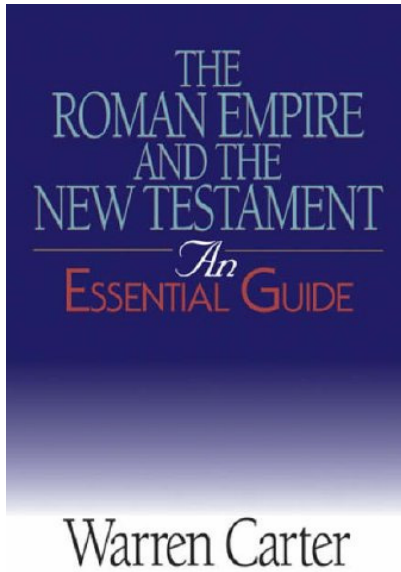


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**Carter, Warren**

***The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide***

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In this book Warren Carter sets out to show how crucial it is to recognize that the New Testament texts assume and engage Rome's world in every one of their chapters. "Even when the New Testament texts seem to us to be silent about Rome's empire, it is, nevertheless, ever present" (1). Accordingly, he shows the diversity inherent in the New Testament writers' engagement of the empire.

The New Testament "is a very political document," and the interest of the New Testament authors in empire was not a peripheral concern but "fundamental to their understandings of how God's purposes might be lived out in God's world" (138). In eight chapters the Roman Empire as "foreground," as "the world the New Testament writings negotiate throughout" (ix), is presented. The first chapter provides a very brief overview of the structure and values of the Roman imperial world with its vast disparities of power and wealth. It was a thoroughly hierarchical and male-dominated world in which the emperors ruled with military support and alliances with the elite. The imperial cult served to stratify society further and provide a perception of divine approval on the reign of the emperor. Elite values supported the hegemonic conception of ruling power and the corresponding "hierarchical societal structure" (10). The exposition focuses, however, on more than the material domination by the elites; degradation and humiliation are

inextricably part of the price nonelites pay. “Domination deeply influences personal well-being and feelings. It deprives people of dignity” (11).

Carter emphasizes that the negotiation necessary to survive as a nonelite was not only present but significant, and various coping mechanisms emerged, such as “hidden transcripts” (12). This “disguised, calculated, self-protective” and apparently compliant behavior is a vital, nonviolent form of protest to the inequalities leveled against the nonelites (12).

Evaluating Rome’s Empire, chapter 2 sketches the varied ways in which New Testament writings appraise this world and the strategies they offer for negotiating it on a daily basis. Carter points out that different tactics, such as opposition and accommodation, can coexist in the same New Testament writing. “Followers of Jesus know a hybrid existence that results from their participation in two worlds, that of Roman domination and the alternative community of followers of Jesus” (24). We find, in the New Testament writings, a “mix of opposition and pragmatic survival” (24). One of the strengths of this book is the acknowledgement of the complexity of negotiating empire, the pointing out of the sheer realities of the “hybrid existence” that follows from opposition and survival, from resistance and accommodation, from protest and negotiation (24, *passim*).

In the next five chapters Carter discusses how different New Testament passages reveal this negotiating with “imperial realities.” In chapter 3, “Ruling Faces of the Empire: Encountering Imperial Officials,” he notes the many texts that portray interaction with imperial officials (emperors, governors, kings, and soldiers), and in chapter 4, “Spaces of Empire, Urban and Rural Areas,” he uses the “urban-rural economic system” to elaborate the early Jesus movement’s rural setting and the urban (Pauline) communities as places in which Christians surmount the spatial expressions of Rome’s power. In “Temples and ‘Religious’/Political Personnel” (ch. 5), the close connection between religion and politics is highlighted in Jesus’ confrontation with the temple and temple-sanctioned institutions. Paul’s confrontation with the Artemis cult at Ephesus and the Roman imperial cult in 1 Peter and Revelation are also considered. Carter notes how worship—of God, Artemis, or the emperor—through temples and their personnel was deeply embedded in the political-economic structures of the Roman imperial world.

Rome’s claim to rule by divine right is examined in chapter 6 (“Imperial Theory: A Clash of Theological and Societal Claims”), and chapter 7 looks at “Economics, Food and Health.” In these chapters the New Testament claims about God and Jesus are examined as ways of engaging and contesting Roman imperial theology and how Christians dealt with basic daily matters (such as buying, food and meals, and facing health issues).

