



Carter, Warren

[Seven Events that Shaped the New Testament World](#)

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Introduction

A familiarity with the historical and cultural backdrop of the New Testament world is something that is lacking amongst believers today. We read the New Testament and believe the message it records regarding Jesus: his birth, his message and teachings, his subsequent trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. But how much do we know about the sociopolitical climate of first century Israel and the role in which the so-called “intertestamental period” plays in shaping it? Or, what does the life and conquests of Alexander the Great have to do with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures? In beginning to understand the history of the the Mediterranean World, one also begins to understand the historical background of the New Testament writings.

In his recent book, *Seven Events of the New Testament World*, Warren Carter, professor of New Testament at [Brite Divinity School](#), discusses seven events that he deems important for understanding the world of the New Testament, stretching from Alexander the Great (323 BCE) through the closing of the New Testament canon (397 CE). For Carter, the “seven chapters of this book provide an orientation to some important aspects of the early Jesus movement and the New Testament. Reading it will enlighten you about the beginnings of the Christian movement and help your understanding of the New

Testament” (xvii). The seven events discussed are:

The Death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE)

The Process of Translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (ca. 250 BCE)

The Rededication of the the Jerusalem Temple (164 BCE)

The Roman Occupation of Judea (63 BCE)

The Crucifixion of Jesus (ca. 30 CE)

The Writing of the New Testament Texts (ca. 50–ca. 130 CE)

The Process of “Closing” the New Testament Canon (397 CE)

These seven events are not chosen arbitrarily. Rather, Carter sees “each event as a focal point for larger cultural dynamics and sociohistorical realities that were in some way significant for followers of Jesus and the New Testament.” He goes on to states that they are “used as entry points, as launching pads, to talk about these significant and larger realities” (xvii).

Summary

With the conquest of much of the known world at the time, Alexander the Great ushered in what would come to be known as Hellenism. Hellenism—the spreading of Greek culture—would have a lasting effect that would continue on into the world of Jesus, the New Testament authors, and centuries after. An early example of the spread of Hellenism is seen most clearly in the production of the LXX—the Greek Old Testament. With the spread of Greek language and culture, a spread that inevitably made its way into Israel and eventually Judaism, there became a need to have sacred writings available for Jews who no longer knew Hebrew. Not only this, but for Jews who had fully embraced the spread of Hellenism there became a need to join their Hebrew traditions with their new love for Greek culture, and the LXX would be the bridge that would unite the two. A few centuries later the LXX would become the Scriptures of the early church, used by various the writers to aid in the recording of the what would become known as the New Testament.

The rededication of the temple is an important event in the history and development of Judaism. The book of 1 Maccabees records the events that lead up to the rededication: Antiochus Epiphanes issues a decree that attempts to strip away Jewish

customs and practices, which in turn leads to Antiochus setting up an image of Zeus in the temple and sacrificing a pig at the altar. This of course does not sit well with the Jews living in Jerusalem. From here the revolt leads to victory, and victory to the rededication of the temple in 164 BCE. The freedom Israel experienced did not last long. In 63 BCE Pompey marched his army into Jerusalem, and in three months Israel's independence was over. Consequently, it was under this rule that Jesus was born and later crucified on the cross.

The writing of the New Testament documents come out of the life, death, and resurrection of this Jewish Messiah. They tell the story of his life and teachings (the Gospels), the history of the early church (Acts), and various circumstances that arose as a result of spread of the gospel throughout the Mediterranean World—a world saturated in Hellenistic thought and culture. The final event is the closing of the New Testament canon. This event has had a lasting effect on church history. The debate over which books should be part of the New Testament canon is a debate that still exists even today.

Evaluation

There is much to commend in *Seven Events that Shaped the New Testament World*. Carter clearly illustrates how key historical events, people, and documents help shaped the world into which Christianity was born. The use of supplemental information like pictures, sidebars, etc. help to aid the reader and provide helpful information. Likewise, each chapter builds on the previous chapter, providing continuity for the reader as they move from Hellenism, to Roman rule, to the New Testament, and beyond.

While the book as a whole is excellent, Carter's chapter on the New Testament documents may rub some in the wrong way. In the title Carter dates the New Testament from around 50 CE up until about 130 CE. Albeit this dating is certainly feasible—some scholars have suggested dates similar to these—it seems that the majority of scholars date all of the writings within the first century. Another issue raised is the authorship of some of the Pauline letters. Again, there is some debate as to the authorship of some of these writings, but there is no real consensus to many of the questions raised by Carter. Carter also notes four factors that are involved in the debate about Pauline authorship: vocabulary, style, historical circumstances, and theological understandings (117). Sadly, Carter dismisses the first three as “not very conclusive,” (though he does have a brief

sidebar on 118 on these factors). Instead, Carter focuses on the fourth factor, the theological understanding of the debated Pauline epistles. In dismissing the first three factors, it appears that Carter does not have a strong leg to stand on for his theological understanding behind these debated epistles of Paul. How can one have a robust understanding of Pauline theology if he does not fully understand the language, style, and historical circumstances behind the writings themselves?

Further, the juxtaposition between the focus of Paul's thought in one letter as compared to another (i.e. Paul's view of the church in Corinth as compared to Ephesians) seems artificial and somewhat forced, but this may be due to the lack of space to sufficiently flush these things out in more detail. In which case, it may have been better to focus more on less controversial aspects of the New Testament documents and less on the theology of the New Testament writers.

Conclusion

In all, Carter has written a book that has great value for anyone who desires to gain a historical understanding of the New Testament world. It is clear, concise, and free of technical jargon, which in turns leads to an entertaining, yet informative look at the history of the Mediterranean World. Carter does not get caught in the minutiae of every single event; rather, he allows the reader to see the progression of history as it lead up to the birth of Christ and well into the early church and beyond.