

## **“Drawing Water from the Well: One Perspective on Charles H. Talbert’s Contribution to New Testament Scholarship”**

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I would like to thank the organizing committee for the invitation to participate in this session. My first encounter with **Charles Talbert** came in 1996 when he visited Baylor University to interview for a faculty position. At that time, I was a doctoral student in need of a doctoral supervisor. Charles became my doctoral mentor and made certain that I finished the dissertation. I relish my time spent learning from him during the next six years as I wrote, lectured, observed his teaching in undergraduate courses, or experienced his humor over lunches shared with he and another faculty member who, like Charles, also hailed from Birmingham, Alabama. When I read the following from Talbert’s commentary while teaching my first class on the Gospel of John in the spring of 2006,

“Draw some more out of the well (*antlein*, 4:7, 15==to draw from a well) and take it to the steward of the feast.” (Talbert 2005, 88-89)

. . . it was not without a large measure of guilt that I thought, “*that can’t be right, can it?*” The Charles Talbert I had come to know over the preceding decade had been challenging and humorous, yet deadly accurate in all things I encountered. This statement was typical of his communication style: short, direct, and leaving no opportunity for disagreement.

I turn now to my perspective on Charles’ unique contribution to New Testament scholarship. I will speak first about his contribution to the NT world before discussing the Johannine passage. Charles Talbert was never reluctant to lock horns with, and challenge the presumptions of, biblical scholars. I understand from several doctoral students that they experienced this same character trait from him.

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His writing, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels*, challenged the dominant view at that time. In this 1977 work volume, published in 1977, Talbert examines other ancient biographies in order to discover where the Canonical Gospels fit into the spectrum. The “critical consensus” at that time understood the gospel to be a literary form developed from, or representing a vivid narrative form of, the apostolic kerygma (Talbert 1977, 2 and 7). Charles utilizes the three pillars of distinction between Christian and Greco-Roman biographies identified by Rudolf Bultmann in 1928: mythical structure, cultic function, and community outlook toward the world, in order to expose the weakness in the undergirding presuppositions for this position. Ultimately, Talbert categorizes ancient biographies into five types (Talbert 1977, 94-97). He places both Mark and John into the Type B category indicating that these two gospels defend against a misunderstanding of the savior and portray a proper understanding of the same. (Talbert 1977, 134-35)

In three early commentaries originally published by Crossroad, Charles focuses on two primary questions: what and how. The question of *what is said* examined the content while the *how* question focused on the rhetoric. At the time of *Reading Luke* (1982), rhetorical analysis had only recently been re-applied to NT writings by Abraham J. Malherbe (1977) and in a volume of the *Semeia* series (*Semeia* 22 (1981)). This emphasis on rhetoric became extremely popular in both seminars taught and dissertations supervised by Charles and by Mikeal Parsons at Baylor in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Peter Ellis, *The Genius of John: A Composition-Critical Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (1984) and John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (1994) later utilized chiastic structure in their Johannine writings.

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Charles’ approach might best be represented in the preface to *Reading Corinthians* (1987) where he thanks those who helped him “produce a book that I hope will introduce a reader with little or no knowledge of the biblical languages to the text itself, as opposed to literature about the text.” (Talbert 1987, ix)

Smyth & Helwys eventually published an entire NT commentary series “Reading the New Testament” based on Charles’ approach with Charles as its editor. A 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of this series continues to address readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a new generation of authors under the editorial leadership of Todd Still bring new volumes to print. Three of the first four volumes in this 2<sup>nd</sup> series feature individuals who studied at Baylor University during Charles’ time there. Smyth & Helwys are working to continue this literary and theological approach with the Old Testament.

A second commentary series, The Paideia Commentary, with Mikeal Parsons and Charles Talbert serving as the original General Editors, provides another unique approach. In the first volume of the series, the commentary on Ephesians and Colossians written by Charles in 2007, the editors’ foreword notes,

this series is aimed squarely at students—...—who have theological interests in the biblical text. Thus, the didactic aim of the series is to enable students to understand each book of the New Testament as a literary whole rooted in a particular ancient setting and related to its context with the New Testament. (p. ix).

Furthermore, the series reflects, 1) an “instructional aim,”

2) a focus on “educational categories and ideas of their ancient writers and readers,” and

3) an emphasis on the texts as a place “to form the theological convictions and moral habits of their readers.” (p. ix).

