

BOOK REVIEW

Charles H. Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5–7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). ix + 181 pp. Pbk. US\$17.99.

In this reading of Matthew 5–7, Charles H. Talbert turns to ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman writings to shed light on the meaning and nature of the Sermon on the Mount (SM hereafter). This study is the fruit of years of teaching New Testament and ethics at Wake Forest and Baylor Universities. Talbert's thesis is twofold. He argues that the major function of the SM is to introduce a new understanding of divine intention behind the Law. Such perception of God's will leads to a new disposition; character is then shaped as the auditor sees differently. Apart from character formation, Talbert also wants to show that, if read in a proper context, the SM contributes to the formulation of a normative Christian stance about various issues.

This study is divided into two main sections. The first five chapters tackle background questions, including the historical and literary context of the Sermon, the relation of Matthew's Gospel to Judaism, and a discussion of the ethics that the SM conveys. It lays out the groundwork and the assumptions for a unit-by-unit analysis that follows in the second part.

The study starts with a discussion of the relation of Matthew's Gospel to Judaism. Talbert argues that Christianity and Rabbinism are 'two forms of Judaism of their time' (p. 4). Taking sides with Overman, Riches and, to a lesser extent, Hagner, Talbert positions Christianity as one of the many spin-offs in Middle Judaism (spanning five centuries from the third century BCE), along with other sects of the time such as Pharisaism, Essenism etc. Thus, to fully understand Matthew one needs to take into account the evangelist's self-understanding as a Jew (a part of Judaism) rather than as a Christian (apostate from Judaism) (p. 6). His intention in writing a Gospel is to contend with other groups of Jews. One of the implications of this perspective of Matthew and

Judaism is the legitimacy of using later rabbinic material in New Testament interpretation. Talbert contends that if the material is chosen 'with great care' (p. 7), that is, with its antiquity confirmed, it helps us to understand the New Testament texts better. He argues:

Since Christian Messianic Judaism was a part of first-century middle Judaism, if a New Testament reference either states or implies such a tradition as is found in later rabbinic sources, then something like the rabbinic tradition may be presumed to have existed in some early form independent of Christian Messianic Judaism (p. 8).

This serves as the ground for his heavy use of later rabbinic materials throughout the second part of the commentary.

The next two chapters look into the setting and the structure of the SM. Drawing from three strands of argument taken from a reading of the first four chapters of Matthew, Talbert suggests that Jesus, the speaker of the SM, is portrayed as the Mosaic prophet and a true teacher who comes to fulfill the righteousness of God. The audience, either summoned or attracted by this authoritative figure, is the crowd in Mt. 4.23-25. Next, Talbert makes a brief survey of various structures of the SM proposed by ancient and modern authors. He agrees with the general consensus on the division of the thought units (5.3-16; 5:17-48; 6.1-18; 6.19-34, 7.1-12; 7.13-27) but offers his own proposal regarding the relation of the sections. Utilizing the concept of higher righteousness (5.17-20) as the exegetical key, Talbert contends that the SM as a whole is a call to the disciples for character formation. This proposed structure is further expounded in the second part (Chapters Six to Eleven). They culminate in a précis that serves as a conclusion in the last chapter (pp. 147-48). Since this is a study of how the SM can be used in ethical discussion, before going into a detailed commentary on the text, Talbert devotes two more chapters to ethics.

Talbert defines 'character formation' and 'decision making' as the 'being' and the 'doing' in ethics. Unlike the majority of interpretations of the SM, which champion the use of the SM exclusively for ethical decision making, Talbert suggests that the SM is a catalyst for character formation. He contends that in order for the SM to function as a reference for ethical decision making, the passage must be read in three contexts (Matthew, the New Testament and the Old Testament).

All this discussion about context and ethics sets the stage for the final chapter of Part One, where Talbert talks about whether the Sermon is preaching legalism (from work to work), legalistic covenantal nomism

(from grace to work) or new covenant piety (from grace to grace). The center of debate concerns how one relates the indicative (grace) to the imperative (work) in Matthew, particularly the SM, where some have contended that it is inevitably filled with imperatives.

Talbert refuses to view Matthew as being legalistic, as proposed by Marxsen and others. He argues Matthew clearly demonstrates that entering Jesus' community is 'due to divine initiative' (p. 33). The disciples are called before they have heard the Sermon (4.18-22), and believers are baptized before they are taught to observe all things that Jesus commanded (28.19-20). Against a legalistic covenantal nomism, he disagrees with Mohrlang who says that signs of divine enablement disappear after the disciples are called to the community. As a literary critic, he turns to Matthew's unique narrative techniques to uncover both the indicative and the imperative in the Gospel, and the priority of the indicative. Talbert first turns to van Unnik's study on the relation between divine presence and empowerment in the Bible. He points out that the presence of Jesus enables both church discipline (18.20) and mission (28.20) and thus demonstrates that 'the indicative is clearly prior to the imperative' (p. 35). He also argues that Matthew employs narrative techniques to achieve what Sternberg called 'omnipotence behind the scenes' (p. 36). Drawing heavily from ancient parallels, he shows that divine enablement is associated with the invocation of a divine name, and being 'with' a deity. Matthew clearly demonstrates this narrative strategy in the Gospel when the disciples are associated with Jesus' name on various occasions (10.40; 18.5, 20; 28.18-20) and are with Jesus for most of his ministry. Even though he is not always explicit, Matthew 'leaves no stage of discipleship untouched by the divine indicative' (p. 43).

