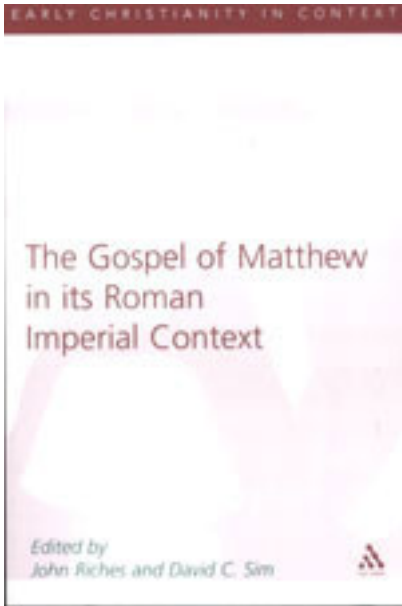


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Riches, John, and David C. Sim, eds.

The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context

Early Christianity in Context

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D. A. Carson
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Deerfield, IL 60015

The title accurately depicts what this volume of essays attempts. Its eight essays (apart from the brief introduction and the still briefer conclusion written, respectively, by Riches and Sim) do not focus on the broadest Greco-Roman cultural context but on the Roman *imperial* context: How does Matthew's community interact with the imperial authority? At a time when postcolonialism has become a burgeoning interest, these essays aim not only to advance our understanding of Matthew's Gospel and of the history of early Christianity (especially the trajectory that ultimately brings it to conquer the Roman world itself) but to probe the interactions of imperial power and colony, of oppressor and oppressed.

With various degrees of probability, not to say conviction, all the authors suppose that Matthew's community was located in Antioch and that the Gospel was written toward the end of the first century. The first four of the eight substantive chapters say little about Matthew or his community but paint the imperial context. Arguing that "postcolonialism" is more than a temporal category describing what takes place *after* (post)independence, but rather a term that has come to refer to attitudes developed even during a colonial period, Philip F. Esler ("Rome in Apocalyptic and Rabbinic Literature") sets his treatment within the context of contemporary discussion. Acknowledging that the Roman

imperial rule was “not driven or accompanied by capitalist forces” (10), that rule nevertheless displayed three “essential characteristics of European colonialism”: “first, political control over subject peoples backed up by overwhelming military force; second, the voracious extraction of economic resources; and third, an ideology legitimating these processes conveyed by discourses of various kinds” (10). Against this backdrop of assertions, Esler surveys the history of the interaction between Rome and the Judeans from 63 B.C. onward. Focusing especially on apocalyptic (esp. *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*) and a rather tiny selection of rabbinic texts, Esler asserts that these Jewish groups were painfully aware of the heavy taxation, of the military iron grip of Roman power, and of the public legitimation of these processes but displayed a vibrant confidence that one day Rome would be overthrown. Their discourse was largely “reliant on the myth of the four beasts in Daniel 7, to counter that of Rome” (33). Although Esler does not specifically say so, the relevance of this chapter to the theme of the book depends on the assumption that Matthew’s community is akin to the Jewish community, or, alternatively, that the latter may serve as a foil for the former.

James S. McLaren (“A Reluctant Prophet: Josephus and the Roman Empire in *Jewish War*”) argues, against prevailing opinion, that Josephus belonged neither to those who totally accepted Roman rule (which is where most scholars place him) nor to those who passionately rejected that rule, like the *sicarii*. McLaren finds evidence in *Jewish War* to support his conclusion that, while Josephus felt it was the part of wisdom to submit to Rome because its power was unassailable, he left plenty of clues that he was “not entirely happy with the way things had worked out” (48). In other words, McLaren’s argument is nicely focused and designed to show that even a Josephus was deeply conflicted about the category of empire.

By contrast, Dennis C. Duling (“Empire: Theories, Methods, Models”) paints with a broad brush. After very briefly surveying a few theories regarding the emergence of empires, he summarizes “the vertical dimension” (54–60) of the Roman Empire—its social ranking—and then its “horizontal dimension” (60–64), that is, the structures of imperial control, with elites living at the periphery of the empire in close relationship with the elites at the core and benefiting enormously from that relationship. This leads to a catalog of the vertical and horizontal dimensions in the Gospel of Matthew (64–66), namely, a listing of every person, named and unnamed, specifying where they fit in the hierarchy, from Caesar and the “rulers of the Gentiles” down through provincial rulers, priestly aristocracy, lay aristocracy, artisans, herders, slaves, and assorted expendables. Duling then analyzes somewhat more closely the peasantry of the empire, not least their everyday resistance and occasional revolts. Duling says he has engaged in this exercise to offer “plausible scenarios for understanding the Roman Empire as the context for a single story, the Gospel of Matthew” (74).

