
Warren Carter’s book is a compact work with no footnotes on the New Testament (NT) view of empire as manifested in the Roman elite imperial politics. He effectively steers the discussion between two extremes: (1) that the NT advocates the escape from or dismissal of the political-civic-societal challenges of the empire and (2) that the NT urges Christians to employ violent tactics to overthrow the empire (86). Within this middle ground, Carter correctly discovers a diversity of strategies in the New Testament documents. “The strategies stretch from demonizing it (the Roman empire), anticipating God’s judgment on it, and opposing it with defiant (but self-protective) non-violent actions, to praying for it, submitting to it, and imitating it” (139). As Carter points out, “These evaluations often appear simultaneously in the same writings” (23). Therefore, the book does not offer dogmatic support for one strategy of dealing with the political and elitist realities of our world but raises interesting and penetrating questions with which the reader must struggle.

I particularly agree with Carter in three emphases.

First, the NT names the social and economic realities so that it cannot be labeled a non-political document. Let me illustrate this with three quotes about crucifixion from Carter: “The crucifixion was a political act and a very public act” (138). “People got crucified not because they were spiritual, but because they posed a threat to the Roman system” (x). “To proclaim ‘Christ-crucified’ as Paul did was to announce a politically threatening message” (135). Jesus also named the evils of empire. He reports that “the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them” (Matt. 20:25). Absentee landlords and the social elite become characters in Jesus’ parables (Matt. 24:45–51; Luke 12:16–21, 36–48; 19:11–27). Slavery and poverty are givens (50). Roman taxes have caused great controversies (Mark. 12:13–17).

Second, the NT imagines a different future scenario that reverses the injustice and power politics of this world. The future age will reverse the evils of this world. The rulers of this age are doomed to perish (1 Cor. 2:6). Jesus’ resurrection anticipates the destruction of the ruling powers (1 Cor. 2:8) and the establishment of God’s empire over all (1 Cor. 15:20–28). Finally, “God will end this unjust and idolatrous imperial system at the final ‘coming’ of Jesus (1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 1 Cor. 15:23)” (88).

Third, Jesus established a new community that lives by a different set of values than those advocated by the empire. Jesus inaugurated practices and social interactions that differ from domination patterns. Instead of obeying the cultural regulations of the Greco-Roman symposium, Jesus advocates inviting the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame into your inner circle. As Carter explains, Luke 14 “builds a collage of meal scenes to depict God’s transforming empire or reign manifested in Jesus’ ministry . . . . In these meal scenes, Jesus counters basic social patterns of imperial society.
that were encapsulated in meal etiquette: valuing social status, stratification, hierarchy; reciprocity; elite/nonelite boundaries; and exclusion.” (115). There is a reversal of roles in favor of non-elites (12). Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:19), a jubilee year, which “was a socio-economic mechanism that was to prevent wealth and power accumulating in the hands of Israel’s elite” (20). In addition, Jesus establishes a new community of shared economic resources where those who leave family and vocation “receive a hundredfold now in this age” (Mark 10:29-30). These followers of Jesus demonstrate their inner strength by “an active strategy for refusing to be humiliated” when Roman soldiers demand transport “by claiming initiative and asserting one’s dignity;” they determine to carry the pack an extra mile. The new community demonstrates the shortcomings of the values of the empire through their practice of an extra righteousness (Matt. 5:20).