In the second part of the book (Chapters Six to Twelve), the commentary on the SM starts off by a discussion on the nature of the Beatitudes and their relation to the succeeding unit. Talbert takes 5.3-16 as one unit since both parts of it concern the portrait of the divinely-enabled disciples. The Beatitudes are followed by eschatological promises (5.3-12) and the next part (5.13-16) by other with expectations. The disciples are divinely-enabled since they are summoned or attracted (4.18-25) to follow Jesus and to be transformed (they *are* the salt and light of the world 5.13-16). The subsequent discussion focuses on the antitheses (Chapter Seven) with an emphasis on the fulfillment of the higher righteousness (5.17-20). Talbert contends that the higher

righteousness (contrasted with the deficient righteousness of the Pharisees and scribes) is fully expounded in the four following thought units: 5.17-48 on proper horizontal relationships, 6.1-18 on true piety and a correct view of God, 6.19-34 on possessions, and 7.1-12 on condemnation of and discernment in judging.

In Chapters Seven to Eleven, Talbert comments on each thought unit following a routine framework. The content is first expounded, with the help of ancient Jewish and/or Greco-Roman parallels, to show its connection with character formation. At each juncture, the disciples are challenged by Jesus to see the true divine intent behind the cited law or traditional belief. Talbert suggests that the Sermon in this way functions as a verbal icon, 'a window into divine reality' (p. 72), and thus shapes the character of the disciples by guiding them to see differently. Then Talbert briefly discusses how such passages contribute to ethical decision making. The major conversation partners here are Allison, Davies and Betz on exegetical decisions, Montefiore and Betz on the Christology of the Sermon, and Bruner on theological insights. The study ends with a précis of the findings of Chapters Six to Eleven.

Indices of modern references, Scripture, ancient sources and modern authors are at the back of the book. This book does not carry a topical index and readers are asked to consult the SBL handbook for the list of abbreviations.

Without dispute, Talbert's work is an important entry to the study of ethics and the New Testament. It is well structured and, apart from several intentional repetitions in the last few chapters, a well-written work. Talbert has put up a strong case for seeing a link among the various thought units by looking beyond their apparent meanings for the divinely-enabled higher righteousness. He goes against the tide that treats the Sermon as a set of ethical instructions, and turns to the concept of a verbal icon, stressing the character-transforming power of the SM. The number of ancient sources referred to in this book is impressive. If one skips the introductory chapters and goes straight to the commentary, it is almost like reading a Jewish (to a lesser extent, Greco-Roman) commentary on the SM. These ancient sources, ranging from the Old Testament Apocrypha to the later rabbinic materials, provide critical background information to fuel the discussion and often clarify the meaning of words and phrases that otherwise may be obscure to modern readers.

Having said that, more discussion and clarification is needed in certain areas. Talbert's defense of using relevant late rabbinic sources for New Testament interpretation remains debatable. He suggests that to use the late rabbinic materials, one needs to find 'independent Jewish witness from (or before) the New Testament period' (such as materials from Philo, the pseudepigrapha or the Dead Sea Scrolls) to presume that such sayings existed at that time (p. 7). However, even Talbert himself admits that this does not prove that the material is early, but only that it is the 'safest' test (p. 7). On several occasions he simply does not follow his own rule, using the late rabbinic parallel alone to explain the meaning of the text (e.g. pp. 96, 104-105). Apart from this, on the discussion of the ongoing transformation of the disciples, Talbert seems to ground the whole divine enablement argument on the call and presence of Jesus (4.18-22). However, more discussion is needed to account for the disciples' apparent and frequent failures in the Gospel even when Jesus is with them (e.g. 8.26; 14.31; 16.23; 17.16).

For treatment of a popular passage such as the SM, one may want more on the grammatical and rhetorical fronts, a more detailed framework on how to apply particular passages as a normative guide (e.g. Richard B. Hays), and a better conclusion than a précis. Nevertheless, no single work can cover everything on a given topic in this day and age. Talbert's contribution to ethical and biblical studies is definitely welcome and enlightening. It may not be as comprehensive as one might want for a course text, but any student of the Sermon and the Gospel will definitely learn from it. Those with some general knowledge of the ancient sources and the development of Second Temple Judaism will have a better grasp of the work than others.

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