

BOOK REVIEW

Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2008). xii + 423 pp. Hbk. US\$120.00; Pbk. US\$40.00.

Warren Carter's new book is clearly marketed as a follow-up to *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001). Hinting, perhaps, that similar works on Mark and Luke–Acts may follow, the more recent volume's imitative title is somewhat misleading on two counts: these are by no means Carter's first forays into imperial criticism, and the 'explorations', which in *Matthew* were partly comprised of previously published, readily accessible articles, are new and often densely packed examples of scholarship in *John*. The book is larger, its pages more crowded, and its concepts more advanced, none of which characterizes an 'initial' study or a novice audience. More adroit readers, however, will find plenty of welcome challenges here, and junctures at which to offer Carter some challenges in return.

Carter begins by outlining briefly his assumptions. He believes that *John's Gospel* was read in Ephesus, perhaps even written there. The document probably dates from the end of the first century, so it reveals more about the activity of Jesus-believers from that period than it does concerning the 'historical' Jesus. The Evangelist and his audience had to negotiate with Rome's culture and theology on a daily basis, and the resulting negotiation can best be studied in the 'final form' of *John's text* (though the text hints at similar negotiations throughout the development of the Johannine tradition). In an assumption that occupies the foreground for many of Carter's subsequent chapters, *John* displays a 'cultural intertextuality', not just reflecting a clash of intersecting worldviews, but contributing to the interaction as well. Finally, Carter lists the previous commentaries on *John* that he engages most frequently in what follows. This is a thoughtful step, one that I wish more

writers would adopt, as the list tells the experienced reader still more about the writer's assumptions and methodology.

In 'Invisible Rome: Reading John's Gospel', Carter sketches two principal readings—schools of interpretation that, to Carter's mind, fail to do justice to John's complexity. An inadequate 'spiritualized' reading individualizes the relationship to the risen Jesus, prioritizing personal belief and emphasizing communion with Jesus in the afterlife, and conveniently forgetting that the crucifixion and the resurrection (or at least the post-resurrection appearances) were public events with public consequences. A likewise inadequate communal reading, the 'sectarian-synagogal approach', overstates the alienation of Jesus-believers from both synagogal and imperial society; John's perspective, Carter argues, is politically involved, yet it advocates a careful distance from cozy societal accommodation. This rhetorical position colours every aspect of John's theology: the significance of the christological title 'Lamb of God' in Jn 1.29 changes when the 'Lamb's' death is remembered as a Roman death sentence, with a resulting soteriology that must be viewed in context rather than as an isolated moment (pp. 11, 13).

Carter tries to correct previous 'synagogal' readings in his next two chapters. Rejecting the claim that John's readers had been expelled from the Jewish community, he places the audience in a synagogue that was distinctive in its messianic faith but still accommodating to Roman civic practices. In this context, John would have written out of a perceived need for a 'more antithetical relationship' (pp. 20, 45) between Jesus-believers, the synagogues and Rome. Though it could not have been simple for Jewish Christians to distinguish potentially idolatrous practices of accommodation from non-idolatrous examples, Carter employs biblical and other ancient sources to document a range of negotiation tactics. He returns to John to remind his own readers of the societally disruptive effects of confessing faith in Jesus.

The composition of the surrounding society and the idioms of Roman power occupy Carter's attention in Chapter Three. He characterizes Domitian's Asia as a culture of elitism and patronage, where the emperor cult was as much a measure for gauging civic loyalty as it was an expression of imperial theology. Carter's recent work tends to combine imperial studies with his earlier interest in narrative criticism, and that tendency is briefly but successfully exhibited here. Rome's power structure invades John's narrative world, not just in the glimpses of imperial hierarchy among John's characters, but also in the language

the Evangelist deploys. Carter samples sociolinguistic and postcolonial studies to theorize the nuances of John's imperial resistance, including a strategy of mimicry at work in Johannine missiology.

John's other rhetorical strategies provide the bulk of Carter's second and much larger section of chapters, the first section having been devoted largely to the framework of his study. One approach to negotiating the 'imperial present' lies in reflecting on the past, appealing to social memory as an act of communal self-preservation. This strategy is not exclusive to John or even to New Testament authors. The temple dedicated to Venus in Aphrodisias, a city near Ephesus, sanctioned and yet subverted the Empire by recalling the region's classical Greek roots. Analogous appeals to ancient forebears represented by Abraham and Moses help to explain John's narration: Jesus' clashes with the Jewish authorities hinge not just on authority, but on *temporal priority* ('Before Abraham was', Jn 8.58) in a world that held antiquity in the highest respect.

