

BOOK REVIEW

John Riches and David C. Sim (eds.), *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* (JSNTSup, 276; New York/London: T. & T. Clark [Continuum], 2005). viii + 202 pp. Hdbk. US\$125.00.

Antioch was not the most inviting place for first-century followers of Jesus. Luke (Acts 11.26) notes that the disciples were first called Christians there, but they must have been called a few other names as well, not all of them complimentary. In his introduction to *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context*, co-editor John Riches describes elements of the atmosphere in which Matthew might well have written his account: a tense relationship with the city's Jewish population, the burden of survival in lower-class society and frequent reminders of the presence and power of the Roman Empire. This last element forms the foundational premise of this volume.

Warren Carter's recent work provides the inspiration for the book's contributors: his monographs (e.g. *Matthew and Empire* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001]) and articles (e.g. 'Are There Imperial Texts in the Class?' *JBL* 122 [2003], pp. 467-87)) figure prominently in several essays here, and he is noted twice as a 'pioneer' in this particular field of imperial-contextual interpretation. The authors acknowledge the influential connections between the Matthean community and the social and religious matrix of Judaism, but they direct their research toward the largely unexplored process of interaction with 'the dominant values of the pagan world' (p. 6). Riches and Sim have thoughtfully organized the chapters around three central areas of study: themes of control and resistance in imperial/colonial environments, with special attention to first-century Palestine as a Roman province; profiles of specific groups and individuals as they responded to Rome's pervasive influence; and the Matthean community's own responses to Rome, as they struggled to come to terms with the 'secular power' that shaped their very lives.

These three focal points allow the editors to shift the conversation gradually from general interest in imperial context to specifically Matthean perspectives. The first two points are combined into one section, as four scholars examine how Rome is portrayed in different (but related) frames of reference.

Philip Esler probes the ways in which Rome was portrayed in contemporary apocalyptic and rabbinic literature. Rome's political ideology, so undeniably present in first- and second-century clashes with the Judean territories, was clearly visible in aspects of daily life, and was memorialized in architecture (the Arch of Titus) and on the *Iudaea capta* coins—souvenirs which Carter has also noted, calling them 'hand-held signs of propaganda' ('Imperial Texts', p. 475). But Rome's ideology fostered a post-colonial style of 'counter-discourse' among Jews and Christians, a carefully-coded millenarian expectation of Rome's eventual overthrow. Esler finds traces of this conflict in *2 Baruch*, *4 Ezra*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the documents of Qumran (a community he sees as apocalyptic, following the lead of John J. Collins). Esler also deserves praise for using *Monty Python's Life of Brian* as an illustration concerning rabbinic responses to Rome.

James McLaren locates a subtle critique of Roman administration and military practices in Josephus's *Jewish War*. Forced to acknowledge Rome's power, the historian made implicit appraisals of the empire and its officials, as he sought to come to terms with a perceived withdrawal of God's support for the Jews. As in Esler's apocalyptic sources, the developing theodicy that McLaren notes is worthy of further exploration.

Dennis Duling analyzes empires according to political theory and social science, applying his findings to imperial Rome. He adapts contributions from Michael Doyle, Gerhard Lenski and Richard Rohrbaugh, fusing them into a useful guide to the Roman world's vertical and horizontal stratification. He includes a number of diagrams to illustrate Roman sociopolitical structure at the time of Matthew's writing, though some of these could have benefited from a more sophisticated rendering: Duling asks the reader to imagine three-dimensional changes to Alexander Motyl's model of core-periphery association that could have been easily shown in the diagram itself. Duling's attention to millennialism as a reactive ideology, a collective form of self-defense against colonial acculturation, is a welcome area of application for his theoretical study.

Peter Oakes, like Carter, has worked previously with Roman contexts (*Rome in the Bible and the Early Church* [Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002]), and brings his experience to bear on the tension present in portrayals of Rome throughout the New Testament. His cleverly-titled contribution ('A State of Tension: Rome in the New Testament') notes the uneven, often ambiguous portrayals of Rome in the New Testament corpus, and he assembles a 'checklist' of elements felt by Roman provincials, by Jews as a distinct provincial group and finally by Christians. These elements—awe, appreciation, resentment, contempt, denial of ultimate authority and the expectation of overthrow—form an attitudinal spectrum, ranging from collaboration to apocalypticism, and informing approaches to the New Testament.

The second section, focusing more tightly on Matthew and his community, begins with Sim's analysis of the Roman role in Matthew's advanced, dualistic eschatology. Sim finds in this Gospel a pervasive expectation of Rome's imminent judgment; the empire deserves punishment as a major player in the cosmic battle (Mt. 24.27-31) between good and evil, a battle with parallels in Revelation and the Qumran *War Scroll*. Sim's essay is more indebted to Carter's work than any of the other contributions. He devotes significant space to praising the 'Imperial Texts' article noted above, though he tweaks Carter's conclusions, arguing for Rome's capitulation rather than its destruction, and opening the door for further discussion on this important pericope (i.e. if the 'eagles' and the 'corpse' *both* represent Rome, does this scenario predict not surrender, but self-destruction?). Sim applies his research to the soldiers at Jesus' crucifixion, suggesting Mt. 27.51-54 as a 'proleptic judgment scene' that looks forward to Rome's downfall.