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This codification of Charles’ interests in both the literary text and the cultural context through two significant commentary series and numerous doctoral students certainly affirms one aspect of his contribution to New Testament Scholarship.

I return now to my 2006 mental conundrum. Charles describes Jesus’ two commands during the first miracle at Cana as returning the story to the religious level with the mention of the purification ritual. First, the servants are to fill the six stone jars with water drawn from a cistern or well. Second, the servants are to “draw some more out of the well and take it to the steward of the feast.” (Talbert 2005, 88-89) How does Charles’ clarification that the servants are to draw more water from the well characterize his contribution to New Testament scholarship.

I will seek to demonstrate with 8 numbered points.

- 1) The text only includes the verb *antlein/antlew* with no reference to a cistern or well in the passage.
- 2) The text remains intentionally vague regarding the source of water for both the six jugs and for the water that became wine.
- 3) Because the text remains ambiguous, NT scholarship seeks to clarify the source for this water.

A. B.F. Westcott (1896) noted the “considerable obscurity” of the meaning of the word for draw water.

- 1) While he recognizes that his contemporaries interpret the wine as coming from the six vessels, “nothing in the text ... definitely points to such an interpretation.” (p. 37-38)
- 2) Although many scholars argue against his suggestion, the source of the water is not his primary claim. Rather, Westcott emphasizes “the significance of the miracle comes out with infinitely greater force if the change is wrought through the destination of the element.” (p. 38)

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- B. C.K. Barret (1958) recognizes the verb “is properly used of drawing water from a well” but “it is better to suppose [the water] was drawn from the pots.” (p. 160)
- C. Rudolf Bultmann (1964/1971 tr) comments, “It is in accordance with the style of the miracle stories that the miraculous process itself is not described; the divine action remains a mystery.” (Bultmann, 1971, 118) I might also mention Bultmann also leaves the source of the water a mystery.
- D. Raymond E. Brown (1966) recognizes – “the verb is normally in reference to a well.”
- 1) Concerning Westcott’s proposal that the 2nd command of Jesus sends the servants back to the same source as for the 6 jars, Brown states without hesitancy that this solution “seems to run against the obvious context; for it is unlikely that having made the servants fill the jars with some 120 gallons of water, Jesus now makes them draw more water from the well.” (Brown, 1966, 100)

Following the publication in 1992 of *Reading John* –

- E. Leon Morris (1995) provides an even more blunt explanation. “This evidently means that they are to draw from the big water pots.” In a footnote Morris reminds his readers of the first meaning found in Liddell and Scott for *antlein*, namely, to “bale out bilge water” (Morris 1995, 161)
- 1) Observing that retrieving water from the well rests within the semantic domain, he clarifies that were this the case “there seems no obvious reason for mentioning the waterpots or for Jesus’ command that they be filled up.” Indeed, for Morris, “we need not doubt that *that* is what was done.” (My emphasis, Morris 1995, 161)

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F. Craig Keener (2003) states, “The water motif throughout the Fourth Gospel consistently represents Jesus and the Spirit superseding Jewish traditions.”

(Keener 2003, 1.493)

- 1) When Keener arrives at the text under consideration he first claims, “it is difficult to understand how John could have conceived of purificatory water found in pots or drawn from a well.” (Keener 2003, 1.511)
- 2) In a parenthetical comment he recognizes the claim by others regarding the verb *antlein* noting Keener then notes that “unless John employs that term symbolically the source in 2:8 is not likely a well; context takes precedent over usual word usage. The source of the water for 2:8 is the pots of 2:8.” (Keener 2003, 1.511)
- 3) In footnote 189 (within only 20 pages) he recognizes no reason for is more specific regarding the likelihood of the servants going back to the well, “unless Jesus simply provides purificatory water before transforming the rest of the well.” (Keener 2003, 1.511)

Neither author cites Talbert at this point in his discussion. I return now to the top level of my outline.

4) Rather than arguing for the source of the wine’s water, Talbert merely states the obvious [as his authorial audience would understand the word] and moves on.

A. Talbert’s characteristic style of analysis which so frequently involves an outline structure keeps his writing quickly moving forward. He notes two, religious elements to the miracle.