Peter Oakes (“A State of Tension: Rome in the New Testament”) finds an unresolved tension between New Testament texts that enjoin respect for and obedience to the state (in this case, the empire) and those that picture the state in wholly negative terms. He insists that this tension cannot be “resolved” by a timeline, as if Christians first thought of the empire as benign until they themselves suffered violent persecution at the empire’s hands. After all, a single document can preserve both trends: Rom 13 enjoins respect and obedience, while “the criticism directed against the idolatrous world in Romans 1.18–32 is so comprehensive that it condemns the Roman system of thought and authority at its core” (75). After surveying 1 Thessalonians, Romans, Mark, Acts, and Revelation, Oakes concludes that, whatever trajectories of thought and attitude there are, “there is a fundamental and persistent element of tension between positive and negative factors within Christian attitudes to Rome” (89). Oakes does not attempt any sort of theological analysis to see why this might be the case.

The four essays that focus primary attention on the Gospel of Matthew itself are highly disparate in goal and result. David C. Sim (“Rome in Matthew’s Eschatology”), building on the work of Warren Carter, expands his earlier argument that Matthew deploys a “developed dualism” (93) akin to that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a dualism best exemplified in the parable of the tares: one belongs either to the wheat or the tares, and “there is no middle ground” (93). Now he takes an additional step and argues that in Matthew’s Gospel Rome is identified with Satan. “The Roman Empire stands not on the side of God and the righteous but firmly in the camp of Satan and represents his evil purposes” (105). By contrast, Dorothy Jean Weaver (“‘Thus You Will Know Them by Their Fruits’: The Roman Characters of the Gospel of Matthew”) does not focus on the empire as an institution but on individuals who in some way or other represent the empire, especially soldiers, centurions, the governor, the emperor himself, and Pilate’s wife. Weaver concludes that Matthew’s narrative is “deeply polarized” (125) between the good and the evil (5:45; 7:17–18; 12:35), the righteous and the unrighteous (5:45), the blessed and the cursed (5:1–12), and so forth. “But while other major characters or character groups consistently reflect either good or evil traits [in footnotes, she refers, for the good, to “supplicants who appeal to Jesus for healing,” and, for the bad, to “the Jewish authorities, who consistently challenge Jesus’s actions”], Matthew paints an astonishingly complex portrait of the Roman characters within his narrative” (126). Matthew “consistently subverts the military might of the Roman imperial power,” but “he does not offer a monolithic condemnation of the Roman characters themselves” (126). Weaver’s conclusions are thus somewhat at odds with Sim’s. Still further removed from Sim is John Riches (“Matthew’s Missionary Strategy in Colonial Perspective”), who traces out the theme of evangelizing both Jews *and Gentiles*—and thus Romans—in Matthew’s Gospel, culminating in the commission of 28:16–20 to make disciples of all the nations.

In that sense, there is an ongoing “anti-Roman polemic” (142), in that Matthew is appealing to a countercultural claim that wins Romans to Christ now, in this age, and transforms their allegiance “to an alternative mode of power and governance” (141–42) until the day of judgment at the parousia, “when his rule will be revealed to all” (142). The final substantive essay, by Warren Carter (“Matthean Christology in Roman Imperial Key: Matthew 1.1”), focuses on just one verse. Carter treats the five “markers” of 1:1: “book of the origins,” “Jesus,” “Christ,” “son of David,” and “son of Abraham.” In each case he seeks to show an anti-Rome polemic. Methodologically, Carter relies heavily on reader-response theory: What does Matthew’s envisaged audience know and experience? Carter locates them (very firmly) in Antioch in the late first century, an audience that “interacts with the cultural knowledge and experience of Roman imperialism that was the lot of first-century audiences” (148). The “book of the origins” takes readers back to Genesis and creation, with the prospect now of a new creation that relativizes the pretensions of Rome. “Jesus” is the Greek form of “Joshua” and thus evokes the national champion who overthrew competing sovereignties and gave the people the promised land: “The Joshua/Jesus echoes in 1.1 begin the process of framing the sort of salvation Jesus will effect, the deliverance of this world from Rome’s sinful control and the establishment of God’s empire (*basileia*) over all” (157). “Christ” anticipates an anointed agent from God who will challenge pretenders, while “son of David” not only conjures up an ancient military hero but, in light of the well-established link between “son of David” and healing, clarifies his mission: “For Matthew, it is precisely from Rome’s sickness that Jesus, son of David, must heal the world” (162–63). “Abraham” evokes the promise that in Abraham and in his seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed—a reversal, Carter asserts, of the condition of “many living in and around the diseased, poverty-stricken, overcrowded and volatile city of Antioch, where life did not seem especially blessed.... Jesus will elaborate the blessings of God’s empire that reverse such societal injustice” (164).

