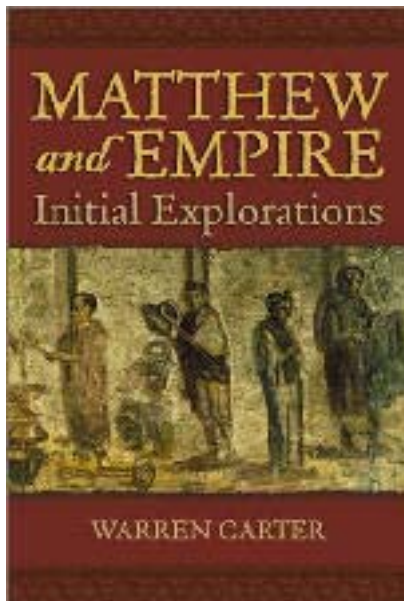


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**Carter, Warren**

*Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*

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Warren Carter has already established himself as an impressive scholar of Matthew's Gospel. His previous books have focused on the way the Gospel opposes the prevailing ideologies that were dominant in the Roman hegemony of the first century C.E. In this book, which brings together a number of papers and articles previously published or read at conferences, Carter moves beyond his previous important book, *Matthew and the Margins*, and focuses more attention on the social realities of life in the Roman Empire and the First Gospel's reaction to them.

Part 1 of this book focuses on the Roman imperial system—summarized under the rubrics of “networks of power”—and how that system affected the social structures of the ancient Mediterranean regions. This part of the book establishes the framework by which much of the rest of the discussion is to be understood. The pervasive reality of Rome's presence in Syria and Palestine is detailed with concision and yet force. Carter nicely interprets the theological claims that the Roman system asserted for its rule of the entire Mediterranean region, theological claims that ultimately came in conflict with those of Jesus. Following a general discussion of the social and theological realities of the Roman Empire,

Carter turns to specific discussions of the situation in Antioch, the presumed location of Matthew's audience. Thus, the imperial presence of the provincial governors, with the military presence that it demanded, had a direct impact on early Christian communities, in this case the presumed Matthean community in Antioch—an impact that Carter also finds in the text of the Gospel.

In part 2 Carter turns his attention to ways in which Jesus is presented in Matthew. Here he takes up some dominant themes and applies them rather specifically to the imperial presence that serves as the historical backdrop to the story. Issues such as the kingdom of God, the presence of God in Jesus, and Jesus' agency are taken to be direct challenges to the Roman imperial pretensions and claims. In an extended essay (ch. 5), Carter specifically interprets Matthew's claim that Jesus came to save people from their sins in terms of political and social realities. The *sins* are taken here as "oppressive political, social, or economic sins." Moreover, the central role of Jesus is to be understood as a direct challenge to the social structures in place, imposed and maintained by Rome, which were disruptive and harmful to the people. Thus the very concept of *salvation* is redefined in terms of social systems, not the individual's relationship to God.

In part 3 Carter takes up a series of specific narratives that he analyzes in some detail to see how they function as counternarratives to the pervasive presence of Imperial Rome. Many of these narratives have frequently been interpreted in specifically theological terms, and Carter attempts to reorient the interpretation to take into account the political and social dimension that must have been, in Carter's view, part of the original emphasis of the narratives. In this section Carter turns more directly to exegesis and direct interaction with the text of Matthew.

In a discussion of Matt 1:23 and 4:15–16, Carter examines Matthew's use of Isa 7–9. Carter approaches this question from a relatively sophisticated use of intertextuality (although not using that term), in which the audience is presumed to hear not only with the specific citation in the text but to also interact with the larger context of that citation. In this case Carter suggests that Isa 7–9 evokes images of God's use of imperial power for divine punishment and of God saving people from imperial power. It is Carter's contention that the narrative context of Isa 7–9, in which Assyria is seen as a punishing threat to Judah, informs the understanding of the entire book and particularly gives a political interpretation to the term "Galilee of the Gentiles." In a study of Matt 11:28–30, Carter interprets the terms *labor*, *burdened*, and *yoke* to refer to the effects of imperial

documentation. From this perspective Jesus' encouragement to "take my yoke" is seen as an invitation to accept God's control as opposed to imperial domination.

In an interpretation of Matt 17:24–27, in which Jesus is questioned about paying taxes, Carter resists efforts to see this as simply referring to a voluntary temple tax, although he seems to concede that this is what the original context in Jesus' time would have meant. Instead, Carter argues that at the time in which Matthew was written this was actually a pervasive post-70 tax imposed by Roman authorities to support the restoration of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus. The provision of the tax to Jesus by the agency of a fish suggests God's provision and, more important, God's authority over even the Roman tax. Finally, in examining Pilate's trial of Jesus, Carter denies that Pilate is positive or neutral, as often interpreted because Matthew depicts Pilate washing his hands of his involvement in the crucifixion. Instead, Pilate is perceived as a powerful and authoritative ruler who manipulates the Jewish people and works with the powerful elite of Israel. Yet Jesus' resurrection shows that even this imperial power is limited and that God is ultimately in control.

The positive feature of Carter's book, as with previous ones, is the attention it pays to the reality of the Roman presence in Palestine and surrounding regions. By reminding the reader of the pervasive nature of imperial occupation, the tendency to read Matthew in purely "spiritual" ways (as opposed to actual social engagement) is made more problematic if not eliminated. The greatest strength of this book is the way it highlights the reality of Roman imperial power and brings it to bear on key passages in Matthew. This feature alone makes this book a helpful addition to the literature on Matthew, and the value of this book is considerable.

At the same time, however, Carter's approach at points raises some questions. The first is the emphasis throughout the book on the geographical location of the recipients of the book, although only minimal effort is made to prove the validity of this location. Much is made, then, of how pervasive the Roman imperial presence was in Antioch. This is problematic, given the unprovable nature of the audience or provenance of the book. Nor is this emphasis necessary. The central issue of the book, the pervasive nature of imperial power, would be true for any place within the Mediterranean region within this time frame. Thus the continuing references to the Antioch origination and/or destination of Matthew seem to be unnecessary for the central thesis.

A second concern deals with the issue of how Carter applies the Jesus material directly to the Matthean audience, without any attention to its original Jesus setting or to previous literary settings (e.g., Mark). There is little or no discussion about the fact that the material may well have originally and primarily addressed different historical or cultural situations. For instance, in the discussion of the two-drachma tax, the force of the argument is blunted unless one shows that either (1) the actual scene was created by Matthew (and thus not original Jesus material) or (2) Matthew has specifically redacted it to make it address more specifically the situation in Matthew's time or place. But Carter tends to compress the horizons between Matthew's setting and Jesus' setting.

Finally, Carter presumes a very competent audience. The subtle readings about intertextual use of Isaiah, for instance, presume a high degree of knowledge of Isaiah and an ability to draw comparisons between Isaiah's political situation and the situation of Roman imperial domination. This kind of audience is not out of the question, but some more effort to establish who the implied audience of Matthew is would be helpful.

Despite these concerns, this book presents an important addition to Matthew studies.