- 1) “The Jewish rites of purification (incomplete even when fully implemented) are superseded when the servants draw yet again [from the well, not the vessels] and take it to the steward.” (Talbert 2005, 89)
- 2) “The good wine that Jesus supplies surpasses the benefits promised and provided by the Jewish purification rites. The wine (religious reality) made available by the events of Jesus’ hour fulfills the Jewish purificatory ritual.” (Talbert 2005, 89)

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Charles concludes that the “miracle story of 2:1–11 functions as the fulfillment of the prophecy of 1:51. A reading of 1:19-2:11 reveals that the whole is tied together with the same care with which the individual units are composed.” (Talbert 2005, 89)

- 5) Charles describes the significance found in the relationship between the Ladder prophecy (1:51) and the new wine. Rather than addressing This spiritual reality is placed in contrast with 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Jewish purification rites, the focus of the passage rests in the areas of discipleship and worship. “This thesis, that the worship Jesus offers fulfills traditional Jewish worship, is pursued at length in the episodes that follow in John 2:13-12:50.” (Talbert 2005, 90)
- 6) His 1970 article, “Artistry and Theology,” As early as 1970 Charles had applied concentric parallelism (chiasm) to analyze John 1:19-5:47, a strategy he implemented in his *Reading John* (1992) commentary 22 years later. The article speaks more specifically to than his commentary on the relationship between the first section, A- 1:19-2:11, and the last, A´ - 5:31-47. He titles these sections, A and A´ in his chiastic structure, as “The witnesses” with each containing four witnesses, (Talbert 1970, 343)

A. The testimony of John the Baptizer – 1:19, 32, 34 and 5:33, cf. 32, 36

B. The Father – 1:33 and 5:37

C. The Scriptures – 1:45 and 5:37

D. The works of Jesus – 2:1–11 and 5:39

In his commentary, Charles describes the main function of section A as “the picking/production of a new community. It focuses on discipleship.” (Talbert 2005, 89) Specifically, this passage focuses on discipleship found before Easter with John

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12, 13–17, and 20–21 painting “a picture of discipleship after Easter.” (Talbert 2005, 89)

7) Two passages from the Hebrew Bible further illuminate the connection between these two episodes involving Jacob and abundant wine (1:51 and 2:11).

### A. Genesis 27:27–29

1) Genesis 27 recounts the blessing Isaac provides for his son Esau (who is actually Jacob dressed with goats’ skins). The Blessing reads

27 [“Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the LORD has blessed.

28 May God give you  
Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth,  
**Abundance of new grain and wine.]**

29 Let peoples serve you,  
And nations bow to you;  
Be master over your brothers,  
And let your mother’s sons bow to you.  
Cursed be they who curse you,  
Blessed they who bless you.” (JPS Tanakh, 1985)

### B. Deuteronomy 33:28–29

1) Deuteronomy 33 records the blessing by Moses upon the sons of Israel. The first as well as the final segments provide words of blessing for the whole.

28 [Thus Israel dwells in safety,  
Untroubled is Jacob’s abode,  
**In a land of grain and wine,**  
Under heavens dripping dew.

29 O happy Israel! Who is like you,  
A people delivered by the LORD,  
Your protecting Shield, your Sword triumphant!

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Your enemies shall come cringing before you,  
And you shall tread on their backs.

Both unite the people who follow the Lord God with an abundance of grain, wine and heaven’s dew.

8) The source for the water which became wine did not remain a mystery for everyone at the banquet.

A. In a narrative aside, the Fourth Evangelist contrasts the Banquet Steward (*arxitriklinos*) who does not “know” where the wine came from with the servants of the household who actually knew where they had drawn this water! (John 3:9)

1) Keener notes “John mentions the knowledge of the servants in 2:10 partly to avoid the implausible inference that those who drew the water remained unaware that a miracle had occurred.” (Keener 2003, 514-15)

### **Conclusion**

The contributions made by Charles Talbert to New Testament scholarship, and more specifically to Baptist Scholarship, abound. Whether by challenging scholarship to reconsider the ancient world and its literary, rhetorical, and educational evidence, or by training new scholars to pursue these avenues of research, or even in promoting the importance of discipleship and worship for the biblical scholar, Charles provided a remarkable example for many in our field.

I end with one brief story from my own personal history with Charles. After completing three chapters of my dissertation, I felt I was finally achieving some level of success in communicating my ideas in writing. I confidently left chapter four in his mailbox in Tidwell Hall on Friday afternoon knowing he would have comments back to

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me by Monday morning. When I picked up the manuscript, only two words appeared at the top. “Try Again.”

I continue to follow his instructions two decades later. Thank you.

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