

BOOK REVIEW

Carter, Warren, *Seven Events that Shaped the New Testament World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). xxi + 162 pp. Pbk. \$21.99 USD.

In this book, Warren Carter, New Testament professor at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University, presents seven key events that he considers pivotal to the socio-cultural and linguistic dynamics of Jesus' followers and the formation of the New Testament canon. The discussion of these key events that span a period of seven hundred years (323 BCE to 397 CE) is divided into two phases. Chapters 1 to 4 deal with four key events before the emergence of the Jesus movement, and Chapters 5 to 7 address three significant events after the crucifixion of Jesus c. 30 CE. Although the title and each chapter of the book emphasize the phrase 'key events' and thus suggest that discussing these is the main contribution of the book to biblical scholarship, this is regrettably not the case, as I will indicate in my comments below. Rather, the book's highlight is its recognition and assertion that the ancient world was multicultural, and that Greek was the dominant culture and language from which the Jesus movement emerged. A second highlight may be seen in the 'seven important dynamics for understanding the New Testament' the author lists and briefly explains at the end of the book, although I am not sure what new evidence the author has actually presented to support his case. Nevertheless, a brief chapter summary might serve as a good review of some of the historical facts related to these seven key events.

Chapter 1 provides an answer to the big question 'what does Alexander have to do with Jesus and the early Jesus movement?' (p. 1) and the significance of Alexander's death in 323 BCE. Carter itemizes Alexander's military accomplishments, focusing on how he defeated the Persian Empire and subsequently established the Macedonian Empire. Carter says that historians have typically stressed the purposes of Alexander's conquest, which include his quest for economic and political

gains, as well as for power and psychological satisfaction. But one relevant issue is the impact of Alexander's endeavors, such as the spread of the Hellenistic culture through the following centuries. As a result, Carter argues, 'the world of Jesus and of the early Jesus movement reflects the processes that Alexander and his successors set in motion' (p. 11).

Chapter 2 discusses another consequence of Alexander's endeavors—the Septuagint. Carter rightly notes that the translation of the LXX (c. 250 BCE) not only showed that the world then was complexly multicultural and dominated by Greek culture, but it also underscored how the Jewish people accommodated that type of world as they simultaneously maintained and asserted their ethnic-religious identity. The rest of the chapter mostly deals with the *Letter of Aristeas*, which provides clues to the date, process and origin of the writing of the LXX. The author points out that the LXX 'became the dominant version of the Hebrew Scriptures for the Jesus movement' (p. 34) and is reflected in many passages of the Gospels, as well as in Paul's usage of the Greek terms translated as 'justified', 'redemption' and 'sacrifice of atonement'.

Chapter 3 outlines some significant events that led to the rededication of the temple in 164 BCE. Carter draws on the book of Daniel and the apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees to recount the stories surrounding Judas Maccabeus and his family's revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes's 'attempt to destroy Jewish identity and community and enforce Hellenistic practices' (p. 45). According to Carter, the temple crisis illustrates Jewish negotiations of Greek culture in various ways that served as litmus tests for in-group membership in early Judaism. 'Some joined Antiochus, others fled, some were nonviolently faithful to death, some fought, some waited for God to act' (p. 55). Consequently, Carter notes that this temple event points to two important understandings of first-century Judaism—that religion in the biblical world highly involved politics, and that Judaism was not monolithic but quite diverse—two facts that are often misperceived by Christians.

Chapter 4 presents the Roman occupation of Judea in 63 BCE, and how Rome took control of the region and maintained its power. The author points out that 'When imperial power is asserted, there are always winners and losers' (p. 67). Whereas the biggest losers were the Judeans and Hasmoneans, the winners were the Romans and King Herod. The author lists some excuses Herod might have had for being a

vicious ruler with whom the Judeans had to consequently negotiate. There were two approaches of negotiation. ‘While some were waiting for God to act through the Messiah, others were seeking justice in other ways’ (p. 77). A host of complex dynamics—aspirations for independence and a better future, diversity of perspectives among the local people, violence from local elites in trying to please the Romans, etc.—were all happening at the same time. Carter thus concludes that local people evaluated their foreign rulers in both positive and negative ways.