Interestingly, the rhetoric that is employed by Jesus and Paul parallels the terminology employed by Caesar and the society he governed but stands in stark contrast to its values and ways of relating. Jesus’ central proclamation consists of the coming of God’s kingdom which will reign forever (Luke 1:32–33). Likewise, Rome pictured itself as “an empire without end” (Virgil, Aeneid, 1:278–79). The term good news was employed “for the emperor’s birth, military conquest, and accession to power” (90) (Josephus, War 4:618), but the gospel writers employ it as a summary of Jesus’ message (Mark 1:1, 14–15). Christian worship offered an alternative to the praise gatherings of the imperial cult as visualized in Revelation 4–5. The gods’ continual sanction for emperors (7) was countered in the Christian community by God’s election of Jesus. Jesus is Savior and Lord, not the emperor (Josephus, War 3:459). Jesus taught his followers to pray “Our Father who art in heaven,” whereas, for the Roman Empire, Caesar was “Father of the Country” (Acts of Augustus 35; Suetonius, Vespasian 12). In his Roman trial, Jesus touts his ability to summon legions of angels to his defense (Matt. 26:53), which contrasts his power with the Roman legions that indwelt Jerusalem. The Pax Romana (Josephus, War 6:345–346) cannot offer the world true peace; “while people are saying ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come” (1 Thess. 5:3). Carter contends that Paul critiques the promises of this imperial world as ‘night’ and ‘darkness’ (1 Thess. 5:5)” (89). Rome proclaimed its mission to give justice to the world, “to crown peace with justice” (Virgil, Aeneid, 6:851–853; Acts of Augustus 34), but Paul states that the righteousness or justice of God is revealed in Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:16–17). Finally, “Matthew ironically calls Jesus’ coming the parousia (Matt. 27:3, 27, 37, 39), a term that commonly denotes the arrival of the emperor or military commander in town” (19). Coins depicted Jupiter with a globe bestowing worldwide rule on Vespasian (85), but Jesus advocates giving back to Caesar that which is Caesar’s. God has his own empire (Rom. 14:17; Phil. 3:20).
However, at several crucial points I believe Carter’s exegesis is one-sided. I will consider his interpretations of Mark 5:1–20; Matthew 23:9; Matthew 24:28; 1 Peter 2:13, 17; and Romans 13:1–7.

Regarding Mark 5:1–20, Carter contends that “Mark shows Rome’s empire to be the devil in the story of the man possessed by a demon (Mark 5:1–20). The demon’s name is Legion, a central unit of Rome’s military” (17). For Carter, the pigs also display a Roman background rather than a Jewish background. “Significantly, the mascot of Rome’s tenth Fretensis legion that destroyed Jerusalem in 70 C.E. (about the time Mark was written) was a pig. The scene shows Jesus’ power over Rome and the latter’s destruction” (17). I prefer a Jewish background relating to the need for the retaking of the land for the new Israel. The crossing of the sea recalls the crossing of the Jordan to retake the Promised Land. Evil must be expelled from the land. Satan is defeated through the casting out of a legion of demons, and impurity is driven from the land through the symbolic act of ridding the land of unclean pigs. Similarly, when Jesus journeys to Tyre and Sidon, the evil spirit must be driven out, and new rules of impurity are pronounced by Jesus so that the Canaanite woman through faith becomes a participant of the Promised Land (Mark 7:24-30). Jesus is reclaiming the land from evil idols so that a parallel typology is established between Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and John the wilderness Baptizer and Jesus the kingdom-land provider. Legion refers to enormous evil power rather than to the Roman Empire in particular.

Carter presupposes a Roman background for Matthew 23:9 as well: “Matthew’s Jesus undermines allegiance to the emperor as “Father to the Fatherland” by instructing ‘Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven’ ” (33). However, the context presupposes an address to the Pharisees, and the apologetic is against their tendency to exalt human teachers as 23:8 clearly points out. The emperor is not in view.

Regarding Matthew 24:28, Carter advocates the translation eagles and not the mistaken option vultures, so that the text reads, “Wherever the corpse is, there the eagles will gather.” Carter argues that this verse “depicts the destroyed Roman army, represented by the symbol of the eagle that was carried into battle and was protected at all cost, as a corpse. God’s judgment enacted by Jesus condemns and ends Rome’s empire” (19). However, I contend that this is an example of Jesus’ employment of double-talk as in the New Testament sayings: “Everyone will be salted with fire” (Mark 9:49) and “He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11). The Greek saying can either mean “Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather” or “Wherever the body is, there the eagles will gather.” The meaning depends upon the response of the audience, but the metaphors cannot be confused so that corpse and eagles are combined together into one saying as Carter attempts with his translation, “Wherever the corpse is, there the eagles will gather.”
In his exegesis of 1 Peter, Carter supposes that Christian participation in honoring the emperor (2:13, 17) includes participating in sacrifices for the emperor as a socially convenient activity (23, 79, 81). Carter employs the command “to reverence Christ as Lord in your hearts” (3:15) as an indication that the audience of 1 Peter could participate in the emperor cult. Then Carter employs this data to identify the readers of 1 Peter with the Christians who are severely criticized by the book of Revelation for participating in idol worship (Rev. 2:6, 14–15, 20–23). This critique then appears to diminish the authority of the advice in 1 Peter 2:13, 17 to be subject to and honor the emperor.

