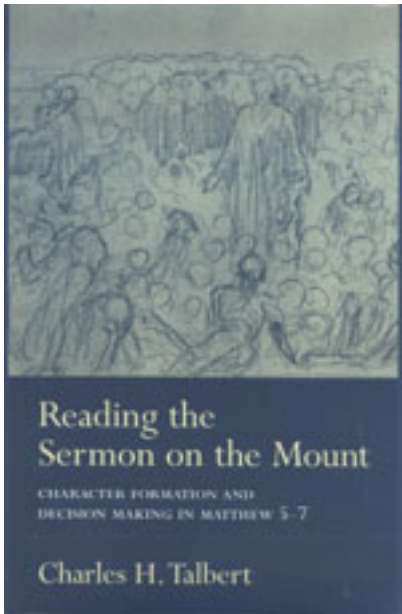


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**Talbert, Charles H.**

***Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5–7***

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Offering yet another noteworthy contribution to biblical scholarship, Charles H. Talbert now enables readers to see more clearly Jesus' aims in the Sermon on the Mount. In *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7*, Talbert's primary thesis is that the Sermon functions as a "verbal icon" through which Jesus reveals his character and forms the character of his disciples. Secondly, when read in its canonical contexts, the Sermon on the Mount offers Jesus' followers guidance for ethical decision making. Talbert thus moves systematically through the text to establish these points, laying bare the Sermon's dual function as catalyst for character formation and standard for decision making.

Talbert formulates this narrative perspective from the biblical text and a wealth of Jewish and Greco-Roman sources from the first century C.E. and earlier. Talbert's aim in part 1 of this two-part volume is to illumine Matthew's conceptual world (chs. 1–4) before he establishes Matthew's essential narrative perspective (ch. 5) and then leads his readers through the text of the Sermon on the Mount and its meaning in part 2 (chs. 6–11).

In chapter 1 he examines the setting of the Sermon and probes Matthew's relation to Judaism. He embraces the new perspective that Matthew and his community saw

themselves as a group within Judaism, not separate from it. They constitute one more form of middle Judaism (third century B.C.E. to second century C.E.) but are distinct from the established synagogues of formative Judaism.

In chapter 2 Talbert turns to the context of the Sermon and asks who is speaking to whom in Matt 5–7. The prior context identifies Jesus as the promised Christ, the Son of God who in Mosaic terms has come to deliver God’s word and to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus speaks with the authority of God, and he addresses all of his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount.

Talbert turns to the structure of the Sermon in chapter 3. After surveying selected analyses to show the range of structural divisions and broad agreements, Talbert sets forth his own understanding of the Sermon’s structure. He agrees with most scholars that the large thought units are 5:3–16, 17–48; 6:1–18, 19–34; 7:1–12, and 13–27, but he differs from many in his view of the relation of these sections to one another and the meaning of these units within their canonical contexts. He presents a full analysis of this distinctive view in the second part of his volume.

In chapter 4 Talbert clarifies the meaning of the terms “character formation” and “decision making.” The former concerns who we are, the latter what we do. What we do is a consequence of who we are. Thus Talbert resists the popular current of scholarship that interprets the Sermon in ethical terms alone. Rather, he argues that the Sermon is also about relations in life, matters of covenant faithfulness and piety. As Talbert puts it, the Sermon “aims in the first instance to function as a catalyst to shape the character of the auditors in the direction of covenant faithfulness” (31).

These first four chapters form the backdrop for Talbert’s fifth and pivotal chapter in which he scrutinizes Matthew’s narrative perspective and shows how Matthew’s Jesus seeks to enable obedience in his followers through the Sermon on the Mount. This chapter warrants special consideration for anyone interested in Matthew’s central convictions.

Interpreters of Matthew have long observed an apparent discrepancy between, on the one hand, the Christian gospel of grace announcing God’s new action in Jesus Christ and ongoing work in the Holy Spirit and, on the other hand, the imperatival demands of God’s Christ that loom large in the Gospel according to Matthew, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Some scholars believe Matthew is legalistic (i.e., Marxsen et al.), while other scholars contend that God’s grace is implicit in Matthew’s emphasis upon obedience to Christ’s commands but is never connected directly to the ethical behavior of

believers, as though Matthew belongs in E. P. Sanders's category of covenantal nomist (i.e., Mohrlang et al.).

