



Talbert, Charles H.

The Development of Christology during the First Hundred Years: and Other Essays on Early Christian Christology

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Charles H. Talbert is Distinguished Professor of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He has published dozens of scholarly articles and books on NT studies to include recent commentaries on Matthew and Ephesians/Colossians in Baker Academic's Paideia New Testament Commentary series. *The Development of Christology during the First Hundred Years* is a collection of essays reflecting nearly forty years of scholarship. Part one contains a single chapter that is the "synthesis" of the "building blocks" of part two, which comprises eight chapters of previously published articles that date from 1967 to 2006. In other words, to employ an elementary school math metaphor, Talbert begins by giving his solution and then proceeds to show his work.

Talbert proposes two dominant views of understanding the development of Christology. The first is a "logically backward process" that begins with the *parousia* at the earliest stages and successively works backwards through *resurrection*, *baptism*, *conception*, and finally ends with *preexistence* at the latest stages. In other words, Jesus' exalted (divine?) status evolves over time from a figure who would be revealed as God's anointed in his second coming to a figure who preexisted all things and took part in creation. The second dominant view challenges this evolutionary model and proposes a "high" Christology from the earliest stages of the Jesus movement. In order to counter claims of the alleged unJewishness of such an early exalted

Christology, proponents attempt to “redefine” Jewish monotheism by viewing God according to *creational*, *eschatological*, and *cultic* monotheism, which can accommodate Jesus as creator, judge, and object of worship.

Talbert is concerned with the cultural models that the early followers of Jesus appropriated and how auditors of the New Testament texts would have understood them. The basic assumptions underlying Talbert’s study are as follows: “experience precedes reflection”; “soteriology is experientially prior to Christology”; “reflection is done mostly with categories furnished by what is ‘in the air’ in the culture”; Judaism in Palestine was a Hellenistic Judaism” (4-5). These last two assumptions drive the majority of Talbert’s investigation as he finds parallels and precedents for early Christian beliefs predominantly in various Greco-Roman myths but also throughout the body of extra/non-canonical Second Temple Jewish literature. He suggests two major patterns that were “in the air,” which could be broken down into four models for the NT authors to reflect on and base their pictures of Jesus.

The first pattern is one of ascent where a human is taken up to heaven for some purpose. The first of the two models that follow from this is the demigod/immortal model, which has the human taken up and awarded immortality and a new status while exercising a present function (e.g., sovereignty); the second is the eschatological judge model, which has the human taken up in order to exercise judgment on God’s behalf at the end of the age. The second pattern is one of descent where a heavenly being descends into the human arena and then ascends back to heaven upon the completion of its work. The first of the two models from this pattern is the epiphany model, which has the heavenly being/deity appearing personally in some form. The second model is the inspiration/possession/indwelling model, which has the deity descending on a human. Talbert focuses on indwelling where the deity remains with/in/on the person permanently with no sign of a time of departure.

After outlining these patterns and models Talbert briefly shows the alleged Synoptic, Johannine, and Pauline uses of them with a handful of examples from the rest of the NT and the Apostolic Fathers. He then attempts to explain how they’d function within the two basic types of worldview current at the time, i.e., the temporally and spatially conceived worldviews. The temporal worldview saw “what is” as present and “what ought to be” as future. The spatial worldview saw “what is” as physical and “what out to be” as heavenly or spiritual. So, e.g., we find the temporal worldview in 1 Corinthians, especially the kerygmatic unit in 15:3-5, and the spatial worldview in 1 Corinthians 8 & 10 with its proclamation of monotheism over and against demonic spiritual powers.

So for Talbert this all means that the earliest followers of Jesus sought to draw from their general culture to explain their salvation. This meant using the Greco-Roman and Jewish myths they were familiar with but this did not signal an “alien invasion of pagan culture into the pure faith” (41). This also points to the “messiness of lived life,” which did not produce a neat evolution from “low” to “high” Christology. But this isn’t to say that the early Christians began on the high end of the spectrum either since Talbert thinks it a mistake to “create a primitive devotion to Jesus as God out of early oral traditions that could or should be read in a different way” (41). The developed view comes later rather than earlier on Talbert’s reading.