Similarly, Carter seems to use the issue of flattery in Romans 13 to minimize the command to be subject to the governing authorities as model citizens. He postulates that Paul is flattering Rome by declaring three times in Romans 13:1–2 that its governing authority is from God and then three times in the next four verses by calling the emperor God’s servant (133). “Paul knows this is not the whole story” (134). This flattery, according to Carter, does not cohere with Romans 12:2 where he instructs Christians not to be conformed to this world. Therefore, he concludes that this flattery must be caused by “some particular circumstances the church was experiencing” (135). He postulates that some believers maybe saw themselves as agents of God’s judgment against the empire and were employing violence. Certainly it is true that Paul does not consider governing authorities who are not carrying out God’s will, but Carter does not develop a creation-fall paradigm here, which the apostle Paul appears to have to have in mind. Because God’s creation is good and government is an important part of God’s good creation, Christians should submit themselves to the emperor’s authority as God’s servant. This type of thinking finds no place in Carter’s appraisal of New Testament theology on the relationship of church and state.

Finally, Carter misses the apologetic of Luke who attempts to present the gospel in such a way that will not be offensive to Roman society. Luke clearly portrays both Jesus and Paul as innocent of any crimes assigned to them and reveals that the civil unrest blamed on Christians is not political but economic and frequently caused by Jewish jealousy. Roman centurions become key figures in the narrative to prove that the gospel has a strong appeal to important figures of the empire. Carter overlooks the structural significance of the presence of centurions at the middle and end of both Luke and Acts (42). At the centers of the books, Roman centurions stand as models of faith, exhibiting a deeper faith than any in Israel (Luke 7:1-10) and becoming the first Gentile converts (Acts 10). At the end of each book, centurions witness to the righteousness and innocence of both Jesus (Luke 23:47) and Paul (Acts 23:16–24; 27:1, 42–43). Carter claims that contrast and critique is the main point of Luke (29). “Jesus’ birth as a Davidic king at the time of Rome’s census recalls God’s purposes that are contrary to Rome’s and threaten to transform Rome’s world” (30) because
God brings down the powerful from their thrones (Luke 1:52–53). I would contend that Luke is demonstrating how the empire and Christianity are tied together through the insertion of the emperor into the beginning and ending of Luke-Acts. Through the centurions, Rome is ready to receive the gospel; Luke does not present a negative apologetic against Rome.

Therefore, I offer a mixed review of Carter’s book and the entire present negative critique of empire in contemporary exegetical literature. Certainly the government that serves God’s creation ordinances (Rom. 13) can become the beast of Revelation 13 when the empire takes over practices that are only appropriate to God. That is what the New Testament documents uniformly oppose: “Deliver to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). This entails praying for (but not to) the emperor (1 Tim. 2:1–2; Titus 3:1–2) and refusing to assign divine names to Caesar or worship his image. All the documents of the New Testament sing a harmonious chorus on this theme.

The New Testament, however, does not oppose any political or economic system nor is it negative toward government or its rulers. The New Testament does not picture God as against the system of patron-client relationships in the ancient world just as he is not against capitalism today. Order is needed in society, but the Bible continually speaks prophetically against injustices within any political or economic system. Carter notes this when he affirms that repentance for the tax collectors and soldiers who visited John the Baptist “does not mean ceasing their occupations and withdrawing from the empire. Rather they are to continue their occupations and conduct them with justice” (30). Therefore, as Carter states, “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). Christians employ the rubric of creation-fall-redemption-consummation to apply the various New Testament texts in their critique of any governmental policy or political ideology.

—Dean Deppe


Edited with an introduction and notes by Nicole Gueunier and Max Engammare, this volume of Sébastien Castellion’s translation (and brief annotations) of the books of Solomon provide an excellent example of close work with the biblical text in the time of the Reformation. Castellion (1515–1563) was a French preacher and theologian learned in biblical languages. Around 1540, he joined the reforming cause and joined Calvin for a time in Geneva. In the following years, he had a falling out with Calvin and is often remembered as one who criticized Calvin for his execution of Servetus in 1553.