

BOOK REVIEW

Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). xix + 296 pp. Pbk. US\$24.99.

The aim of the Paideia Commentaries Series is to assist today's readers not only to grasp the original cultural, literary and theological settings of biblical books, but also to find their possible meaning for today. Here, Talbert endeavors to give insight into the lives and conditions of the original readers of Ephesians and Colossians.

In the opening section, Talbert has an extended discussion on the relationship between Ephesians and Colossians. Although there are various suggestions about how to approach these two letters, the reason Talbert deals with the two in one commentary is that there are so many similarities between them, such as in the forms of the salutation, the prayer, the parenesis and the closing. In terms of authorship, he holds to deuterio-Pauline authorship because of the obvious discontinuity regarding various theological matters between these letters and the seven 'authentic' letters. Talbot's argument that the discontinuity indicates different authorship means that he has to explain the similarities of the two groups of letters. He says that such similarities are due to the fact that the assumed other author(s) followed Paul and wrote these letters under Paul's authority. The similarities reflect imitation of Paul's previous writing, the so-called 'echoes of the early letters'. As a result, the date of the two letters is automatically placed between the late 50s and the end of the first century.

Talbert believes that the purposes of the two letters are different. Although some scholars suggest specific issues for Ephesians, he focuses on general issues dealing with the formation of the intended readers' identity as Christians. Regarding Colossians, he asserts that the purpose of the letter is due to a specific situation in which the Colossians were threatened by a worldview based on a local philosophy.

Talbert tries to discover the varied aspects of the background of the first century, particularly in the province of Asia. He believes that the author 'Paul', who knows his/her readers' situation (the '*Zeitgeist* of the readers'), skillfully embraces various literary strategies so as to help the readers comprehend the letters. Talbert's main idea is to reconstruct from the text the ancient cultural issues through which the writer and the readers communicated. He implies that only one who understands the first-century context can understand the text properly. Accordingly, his exhaustive analysis is from the viewpoint of an authorial-audience-centered reading. To this end, in the last part of the introduction Talbert expands on some of the social-cultural matters indicated in the texts. These matters would have affected how the first readers interpreted the letters.

Like other books in this series, this commentary treats each pericope under three headings: 'Introductory Matters', 'Tracing the Train of Thought' and 'Theological Issues'. These three parts are strategically intended to lead readers into an understanding of the text. In 'Introductory Matters', Talbert investigates textual features such as epistolary devices, textual evidences of ancient Mediterranean culture, and literary forms in comparison with other ancient Mediterranean writings, and compares the two letters in this regard. He also tries to connect each pericope to the others in its book to show the book's theological development and help the readers to keep the larger picture of each letter in mind.

In the second part, 'Tracing the Train of Thought', using structural analysis Talbert focuses on tracing the particular characteristics in antiquity of concepts such as 'grace', 'gift' and 'thanksgiving' as crucial factors in the context of the reciprocity system, and of the ancient household. Among other things, the most significant task in this part is to find the communicative strategies that 'Paul' shares with his/her readers since the text represents the reciprocation of information flowing between them. Such information, which is intended for both a dialectical purpose and for identity formation, reflects the author's theology, which includes eschatological, ecclesiological and soteriological teaching. To better understand ancient social-cultural systems, Talbert traces the history of some kinds of social relations, especially between Jews and Gentiles. In this part, Talbert presents the evidence for the kinds of conflicts that the intended readers must have faced in their society.

In the third section, 'Theological Issues', Talbert draws the readers' attention to the theological issues that the pericope contains, and the discussion about these both in the Fathers and among modern scholars. While supplying a good summary of discussion and sources, he elaborates on the historical-theological features of the text. In particular, he notes the similarity and dissimilarity of how these issues are treated in the 'authentic' letters and in Ephesians and Colossians.

Talbert offers a masterful account of how the social-cultural elements of the first century are reflected in the two letters. His primary motifs for reconstructing the authorial audience include social systems, relationships among groups, and group identity formation (in forming the identity of the Christian audience). Although he avoids a verse-by-verse treatment, he successfully combines close attention to the two letters with appreciation of numerous historical-theological concerns. Thus, Talbert's work contributes significantly to the understanding of the formation of the theological convictions of the text. Moreover, his adhering to the final form of the text helps us to appreciate the text in terms of its larger rhetorical units.

Notwithstanding this book's strengths, it has a few weaknesses. In the beginning, where Talbert defends treating the two letters together, he mentions both the literary and thematic similarities. However, he fails to prove that the same author wrote Colossians and Ephesians. Compared to other commentaries, this one has less information regarding matters of authorship and date; it is in this section that Talbert could have defended his approach more thoroughly. Secondly, in terms of deciding the units of the texts, he offers well-analyzed structures, but he does not provide clear evidence for determining the unit boundaries. Even though he touches a bit on epistolary components, Talbert fails to show the literary features functioning as boundary makers. The third vulnerable point is that in some places it is not easy to discover how he differentiates the sections 'Tracing the Train of Thought' and 'Theological Issues'. Talbert's arguments in both sections are sometimes quite similar, so that the former is the extended and articulated argument of the latter or vice versa.

All in all, this is a very useful commentary for those who want to expand their approach to looking at the text. Many tables, charts and pictures are especially useful in acquainting the reader with both the socio-religious features and the developing historical-theological issues of the world of the first readers of Ephesians and Colossians. The easy

style without footnotes makes it approachable and the wide-ranging bibliography is very helpful to readers as well. For many reasons, therefore, Talbert's work deserves to be read widely.

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