Dorothy Jean Weaver, like Sim, acknowledges Carter's work, but she redirects attention from the imperial machine to its human components, giving the reader a detailed study of Matthew's Roman characters. Weaver profiles soldiers, centurions and rulers, including the emperor as an unseen 'offstage' character whose power is implied in parables (Mt. 22.1-10) and numismatic images. In making mention (with Esler) of coins as symbols, Weaver brings out a subtle point: *people* could be just as symbolic of Rome's power. Weaver sympathizes with characters such as Pilate's wife; and where Sim sees proleptic judgment, Weaver finds centurions joining 'a growing chorus of Gentile witnesses' (p. 122). Matthew's moral polarities grow more complex when he treats

Romans as individuals, powerful yet powerless before the sovereignty of God.

Riches ('Matthew's Missionary Strategy in Colonial Perspective') asks an intriguing question: in what ways does Matthew display or encourage post-colonial-style resistance? His answers overlap somewhat with earlier material, as he examines *2 Baruch* and *4 Ezra* (following Esler) and Josephus (McLaren), and mulls over Matthew's apocalyptic eschatology (Sim). But Riches concentrates more energy on the dynamic between cosmic-dualistic and forensic eschatology, charting a Matthean apocalyptic framework for articulating a coded resistance. The Great Commission, read with this framework in mind, becomes politically and eschatologically charged, as the coming reign of God demands acknowledgment from present earthly authorities.

The final place is reserved for Carter, who investigates the tension between imperial and divine sovereignty, connoted by Matthew's use of five key titles (Mt. 1.1). These titles mark a Christology that subtly relativizes and displaces Roman theology and propaganda. *The Book of the Origin* recalls God's demonstration of creative power in Genesis; *Jesus* carries intertextual connections to Joshua as a deliverer of his people, while *the Christ* evokes divine commissioning and eschatological expectation. *Son of David* and *of Abraham* suggest respectively a kingly role as ruler and healer, and an ethic of inclusiveness and mercy in the face of Roman prejudice and injustice. Carter is careful to note the response that these titles would have generated, especially in the context of vast inequality, tension and hardship in a first-century city that felt the full weight of empire.

Sim concludes the book by reviewing earlier points, noting broader differences in emphasis between the contributors: he contrasts, for instance, the attention that he and Carter give to proleptic judgment and ethics with the interests in literary motifs (apocalyptic imagery and character study) shared by Riches and Weaver. His points of comparison are well taken, but there is so much more to discuss than his four pages of concluding material will allow.

This collective project is only one of a number of books, articles and conference topics pertaining to early Christianity's Roman context; Duling notes several of these in the introduction to his essay, including a paper/panel session at the 2003 meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in which Weaver, Riches, Carter, Duling and Steve Friesen all participated. Such interest has effectively generated a self-sustaining

‘cottage industry’ of scholarship on the Roman context of the New Testament, influencing many related areas of biblical study. When Catherine Sider Hamilton presented a paper on Matthew’s use of the ‘innocent blood’ theme (Mt. 27.4 and 24-25) in preparation for the 2005 SBL meeting, a response from David Reed included Carter’s references to ‘hidden transcripts’ in the Matthean text as part of an ongoing indictment of Pilate and Rome. While some New Testament books will reward imperial-contextual study more than others, there is clearly room for a much larger conversation here, even when confined to Matthew alone. As it exists now, this dialogue already holds great potential for classroom use: educators could ask students to read Carter’s ‘Imperial Texts’ article, or excerpts from *Matthew and Empire*, before tackling the essays in the second half of this book (Sim, Weaver, Riches and Carter).

The topic of sovereignty, a frequent touch-point in this volume, presents even richer possibilities for further study. The exercise of sovereign power is a prime factor in a chart that Carter adapts from *Matthew and Empire*, comparing Roman and Matthean theology (p. 148). Carter also notes that Jewish hopes for divine intervention, in the form of a promised Messiah and a re-created earth, represent ‘a fundamental challenge to Roman sovereignty’ (p. 155); the same can be said for Christian expectation of the Messiah’s return. As Riches explores apocalyptic eschatology, he refers repeatedly to divine intervention from oppressive rule. Weaver joins Sim in enthusiastically citing Carter’s work, as she delineates the difference between Caesar’s *power* and God’s *sovereignty*.

The book’s second half, then, is governed by what might be called a hermeneutic of sovereignty, a timely topic with promising applications—so long as this reading is not taken too far out of context. To an extent, the contributors to the first half can be said to share this interest, which they apply to non-Matthean sources. Can Rome be understood as an agent of destruction within God’s sovereign plan, spoken of in terms like those applied by Old Testament prophets to Assyria and Babylon? (Note the parallel use of eagles and other predators as images, and the obvious overlap in the symbolism of ‘Babylon’ in Revelation.) When the ‘bad guys’ win the day, not only triumphing on the battlefield but continuing to oppress and persecute those under their control, what are the implications for Jewish and Christian theodicy? This concern, a common point of agreement for several of the book’s early essays,

deserves further consideration and fits well with the broader issues of sovereignty posed by subsequent contributors.

As with any collective work, *Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context* benefits from the diversity of its contributors, who bring a variety of approaches to their conversation, ranging from character study (Weaver), to the use of apocalyptic and eschatological vocabulary (Esler, Sim, Riches), to historical, canonical and sociopolitical analysis (McLaren, Oakes, Duling). Carter's work provides the focus, the essential point of contact for the majority of these contributors, though there are other connections: Esler and Riches invoke colonial and post-colonial perspectives, views that seem slightly anachronistic but remain helpful frames of reference for thinking about Rome's interaction with the New Testament world. Taken together, these essays offer much-needed depth to the field of imperial-contextual study, ensuring promising discussions yet to come. All that they lack is a stronger and more thorough correlation to give them a convincing coherence, a shortcoming that will no doubt be addressed in publications, conferences and classrooms as the field of study continues to grow and mature.

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