Talbert, on the other hand, utilizes the works of Hubert Frankemölle, David Kupp, and W. C. van Unnik to move beyond the traditional stereotype. Paying close attention to the Old Testament formulas "with us/you" and "in your midst" that are present in Matthew (1:23; 18:20; 28:19–20), Talbert agrees that these synonymous formulas reveal essential elements of Matthew's Christology, namely, that God is present in Jesus (1:23) and that Jesus' presence enables church discipline (18:20) and empowers mission (28:20). Talbert advances their arguments, however, by paying close attention to Matthew's conceptual world as it is revealed through Matthew's own narrative approach and techniques. For example, in light of Meir Sternberg's work on narrative in the Hebrew Bible, Talbert sees in Matthew's narrative approach a presentation of divine activity as "omnipotence behind the scenes" (36), at least regarding the disciples' obedience in Matt 5–25. Talbert contends that the chief literary techniques that Matthew uses in this method of narration are "invocation of the name," "being with Jesus," and "Jesus being with the disciples" (36–42). These three narrative techniques especially reveal Matthew's fundamental conviction that Jesus enables his followers to keep fellowship with him and one another as they grow in obedience and righteousness. Together they show Matthew's view that "divine enablement covers the disciples' lives from start to finish" (43).

In part 2 of this volume Talbert examines each of the six main thought units of the Sermon. He then presents a précis, a bibliography, and indexes of scripture, ancient sources, and modern authors. Chapters 6–11 present Talbert's analysis of Jesus' promises and expectations for the disciples (ch. 6; 5:3–16); Jesus' responses to popular antitheses that distort and oppose the divine intention for righteous living (ch. 7; 5:17–48); Jesus' insight into the essence of true piety, which is righteousness toward God (ch. 8; 6:1–18); Jesus' summary of how righteousness expresses itself toward material things (ch. 9; 6:19–34); Jesus' counsel for righteous judgment (ch. 10; 7:1–12); and Jesus' guidance for choosing wisely both the teachings and teachers whom disciples follow (ch. 11; 7:13–27). The précis provides a helpful summary of Talbert's argument, and every scholar values useful bibliographies and indexes.

Readers of Talbert's book will be richly rewarded. His argument for a broader interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount that includes its inherent dimension of character formation is a sound contribution to Matthean studies. Over against the predominant, traditional way of reading the Sermon on the Mount as only a collection of ethical mandates regarding certain kinds of behavior expected of Jesus' followers, Talbert unveils the heart of Jesus' teachings, identifies and follows the common thematic thread of true righteousness that runs throughout the Sermon, and shows how Jesus' loving

grace enables his disciples to live by this higher righteousness that he reveals and requires. In other words, Talbert shows how the Sermon functions as a catalyst—a “verbal icon”—to shape the character of its auditors toward covenant faithfulness. Indeed, the term “verbal icon” that Talbert employs to describe Matthew’s perspective of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon and their affect on Jesus’ disciples will likely gain wider usage among biblical scholars, especially in the area of Gospel studies. Talbert’s study also shows how the Sermon may help modern readers in their acts of decision making by highlighting the character of the Teacher who calls his followers to faithfulness in relationships with God and neighbor. Anyone who seeks to examine the ethical aspects of the Sermon in the future will need to take into account Talbert’s contribution here.

Of course, not everyone will agree with all of Talbert’s findings, and not every scholarly publication is perfect or fully satisfactory for every reader’s interest. Some may see differently the relations between the units of thought in the Sermon even as many will be persuaded. Others will desire a topical index to increase the book’s practical usefulness, but many will find the present indexes sufficient. Some feminine critics may be surprised by Hannah’s absence in Talbert’s discussion of biblical traditions of praying in secret (105), but critics of every sort will find helpful Talbert’s distinction between “relational” and “political” language regarding God as “Father” (112–15). Some ethicists will take offense at Talbert’s relation of Jesus’ ethic to just-war doctrines, but every reader will benefit from considering Talbert’s view that “there may be occasions when love of neighbor trumps one’s commitment to non-retaliation” (92). Rhetorical critics may be disappointed to find no mention of syllogisms and enthymemes in Talbert’s analysis of the Beatitudes or of periodic constructions in the Sermon, which would reinforce grammatically several of his narrative critical conclusions (e.g., the Matthean Jesus’ emphasis on righteousness and fulfilling the scriptures,). Still every reader will appreciate Talbert’s attentiveness to the language of the biblical text and his theologically sophisticated illumination of key words and concepts in the Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, every reader will appreciate this clear and masterfully written piece of scholarly literature. Without doubt, this book makes an important contribution to biblical and ethical studies; it is an essential read for any interpreter of Matthew’s message about Jesus and the function of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.