Chapter 5 seeks for ways to understand Jesus’ crucifixion c. 30 CE. Carter first discusses who got crucified in Jesus’ time and the reasons why they were crucified. The accounts of Josephus and Tacitus indicate that crucifixion was not typically carried out for everyone, especially when one was a Roman citizen. This brutal punishment was only used for violent criminals and rebels as a way ‘to intimidate as many people as possible...to maintain the Pax Romana’ (pp. 89-90). Carter also mentions two theories as to how crucified people died. Whereas the older theory suggests that they died of asphyxiation or suffocation, modern theories claim that they died of shock, due to mental agony and all sorts of physical and emotional trauma. He concludes that three factors—Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God, Rome’s allies in Jerusalem and Jesus’ eschatological threats and teachings—led to Jesus’ crucifixion as a rebel king, even though Jesus did not publicly declare himself as ‘King of the Jews’.

Chapter 6 marks the period 50–130 CE as the approximate time during which the New Testament writings were produced. This chapter addresses some of the typical ‘introductory’ issues pertaining to the study of Paul’s letters, some of the writings after his death (e.g. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*), the book of Acts, the Catholic letters (excluding the letters of John and Jude) and the Gospels, while keeping an eye on the ‘forms, functions, and content of these writings for communities of Jesus-believers’ (p. 108). The author shows that the New Testament writings were all pastoral and theological works, although they differ in the way they present their materials. Whereas the Gospels use narratives and focus on Jesus’ public ministry to introduce Jesus and to tell about how to become Jesus’ disciples, the New Testament letters address the specific situations and needs of the early Christian believers, emphasizing the significance of Christ’s finished work on the cross. The author closes with a discussion of the Synoptic problem.

Chapter 7 identifies the stages in the process of canon formation by the third- and fourth-century church. Stage one involves the writing of the New Testament during the period c. 50–130 CE as discussed in the preceding chapter. Stage two is the ‘use or reading/hearing of these texts among Jesus-believing communities’ (p. 140). Stage three concerns the copying, circulating and collecting of these writings that will eventually lead to the formation of the New Testament canon. And stage four involves a selection process from various ‘lists’ of collected writings to determine which books are to be included in the canon. The author points out that the ‘canonization’ event spans a period of 350 years and identifies the Council of Carthage in North Africa in 397 CE as responsible for the ratification of the New Testament canon, while noting that this event was not of unanimous significance for the churches then. Carter ends with a discussion of some of the criteria of canonization and the legacy of the canon.

Carter claims, “Reading it [this book] will enlighten you about the beginnings of the Christian movement and help your understanding of the New Testament” (p. xvii). This is true, especially since these seven events were rightly selected as ‘special’ events related to the early Jesus movement and the emergence of the New Testament. Yet, in my opinion, they are also ‘not-so special’ in that they are events that most scholars would already know, and in that the discussion of each of these key events contains virtually no new material. Except for the significant facts that the author highlights in Chapters 1 to 3, the other chapters are merely a repeated discussion of historical facts that can also be found in many other scholarly sources. The bibliographical list of sources in the footnote at the beginning of every chapter should prove my point. With reference to Chapters 4 to 7, this reviewer would have expected to see a continuity of how the Hellenistic culture and Greek language directly or indirectly affected and played their role in the Roman occupation of Judea, the crucifixion of Jesus, the writing of the New Testament texts, and the process of canon formation. Moreover, with reference to Chapters 6 and 7, readers would perhaps have wanted to see a presentation of the available textual materials or documents that show how the process of transmission came about and how we finally arrived at our New Testament text, instead of a general discussion of the commonly known process of canon formation based on the history of traditions. For these reasons, it appears the book does not bring a new perspective to our understanding of the New Testament world, in

order to better understand the socio-cultural and linguistic milieu of the early Jesus followers. The audience to whom this book is written is also not apparent, as the author does not say. It can be confusing to the reader, since, on the one hand, ‘seven key events’ sounds something like long-hidden secrets to be revealed, yet on the other hand, the book’s content looks like a considerably abridged version of a New Testament survey or introduction volume. Despite these shortcomings, this book certainly provides important background information and knowledge about these well-known key historical events that shaped the New Testament both for the beginning seminary student and the lay people of the church. The book also includes many illustrations and a subject index that serve as textual aids for readers.

Hughson Ong
McMaster Divinity College