Certainly this volume is worth reading (provided one does not have to buy it; the price is a bit high for a 200-page book, even by European standards): it usefully reflects on a fair bit of the growing literature on the interactions of early Christianity with the Roman Empire, applying the findings to one New Testament book, the Gospel of Matthew. The appeal is obvious, not only to specialists on Matthew, but also to those interested in empire theory and in the history of nascent Christianity. One might question some features of the book. The exact bearing of the first four substantive chapters on the final four substantive chapters—that is, the bearing of the material treating the Roman Empire on the chapters dealing with Matthew—is usually not transparent, except in the broadest and vaguest sense. The usefulness of holding up Jewish apocalyptic and rabbinic reflection on the empire, especially in its Palestinian context, needs to be probed a little

harder: these Jews were aware that the empire was a foreign power exercising political and military control over a parcel of land that they regarded as theirs by right, part of their patrimony as a nation. By contrast, the Christians were very early aware that they did *not* constitute a nation and that their Master had *not* promised them (at least in this world) a designated territory. Rather, they were Messiah's assembly, an international and multiethnic community without an earthly country, so that their stance to the empire, though doubtless it overlapped with that of Palestinian Judaism, was *necessarily* different. More broadly, the social analysis in some of these essays that supposes that all the colonized *wanted* to subvert the empire, and that does not attempt to evaluate how many were *proud* to be part of the empire, sounds much too much like unyielding ideology. What do we make of the fact that what became Asia Minor was actually bequeathed to the Romans?

But the most serious question to be asked of the book is whether its approach is on the verge of guaranteeing a distortion of Matthew's Gospel. The danger is most easily demonstrated by interacting briefly with several of the essays. Duling seeks to establish the Roman Empire as "the context" in which the story of Matthew unfolds. At a certain level, of course, the bare fact is indisputable: wherever Matthew was written, the site lay within the borders of the empire. But not least in the case of empires, there are concentric circles of contexts, narrowing down to the small and the particular. One lives in the Roman Empire, well and good—but within that empire one may live in a Latin-speaking part or a Greek-speaking part or in a part where the *lingua franca* is not widely used. Language plays a huge role in one's self-identification. Further, one lives not simply in the empire but in some part of it, which inevitably is in support of or in conflict with or in competition with other parts. One belongs to a particular *ethnos*, but within, say, the Jewish *ethnos*, there are numerous parties and loyalties, some of which play a much more immediate role in one's self-identity than one's membership in the empire. By selecting the empire as "the context," Duling and the other contributors end up making the texts respond to empire-related questions, even though it remains to be shown that such questions dominated the mind of either the author of this Gospel or its ostensible first readers. Yes, it is possible to go through Matthew's Gospel and identify the social level of each person and party, as established by the empire. But does an artisan in Nazareth go through his day reflecting on his social status within the empire or simply living his life within his village, with his uppermost thoughts revolving around preparations for the wedding of the farmer's daughter and how to look after his sick mother-in-law and whether or not his son should continue in the synagogue school? What precisely is "the context" in which Jesus' words are heard—whether in Jesus' day or in Matthew's book? Carter's treatment of Matt 1:1 is especially egregious. Yes, "Jesus" is the Greek form of "Joshua," but the connection of Joshua (as Carter acknowledges) is with "Yahweh saves"

or the like, and in his first chapter the Evangelist gives us the interpretation that then shapes the rest of the book: Jesus is given that name because he will save his people from their sins (1:21)—not to give relief from the societal injustices of the empire. Undoubtedly Jesus does say some things that have a strong bearing on social injustice. Yet the fact remains that Matthew does not mention urban overcrowding, but he does mention lying, marriage, lust, and arrogance, while the storyline itself moves toward the passion and resurrection, with the words of institution thrown in to make the storyline clear and show how it ties in to Jesus' name: "This is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*" (26:28). To tie 1:21 to the overthrow of imperial societal injustice, without tying it to the ways in which saving people from their sins is developed within the Gospel itself, feels vaguely out of touch with reality. Weaver finds it strange that people tied to the empire can be treated so differently, some positively, some negatively, while another group, such as those who petition Jesus for help, are treated only positively. But that is the point: the focus of Matthew's interest is not on evaluating the empire and all its agents and representatives but on drawing people to Jesus. Those who approach him humbly, asking for help, are *bound* to be viewed positively. As for Romans—or Pharisees or peasants or any other group—the assessment will depend on how they relate to Jesus, not how they relate to the empire. Oakes insists that Rom 1:18–32 embraces a condemnation so comprehensive that little in Roman culture can stand up to the onslaught. True. On the other hand, this passage is nestled into a still larger argument that runs all the way to Rom 3:20: everyone is guilty, Jew and Gentile alike, guilty before God, such that the only way forward is the cross of Christ (3:21–26), which alone provides "a righteousness from God" to those who believe. Undoubtedly this argument undermines the pretensions of the Roman Empire, but no more so (and no less so), in Paul's mind, than the pretensions of barbarians or of Jews who reject Jesus. In other words, the dominating agenda of this volume lends itself, again and again, to distortion of the biblical focus—mostly, but not exclusively, Matthew's focus.

This is not to say that the book does not helpfully address some questions that have sometimes been overlooked. For that we must be grateful. But it would have been a much stronger volume if the authors, as a group, had devoted more attention to reflecting on whether or not the questions they are asking, quite legitimately, should be asked in conjunction with questions raised by quite different paradigms, the answers to which would tame some of their boldest claims. Perhaps this is one more instance where the narrowness of a specialty interest in Gospel research has the potential to mask the text as much as to shed light on it.