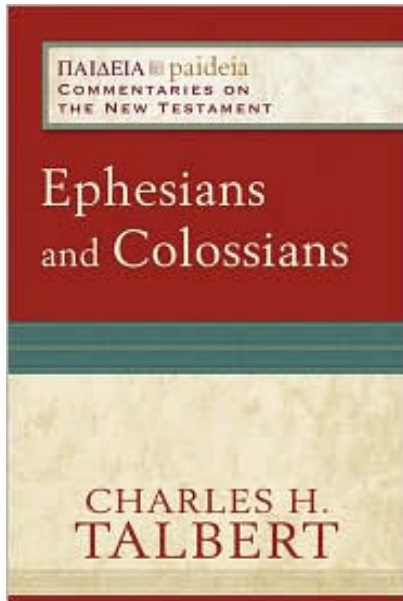


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Talbert, Charles H.

Ephesians and Colossians

Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament

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This volume is the first in a new series of New Testament commentaries. Its foreword makes clear that the series name, Paideia, is meant to reflect its aim: to instruct students who have theological interests in the biblical text by paying attention to the cultural, literary, and theological settings in which the text took form and to the concerns of contemporary readers. While focusing on the final form of the text, the commentaries will also emphasize the extratextual repertoire of the original readers in order to highlight the ways in which the text is designed to persuade and move such readers. Their authors will be drawn from a number of confessional perspectives—Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox—and will work through the particular New Testament text in terms of its rhetorical units, exploring each in relation to (1) introductory matters, (2) the train of thought or narrative flow of the argument, and (3) theological issues raised by the text and of interest to the contemporary Christian.

Charles Talbert, Distinguished Professor of Religion at Baylor University and a prolific writer, is one of the editors of the series (along with Mikeal Parsons), so his interpretation of its remit in authoring the commentary on Ephesians and Colossians is likely to provide a taster of what is to come in the rest of the series. Talbert is well known for, among other matters, his stress on how the first readers would have understood the text as key to its

interpretation and, not unconnected, his expertise in the culture and writings of the ancient Mediterranean world. It is not surprising, therefore, to find these areas of interpretation both listed among the distinctive contributions of the series as a whole and emerging as major features of his reading of Ephesians and Colossians.

To fulfill his pedagogical aim, Talbert draws on his long experience of teaching students, writes clearly and accessibly, summarizes scholarly debates helpfully, and presents material in a user-friendly manner. The commentary is interspersed with boxes containing outlines, diagrams, and significant quotations from ancient writers, with maps, and with photographs of ancient artefacts.

The commentary's introduction (3–28) deals with both Ephesians and Colossians, discussing their relationship, authorship, date, locale, and purpose and setting out the commentary's approach before treating aspects of the readers' cultural repertoire, such as unity, hostile powers, benefaction, loose living and disorderly worship, and households. The decision to treat Ephesians and Colossians together in one volume is justified by pointing to their similarities, and two tables set these out. Talbert, of course, also notes that common material is used or developed in different ways. Nevertheless, at the end of the introduction the reader is told that Ephesians will be treated first and in more detail and asked, in reading the commentary on Colossians, to turn to the similar content in Ephesians for further information. Does this do enough justice to the distinctive use of similar words and phrases in Colossians? Ephesians is longer and has probably had a greater impact in the history of interpretation, but does Colossians end up receiving relatively short shrift? While 142 pages are devoted to the commentary on Ephesians, only 73 pages are given to Colossians, and while the former has twenty-nine items of illustrative material with it, the latter has only nine. On the question of authorship, Talbert has rightly seen no reason to take the view of some recent commentators that Ephesians is by Paul himself. Instead, he surveys the varieties of authorship in the ancient world and concludes that both Ephesians and Colossians fall into the category of writing "as if" by the putative author, arguing that they would only have been perceived as forgeries if their ideas were insufficiently in continuity with those of the alleged author. In line with this, their writer is frequently referred to as "Paul" (with scare quotes) in the commentary. As for the purpose of the letters, Talbert agrees with the emerging consensus that both are attempts to shape Christian identity and enable Christian growth. Ephesians does this in a more general way, while Colossians does so in the face of a particular problem and by adapting conventional philosophical strategies.

