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Jesus, Paul, and Power: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Metaphor in Ancient Mediterranean Christianity

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The fascinating nexus of power and religion is a highly relevant subject for New Testament studies. Religion is principally ambiguous in its relation to power: it can empower as well as disempower people and function as a critique of existing power relations. Jesus and Paul both applied power and responded to the power displayed by others, which is the topic of Talbott's book. He bases himself on selected passages from the Synoptic Gospels and the authentic letters of Paul but tries to go beyond the texts with the help of various methodological insights, which he applies eclectically. Two sections are based on earlier publications (ch. 2, "Nazareth's Rebellious Son," was originally published in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* in 2008, ch. 3, "Imagining the Matthean Eunuch Community," in the *Journal of Feminist Studies of Religion* in 2006). Talbott coins the new term "kyridoularchy" by building on the term "kyriarchy" of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and also uses related terms such as "kyriarchal" and "kyridoularchal" in his book. "Kyriarchy" concerns the power used by males or females over others in concert with the prevailing and intersecting social systems"(xvi n. 3); "kyridoularchy" is the use of any form of power to serve others after his [Paul's] example and the paradigmatic example of Christ himself" (xvii; see also 15–16, 99). Kyridoularchy implies giving honor

to lower-status kinship members who would not receive honor according to ancient Mediterranean conventions.

The book starts with a survey of relevant methodological approaches (from the Context Group to postcolonialism) and a discussion of the relevant theories of power. Talbott argues that the Jesus movement originated as a response to a conflict about debt as well as honor and shame values, which Jesus encountered with the households and village authorities at Nazareth. Jesus's proclamation of God's kingdom required poor peasants to oppose their family members (see Matt 10:34–34 par. Luke 12:53). Jesus's new fictive kinship movement was strongly opposed by most fathers and village leaders, who could not accept that Jesus's proclamation challenged their honor, masculinity, and socio-economic stability.

Talbott interprets the eunuch saying in Matt 19:12 as a metaphor about male power, which functions in the larger context of Matt 19 as a challenge to kyriarchal marriage, divorce, and remarriage practices that oppressed women. The metaphor implies that women can continue to experience equality in marriage and leadership roles as in Jesus's original movement. Talbott criticizes that part of recent feminist scholarship about the historical Jesus that would reject the empowering and emancipatory nature of Jesus' movement for women (see in particular the detailed discussion of Kathleen Corley's *Women and the Historical Jesus*, 2002, 78–86). Talbott argues that Jesus' statement in Matt 23:9 ("call no man on the earth your father, for you all have one heavenly Father") undermines the power of earthly fathers, as Augustus's title "Father of the Fatherland" (*pater patriae*) did for Roman fathers.

Turning to Paul, Talbott argues that none of the current studies about Paul and power explains the complexities and inconsistencies found in Paul's letters (referring in particular to Elizabeth Castelli's *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power*, 1991; Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, *Community and Authority: The Rhetoric of Obedience in the Pauline Tradition*, 1998; Sandra Hack Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power*, 1999; Kathy Ehrensperger, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power*, 2007; and Joseph Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven*, 2008). Talbott considers the application of Michel Foucault's work on power to the New Testament problematic, as long as it is not combined with other methodologies that are congenial to the biblical world. Paul's response to and use of power is ambivalent, because his application of power is bifurcated: he calls for kyridoularchy but responds to conflict in a kyriarchal way. Talbott exemplifies this ambivalence in a discussion of selected passages from 1 Corinthians about the Lord's Supper as well as marriage and celibacy (1 Cor 7). With Scott Bartchy, he interprets 1 Cor 7:10–11 about women's power to make choices after a separation from their husband as a nonkyriarchal approach because it affirms equality between men and women. But Paul's rhetoric to put high-

status members of the community in place in 1 Cor 11:19–22 is kyriarchal because Paul attempts to reinscribe his own authority (e.g., 1 Cor 1:1; 14:37). Talbott concludes that Paul's plea for kyridoularchic relationships based on the example of Jesus Christ goes hand in hand with authoritative rhetoric that requires submission. By way of a synthesis, he compares Jesus' use of power to Paul's, and the ultimate outcome of this is, in his own terms: Jesus consistently opposed kyriarchy, while Paul vacillates between kyriarchy and kyridoularchy.

Because Talbott refers to so many theoretical perspectives, it is obvious that other scholars may assess these approaches somewhat differently than he does. I wonder, for example, whether Foucault's work is not more complex than dealing with "forms of resistance against different forms of power," as Talbott indicates (105). Sometimes readers may experience a kind of "prooftext" use of biblical passages, for example, in statements such as "I use Deut 21:18–21 and Luke 4:16–29 … to expose a common ritual of social marginalization for 'rebellious sons' in ancient Israelite villages" (38) or "Jesus's deviant behavior set in motion the social punishment village elders orchestrated when Jesus returned home to the synagogue at Nazareth (Matt 13:54; Mark 6:1; Luke 4:16). All three synoptic versions of this status-degradation ritual at Nazareth still reflect typical features found in social-labeling theory" (43). This may be a valid observation on a general level, but if one applies close reading and connects these statements to the individual texts, all kinds of questions arise: What exactly is the *ritual* of status degradation described in the texts? How is the role of the village elders articulated? Which aspects of social labeling theory are reflected by the texts and which not? How should we assess the differences between the Synoptic Gospels in this respect, especially in the much more elaborate version in Luke 4? Another example concerns Luke 7:34, concerning which Talbott states: "The charge against Jesus as a rebellious son expressed by calling him 'a glutton and a drunkard' in Luke-Q 7:34 most likely originated with his parents and culminated in the status-degradation ritual in the synagogue at Nazareth after Jesus returned from Capernaum" (45). This may be so, but how do we know that the original context of this statement concerns the conflict at Nazareth, and what arguments do we have that Jesus' parents were responsible for this accusation? One may think of Deut 21:20, where one finds a similar accusation that may underlie this statement in Q, but Talbott does not elaborate this.

In short, this is a stimulating, programmatic book about a fascinating topic that calls for further elaboration and more detailed discussions of the texts involved.