current in John's Ephesus.

In chapter eleven, Carter discusses the interaction between Jesus and the Roman Governor Pilate in John 18:28-19:22. After describing the deficiencies of previous approaches to Pilate in John's Gospel, Carter discusses the general job description of the Roman Governor and then proceeds with an exegetical examination of 18:28-19:22. Carter concludes that Pilate, according to John, "is an efficient and powerful governor who in crucifying Jesus protects Rome's interest against the threat" (p. 311). For John's audience, though, Pilate is another example of Roman power that "is not committed to God's purposes, but is their enemy" (p. 311).

In the final chapter, Carter addresses the issue of apotheosis and the resurrection/ascension of Jesus in John's Gospel. Carter presents a helpful review of the apotheosis traditions with regard to Romulus, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Titus, and Moses, and offers some discussion of those who were critical of the apotheosis tradition. In reference to John's Jesus, Carter argues that the cultural intertextuality between Jewish and Roman apotheosis traditions and Jesus' return to the Father in John identify Jesus with the great ones who receive the honor of apotheosis, but also distances Jesus' elevation by "democratizing" apotheosis (p. 327) and by offering better blessings of true peace and wholeness (p. 328).

Carter concludes his study by reviewing his argument and by interacting with Stephen Moore's *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006). Near the end of the discussion, Carter points toward some contemporary application of his study by stating, "Imagining the establishment of God's life-giving purposes after the destruction of all enemies, Christianity has become and continues to be imperial Rome, intolerant of, vindictive toward, and heaping destruction upon those who do not fall in line" (p. 342).

In an appendix, Carter argues that imperial negotiation does not take place only in the final form of John's Gospel, but is present throughout the development of the Johannine tradition. He points particularly to Gaius Caligula's attempt to erect a statue of himself as Zeus in the Jerusalem Temple in 40 CE as an important event in the development in the Johannine tradition (pp. 380-381).

Carter's *John and Empire* is a large work that is carefully argued with significant citations of relevant literature. Carter has rather clearly outlined the deficiencies of previous approaches to John's Gospel and illustrated why an approach that focuses on imperial negotiation is necessary. In each chapter, Carter carefully nuances his argument and provides ample support for his claims. I have only two (minor) critiques. First, the use of chapter endnotes rather than footnotes is a nuisance to those who care about the citations and additional information contained in these notes. Why academic presses continue to use endnotes is a mystery. Second, I would have liked to see the author explore some of the *theological* ramifications of such imperial negotiation. Put another way, I would like to have seen more discussion around the question of how this reading affects our understanding of developing Christian theology in the late first century and perhaps, in the conclusion, some discussion of how such a reading might (re)shape contemporary theology. Despite these minor issues, I heartily recommend Carter's *John and Empire* to students, pastors, and scholars who are interested in exploring John's Gospel in its historical and cultural context.



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