The latter half of the introduction lays out typical concerns of ancient Mediterranean culture that original readers would have brought to the text. These have been listed above, and Talbert enlarges on their significance at relevant places in the commentary. Likely to

be particularly illuminating for students is the discussion of benefaction and the reciprocity system, where Talbert indicates how the Pauline tradition employs the phenomenon of benefaction in its understanding of God but critiques the understanding of reciprocity. Helpful as much of this material is for placing the thought of the letters in their context, questions might be raised about some of the claims made for it. Does it really make the general nature of Ephesians less of an enigma (15)? Does focusing on the original audience provide a better interpretative guide than focusing on the author or the text (16)? All three have the ancient Mediterranean world as their context, and, without in any way advocating authorial intention as the aim of interpretation, it is hard to see that we know any more about the specific place within that cultural milieu of reconstructed first readers and about precisely how much of its concerns they may have shared and in what distinctive ways they shared them than we do about these issues in relation to any putative authors. On occasions the way in which the comparative cultural material is introduced gives one pause. We are told, "Given the pervasive theme of unity in Ephesians, the 'world' of Ephesians must have included a desire for or emphasis upon unity and the overcoming of factions" (17, see also 18 on hostile powers). It may well be right that there were concerns about unity in the Greco-Roman world, but this surely does not follow from the emphasis of Ephesians. Do all pervasive themes in Pauline letters have a match in the concerns of the surrounding culture? Do not a number of them introduce their own distinctive concerns or even clash with dominant features in the culture?

In the actual commentary on the texts, Talbert generally proves to be a sure-footed guide, and students should emerge from their reading with a clear impression of the thrust of the letters' arguments and of the main interpretative issues. Here a reviewer may best serve potential readers by indicating the way in which the author employs the series' threefold format, his stance on selected issues, and a few of the places in which he puts forward what appears to be a distinctive view. The first angle of approach to a rhetorical unit is headed "Introductory Matters" and most frequently deals with the form, function, and structure of a unit. Under this heading, we learn, for example, that Talbert takes Col 1:15–20 to be a preformed Christian hymn incorporated by the writer into his letter in its original form with no editing. In the case of Col 2:6–23, this section also includes a survey of the main positions in the debate about the nature of the philosophy the author is opposing.

The second section, "Tracing the Train of Thought," is the most substantial and where Talbert is seen at his best, commenting succinctly on issues of translation, syntax, and exegesis of key words, phrases, and sentences, supplying a rich amount of comparative material from ancient sources, and ensuring, through the use of boxed outlines, especially in the case of Ephesians, that the overall flow of the unit's argument and its place in the

latter is kept in view. In these sections we discover, for example, an extended analysis of how *charis* in Eph 2:8, 9 differs from *charis* in the reciprocity system (63–69). Among a brief sample of Talbert’s exegetical decisions that might be of interest are the following. On the syntax of the three prepositional phrases in Eph 4:12, he argues, on the basis of a similar mix of prepositions in 4:14, that the first two phrases are linear and the last two coordinate and therefore should be translated “for the training of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.” His exegesis of 5:21–33 makes no concessions to revisionist readings. In fact, 5:21 goes with what precedes rather than with what follows and does not teach mutual submission but means “Obey those you are supposed to obey” (130–32). Within Colossians, 1:24 refers to a lack in Paul’s apostolic sufferings not in Christ’s suffering, the interpretation of *stoicheia* in 2:8, 20 as hostile astral beings is to be preferred, and in 3:11, it is argued, “Scythian” stands for “slave,” so the formulation is organized around just two contrasts: Jew-Greek and slave-free. In the last example, what appears to go unnoticed is that this would leave “barbarian” as free-standing and unexplained.

The final angle of approach, entitled “Theological Issues,” is more varied in the content covered. In relation to Ephesians, this heading is omitted for 6:21–24, and the topics selected for discussion elsewhere include the meaning of “in Christ” in Paul and Ephesians, predestination, spiritual powers in the worldview of the letter, reserved and realized eschatology, Jews and Gentiles in the church, the church and Israel, the portrait of Paul, spiritual gifts, the imitation of God, the function of the Two Ways form (which one might have expected to find under Introductory Matters), women and slavery in relation to hermeneutics, and contemporary interpretation of the principalities and powers. In relation to Colossians, the topics covered include “in Christ,” the letter’s salvific narrative, “high” Christology and its relation to creedal controversy, reconciliation, apostolic suffering, spiritual circumcision, worshiping the creation not the Creator and the role of the letter’s paraenesis. On 4:7–18, the third heading is changed to “Historical and Theological Issues” in order to discuss Paul’s co-workers and the relation of Colossians to Philemon. These sections contain judicious and well-formulated evaluations of the perspectives of the letters. More contentious is Talbert’s view that “in Christ” never has a locative connotation referring to incorporation but is nearly always instrumental, sometimes having the force of “in the power of, in dependence on, in the hands of” Christ.