Carter's Chapters Five, Six and Seven anchor this section, suggesting John's genre and plot as subtle forms of imperial negotiation, with the Roman imperial context of John's images and titles for Jesus as a subsequent set of case studies where Carter can apply the lessons learned from the preceding literary examination. John's choice of genre relies on the literary conventions of his time: the fourth Gospel is an example of ancient biography, meant to be read and read aloud, even performed. But the Johannine amalgam of polemic and apologetic forces readers to reexamine their own performance, as those who have collaborated with the Empire are reminded that Rome could not take Jesus' life until he laid it down. There is merit to Carter's comparisons between John and other ancient biographies, though his references to ancient performance techniques cannot match the depth demonstrated in studies of orality by Whitney Shiner and Richard Horsley. Like the genre, the plot serves John's purposes in guiding his audience's imperial negotiations, as the story of a crucified and resurrected provincial exposes Rome's 'death-bringing commitments' (p. 144) and denies the Empire's claim to ultimate power. Even the prologue, ostensibly not part of the Gospel's main storyline, reveals a conflict between light and darkness, with the imagery of light both imitating and contesting the purported brilliance of Rome's emperors. John's titles for Jesus share in the task of advancing the story, for each of the eight images considered is an evocative cipher that carries christological weight, whether the associated

expectations draw from Jewish backgrounds (e.g. Messiah/Christ, Son of Man) or Roman (Saviour of the world, Son of God).

The eighth chapter, 'Eternal Rome and Eternal Life', marks a second round of challenges to the over-spiritualized reading, as Carter connects propaganda regarding piety and the gods' eternal sanctioning of Rome with Jesus' promise of eternal life in John 3. Carter rightly insists that the *quality* of the life intended is important here. John's rendering of eternal life forms a complement to the Synoptic emphasis on God's *basileia*, though the latter image is more explicitly political. His eternal life is eschatological, and provocative, as Lazarus's resurrection provides Jesus' opponents with an ironic reason to kill. It is material, political and social in its implicit ramifications, yet it is lived at a significant remove from 'eternal' Rome's way of life. Here, as elsewhere, Carter speaks of 'distanced' participation in the Empire's ways, but his model is often rather vague. How does John bring this rhetoric of 'distance' to life?

Two of the last five chapters are in-depth inquiries into John's titles and images, refining the christological focus from Chapter Seven and expanding the discussion into John's patrology—not in the sense of patristic studies, but that of the theological perception of God as Father. 'John's Father and the Emperor as Father of the Fatherland' categorizes John's use of 'father' imagery according to the ways in which the Empire employed the term, and the categories make this ninth chapter, like the seventh, an invaluable quick-reference resource. While John imitates and parallels imperial language, a counter-imperial note emerges from the tenor of John's usage, as God's creative agency brings and sustains life in ways in which the Empire cannot. The appendix, while technically not a chapter in the volume proper, appears to be separated from the body of the text only because its concentration is on negotiation in the developing Johannine tradition, rather than in John's final form. This appended essay furthers the questions raised in the seventh and ninth chapters, probing Gaius Caligula's actions, attitudes and assumed roles as influential factors in John's Christology.

The three chapters not yet mentioned are dedicated respectively to the sacred identity of John's Jesus-believers, the confrontation between Pilate and Jesus as governor and divine king/emperor, and the interface of belief in the apotheosis of the emperors with faith in the ascended Christ. Each of these essays is worthwhile, and together they add cumulative force to Carter's global argument; the apotheosis-versus-

ascension chapter even begins to flesh out the expectations of John's 'distancing' rhetoric, as Carter insists that it was in the civic and commercial rituals associated with the cult of the emperors where over-accommodation and compromise would have been most tempting.

Putting the individual contributions of each chapter aside for a moment, the question still remains as to how well the overall structure of essays serves the interests of the book. It might have made more sense to subdivide the book's larger second section into components, moving from studies indebted to narrative criticism, to christological and patrological images and titles, and then perhaps to a final division of 'further explorations', cementing the connections between the earlier chapters and leaving ample room for Carter and other scholars to build future arguments. The last few essays mentioned above would then have a more logical and helpful place to fit.

In addition to this structural problem, the 'distancing' rhetoric is a source of constant frustration, blunting the point of an otherwise incisively sharp study of John's interaction with the Roman world. As I have already noted, Carter never fully explains how this rhetoric hangs together, or what observable effects it would have prompted in the lives of John's readers. That the rhetoric would have cautioned a Jesus-believing community against close association with idolatrous practices, or chastened the community's members for past compromises, is understood. That John's polemic aims to improve readers' 'performance', not just reading aloud but living more distinctively Christian lives, is well proven here. But the results of this performance enhancement remain vague and speculative. What would Carter's terms—distancing, differentiating and so on—have looked like in the day-to-day lives of first-century Christians, and how can we discern these patterns in John's narrative? The problem might be linguistic: does Carter mean 'distancing' in the same way that fellow imperial critics Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat (following Wendell Berry) talk about 'seceding', breaking decisively from the mores of the encroaching culture without isolating oneself from it? A more thoroughgoing explanation of the ethic John was evidently encouraging is the only obstacle that holds Carter's book back from really going the distance.

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