In the end, I find very little to commend Talbert’s work. One reads the synthesis essay and finds the shell of an argument; plenty of assertion with very little to support it. The reader expects to find the supporting argumentation in the building blocks section of the book but instead finds more of the same with much older footnotes. If not for Talbert’s concluding remark that “early Christologies were neither constructed out of OT texts nor out of pagan and Jewish myths” (41) one might be tempted to accuse him of what Samuel Sandmel called “parallelomania.” And this concluding remark is slightly misleading because it gives the reader the impression that the OT texts were mined in a way similar to Greco-Roman myths. They were not, which makes Talbert’s overall argument dubious on its face.

Talbert’s concern for what auditors of the NT would have heard is commendable but flawed since what the authors of these texts would have intended is not given equal weight. He insists that auditors would have heard the NT texts with reference to these Greco-Roman myths but are we to assume that the authors intended their writings to be heard in such a way? It is highly unlikely that NT authors were: 1) consciously drawing from these myths and 2) even familiar with them in the first place. They were however consciously drawing from the Hebrew Scriptures (as seen, e.g., in the myriad quotations, echoes, and allusions seen throughout the entire NT corpus), which Talbert rarely acknowledges, so for example, he can incredibly discuss 1 Corinthians 8:6 with reference Roman emperors and not the Shema (22)!

One might also question Talbert’s patterns and models. These patterns/models may work as an explanatory or interpretive grid for the scholar who has access to large corpora of ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish literature, but he has not shown through any kind of inductive study that ancient peoples would have recognized these patterns/models as such. Contrast this with the recent work of Chris Tilling who has argued persuasively through an inductive study of the undisputed Pauline corpus that Paul deliberately employs a pattern of language and themes that he would have arguably recognized as a pattern in order to speak about the risen Lord’s

relationship to believers. Tilling's study shows that the only genuine analogy of this relationship is YHWH's relationship to Israel in the OT and other Second Temple Jewish texts. Tilling's project also nullifies much of Talbert's shallow treatments concerning prayer to Christ, Christological titles, and the functions that Christ performs.

There is also some inconsistency in Talbert's treatment of these models and the alleged worldviews of the authors/auditors. He finds evidence that some NT authors employ various models but also suggests that not every model fits each worldview. Laying aside the fact that Talbert's descriptions of these worldviews are far too tidy and reductionistic, this would suggest that the NT authors were operating with different/disparate worldviews. What's more is that it suggests that the two proposed worldviews were mixed/confused within the writing of a single author (see, e.g., the references to the temporal and spatial worldviews in 1 Corinthians above)! Talbert arguably recognizes this since he describes Paul's use of these models as *ad hoc* (31); but perhaps it seems *ad hoc* because Paul isn't deliberately employing the proposed models.

One could detail various other shortcomings in the minutia of this volume but the problems mentioned above speak to the heart of Talbert's thesis. It's little wonder that his name does not appear significantly in the footnotes or bibliographies of standard works on early Christology written over the last 30 years. Unfortunately, Talbert does not engage these works much either. While names such as Hurtado and Bauckham are mentioned, they are not interacted with in any depth, and thus their Christological proposals go virtually unchallenged. Talbert seems to intentionally avoid interacting with those whose views he disagrees with as can be seen in a summary dismissal of Gathercole's work on preexistence in the Synoptics by saying that he has "persuaded few" (26n6). But why he has failed to persuade Talbert is a mystery!

In light of these issues I cannot recommend *The Development of Christology during the First Hundred Years* as a useful source for study or as an accurate account of the development of early Christology. Those readers interested in finding a sampling of Talbert's work bound together in one volume will do well to consult this work, but those interested in helpful treatments of the subject will want to look elsewhere. I'd suggest the standard works of Hurtado, Bauckham, and Dunn, along with the more recent treatment of Tilling.