Some “Further Dynamics of Resistance” are considered in chapter 8: “imagining Rome’s violent overthrow, employing disguised and ambiguous protest, and using flattery” (119ff.). There is quite a bit of imagined violence in the New Testament, and Carter does not avoid discussing it: “Oppressed peoples absorb the cultural ethos, which constantly models violent power as the means to a very desirable end” (123). Violent imaginings of the overthrow, reversal, and punishment of Rome (Revelation) are “in-group” protests, speaking “truth about power” rather than “truth to power” (128). Carter describes Rom 13:1–7 as flattery rhetoric, meaning Paul is giving a flattering exhortation to submission. Yet by deliberately leaving important questions unaddressed, Paul undermines his own instructions. “These verses do not comprise a political treatise that presents a fixed ethic of submission for every situation” (136).

In every chapter Carter shows the multiplicity of early Christian strategies in response to the Roman Empire by means of a wide range of texts from Matthew to Revelation. In a “Postscript” Carter turns to how his discussion of New Testament texts can possibly “offer any help” to Christians today when engaging “the world’s most powerful empire ever” (137). He emphasizes that “much thought, conversation, and engagement with books that specifically focus on this contemporary question” are necessary, and he provides six “all-too-brief” comments as a small contribution (138–43). The gist of these is that “discipleship is a matter of politics”; negotiating empires is difficult; “unquestioning submission” is not the Bible’s only way, nor is constant opposition; active, nonviolent, calculated interventions (rejecting violence) are always preferable; and, finally, the New Testament writers “offer followers of Jesus an alternative understanding of the world” (141).

In summary, Carter sees the early Christians’ response to empire as that they often “dissent from Rome’s way of organizing society,” they “seek to shape alternative ways of being human and participating in human community that reflect God’s purposes,” they “offer practices and ways of living that often differ significantly from the domination and submission patterns of Rome’s world,” and they “provide different ways of understanding the world, of speaking about it, of living and relating—all the while rejecting options of total escape from or total compromise with Rome’s empire” (12–13).

This is a well-written and informed introduction to an immensely important topic. The fact that an “essential guide” to the New Testament and the Roman Empire has become relevant in recent times is revealing about our discipline and the attitudes toward politics in the history of scholarship. I conclude with three comments intended to advance the conversation and not to detract from this very useful introduction.

It is in the nature of an introduction to simplify somewhat and to generalize, and Carter does his summarizing very well. Despite his mention of the complexity of matters, I do think some more attention to the co-opting nature and the intricate structure of power is unavoidable. I suggest this not only so that we should think about the complexity of empire, but to understand its real power, why imperial/hierarchical/exploitative thinking (or mindset) is so enduring.

The setting Carter depicts tends to be dualistic; despite his emphasis on the necessity of nuance, his depiction remains a two-part society (evoking an “us-them” logic) and a consequent neglect of the seductive powers of Romanization. I do not mean this in the sense that there is somehow something good/positive about the “blessings” brought by the Roman Empire but to draw attention to Carter’s references to “accommodation” and acceptance. The involvement of the not-so-powerful, the “ordinary” people, inadvertently but inexorably adds up to make people not just part of something wrong but sometimes even exponents thereof. Reality is not just “us” and “them”; far more often “they” are “us” and “we” are “them.” Our dealing with empire requires that we understand the power and role of mystification, fantasy, hope, and lack of action on all sides and in all contexts.

Second, although Carter has shown himself in his other work as very adept with various methodological issues, this book conveys a rather unsophisticated presentation of method and theory. There are no indications of how method and perspective are interconnected. Crucially, he leaves the reader with a simplified image concerning history and story when dealing with narrative texts. Is it a particular conception of what an “introduction” should be that plays a part in the style and layout? When Carter refers to a particular Gospel text, the historical Jesus, the early Jesus movement, and the responses by Christian communities after 70 all flow together. Or in his discussions of Acts, person (the historical Paul) and persona (the narrative character “Paul”) are flattened into the same image.

This is not just a matter of methodological and historical precision. This book will be used as a textbook, and the assumption that one need only introduce the “facts” with a few reminders that further study is required here and there is simply inappropriate. What we “know,” we know because of a way of looking and by selecting an analytic discourse. A few pages extra dealing with such aspects will serve the intention of introducing and inviting and persuading far better.

Third, and once more acknowledging that a brief introduction makes for easy criticism in this regard, Carter shows how the (early Christian) fantasies unmask Roman power but diligently sidesteps the underlying challenge: the unmasking of those fantasies as

possibilities of “will to power.” The dark side of church history is more than enough warning how naïve it is to assume one’s own fantasies are not capable of abusive power.

As Carter reminds us, a political text is not yet politics. But whoever wants to “oppose and redress the destructive ways of empire” (143) will do very well by taking note of this introduction.