Potential readers should be clear about the nature of the material they will find under Theological Issues. The topics are dealt with descriptively and historically. There are summaries of the letter’s thoughts in these areas, which, on occasion, may be compared with the undisputed Paul or other early Christian writings, and there are historical explanations for Colossians’ high Christology and the differences between it and later

creeds. Predestination is handled via a brief sketch of historical theology, including Eastern Orthodoxy, Calvin, Arminius, and Barth. Helpful as many of these treatments may be, one will not for the most part find here the sort of theological interpretation that engages with the subject matter of a unit in an attempt to appropriate it both faithfully and critically for a contemporary theology. The closest one comes to this sort of theological reading is probably in the hermeneutical attempts to relate principalities and powers to the contemporary world and to help readers handle the women and slavery passages. The former, however, remains largely descriptive of recent debates, while the latter (149–56, see also 234), in embarking on a distinctive approach, has its own curiosities. Because of its importance for some readers, it is worth looking at further.

Uncontroversially, Talbert stresses that the household codes are to be related to the ancient world's manuals on household management and that they reflect the highest ethic of their patriarchal culture while providing a distinctive Christian motivation for pursuing it. For a contemporary appropriation of Eph 5:22–33, Talbert appears unwilling, however, either to ditch the patriarchal structure and find principles that can be applied to both parties or to argue simply that present-day Christians need to find ways to bring a potentially transformative Christian perspective to the structures of their own society. Instead, he takes a bold swipe at the guild for the “obvious disconnect” between its historical research and its hermeneutics (150). His own solution is to propose that the household codes are not really talking about the actual relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves. Because ancient advice on households was frequently in the context of estate management and finance, household codes were simply organizational charts for how to run the estate. So the modern equivalent to the ancient Christian household is not the Christian family but the Christian family business. Pauline Christians were egalitarian in their worship services (Gal 3:27–28) but hierarchical in their businesses. “Galatians speaks to Christian equality in the worshipping community; Ephesians focuses on the organization of labor in a Christian family business.... Modern Christians may rightly regard both as normative, each in its own sphere” (133)! But every aspect of this hermeneutical solution is problematic. (1) It disregards recent scholarship that holds that egalitarianism is an anachronism being imposed on Gal 3:28. (2) It fails to mention that ancient household codes were not simply about how to organize an estate most efficiently but held that what was taught about the human relationships within the household was in accord with what nature or the gods laid down for those relationships. (3) Any ancient instruction on the household was therefore instruction about marriage relationships, parent-children relationships, master-slave relationships. Marriage instruction and household management were inseparable in the household codes. (4) A modern family business, which is separable from arrangements within the core life of the family, is not therefore an

equivalent to the ancient household. (5) If this hermeneutic were to be followed, a Christian wife with better business skills and sense than her husband would be debarred from running the family business. It is not clear how the hermeneutical approach offered for dealing with the material about slavery (152–56) relates to this solution. Here Talbert distinguishes between a hermeneutics for the short term and one for the long haul. In the short term, like the Pauline tradition in relation to slavery, Christians have to live within the dominant structures of their society and attempt to Christianize them from within. Over the long haul, they can see the Pauline writings as part of the bigger canonical picture in which slavery and the subordination of women are part of the fall and not God's intention in creation and redemption. Over time Christian consciences are informed by the canonical story, and over time God's activity in the wider historical process makes structural changes possible that can be approved by the Christian conscience. This formulation does not, however, state explicitly that the Christian conscience should itself be striving for such changes rather than approving them after they have happened.

The commentary's bibliography is relatively comprehensive and up-to-date and will make students aware of a wide range of secondary literature. Throughout the commentary Talbert shows his own awareness of this range without allowing references to other scholars to clutter his text. This policy has its own hazards, however. Sometimes it is not clear why one scholar rather than another has been selected to represent a particular viewpoint, and sometimes what other scholars have said is taken out of context or placed in categories they might well not recognize as representative of their views. Moule would have been perplexed to read that, because he depicts the Christology of Col 1:15–20 as staggering for some thirty years after Jesus' death, he is among those who have difficulty accepting it (192), and this reviewer was surprised by what was made of his own views on some occasions (150, 158, 220).

Notwithstanding the criticisms of his hermeneutical ventures and other quibbles raised in this review, Talbert has provided a fine resource with which serious students will be able to explore these two letters within their first-century setting. Use of his commentary will give them a very valuable orientation for their own further study of and reflection upon these canonical texts.