

**Book Review** by John Littleton 12/1/2022

Michael Trainor, 2021. *Acts An Earth Bible Commentary About Earth's Children: An Ecological Listening to The Acts of the Apostles* (London: T&T Clark).

Paperback edition. Pages 191. Kindle \$45.90; Paperback \$72.24; Hardback \$176.

Michael Trainor's ground-breaking book merits a place in public libraries as well as libraries for theological colleges and parishes. His work speaks into the contemporary culture concern for Earth as well as inviting current disciples to hear the holistic Christo-centric preaching, teaching and behaviour (48-50, 125, 156) that surfaces regularly throughout the *Acts of the Apostles* in response to God's divine presence and action.

*Acts An Earth Bible Commentary about Earth's Children* is a wonder-full work of art. The author enables the reader to wonder and ponder anew on the historical, geographical, and ecological circumstances behind the biblical text of the *Acts of the Apostles*; and to explore the theological meaning of each aspect. Ecology is a study of the relationships between the air, land, water, animals, plants, etc., usually of a particular area.

Earth's elements are central to Luke's theology in the storyline of the *Acts of the Apostles* as interpreted by Trainor: the land, the sea, the rocks, the clothing, birds, animals, and plants, walking across the country, food or lack of it, storms, wooden boats for travel, famine, water, shared meals...

*Acts An Earth Bible Commentary about Earth's Children* is an ingenious and wise work of scholarship. The author broadens our horizons, deepens insight into key teaching and highlights Luke's theology; and all this is done seamlessly by referring to Luke's two-volume work, the *Gospel according to Luke* about Jesus the Christ Earth's Child and the *Acts of the Apostles* about members of the Jesus movement Earth's Children (2, 171).

The Earth Bible Commentaries on these two volumes<sup>1</sup> are well crafted and fun to read, especially when the author's (and the reader's) excitement from a new insight is evident. Regularly the words "echoes" or "parallels" or "resonances" occur when Trainor enthusiastically remembers and compares passages in Acts with passages in the Luke's Gospel (145-151): for example, the parallel between Paul's voyage on the sea during a storm (Acts 27.9-38) and the experience of Jesus' disciples as they sailed in a storm on the sea of Galilee (Lk. 8. 22-25).

Three other positive features are: a new insight, a learning community lens, and practical aspects.

Key themes thread their way through the whole work demonstrating the *holistic* attitudes which Trainor, "the contemporary listener" (150) with an "intertextual approach" (6-8), hears within the biblical text and highlights for our consideration today. One theme stands out as a *new insight* about the term kingdom of God.

Trainor's considered words on God's *basileia* or kingdom are particularly pertinent for disciples today who are used to the term the Kingdom of God. Trainor retains the use of the Greek word *basileia* because "Given the inclusive nature of the *basileia*, the common English translations 'kingdom' or 'reign' are unhelpful, if not misleading" (Trainor 2012, 130). I have for many years been uncomfortable with the word 'kingdom' and now, thanks to the author, know the reason for my unease.

The words kingdom or reign identify God's activity through Jesus with a human structure which inadequately describes "an inclusive encounter with the divine presence" (22). Trainor writes "The *basileia* is not a hierarchically derived entity, mirroring a universal heavenly scale that is obvious

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Trainor, 2012. *About Earth's Child: An Ecological Listening to The Gospel of Luke* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press). The Rev'd. Dr Michael Trainor is Senior Lecturer in Biblical Studies at Australian Catholic University, Adelaide, Australia.

within the ancient Greco-Roman world of social structure” (22). “The speech and action of Luke’s Jesus concern the revelation of God’s *basileia* as essentially inclusive, healing, reconciling and uniting,” (22) and “brings creatures into divine communion” (10). Jesus’s mission was to “ensure that God’s *basileia* is realised in the lives of human beings and the whole created world” (Trainor 2012, 130). For that reason, the author uses the term *basileia-ecotopia* to acknowledge the fullness of God’s ecological intent, as revealed in Jesus, for all creation, including humanity (22).

I write this review as a biblically and theologically informed Christian educator, one who has a learning community focus for Christian education in parishes. A learning community, customised for a parish context, is defined as: “a visionary community of faith where leaders and members, while respecting a diversity of abilities and perspectives, practise holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes”.<sup>2</sup>

The rich tapestry of Christian experience revealed by Trainor is identified when seen through a *learning community lens*. The underlying narrative of *The Acts of the Apostles* as interpreted by Trainor is the story of Earth’s Children discovering what God is up to and joining in. The significance of individual learning is emphasised by the theophany experiences of Luke’s Peter and Saul/Paul for example (81-82,70). Collaboration is evident when disciples and leaders conferred as individuals and groups, then in Council made decisions, concluding that Gentiles could formally be Christian disciples. Community engagement and dialogical learning are evident in Paul’s address to members of the Areopagus (119-121) and his dialogue with Stoic and Epicurean philosophical traditions of the time. Paul’s self-supporting ministry as tentmaker using leather or goat’s hair enabled him to identify with other artisans like Aquila and Priscilla (123-125). Theological reflection is evident in triple action/reflection moments: for example, Luke’s Peter thinking about the vision (Acts 10), then Trainor thinking about Peter’s encounter with a non-Jew (75-77), then the reader ponders too.

*Practical aspects* of the book help the reader into the newness and excitement of an ecological reading the biblical text. A picture of ferns on the colourful front cover excites interest. Each chapter has a concluding summary. Chapter headings in Part Two highlight Earth’s elements. For example, chapter seven is named “Earth’s Linen Sheet” when we learn how important Earth’s element linen cloth is to Luke’s Christology and for Peter’s theophany (80-83). Eleven diagrams and fifteen illustrations are provided, abundant archaeological evidence and four maps. The book’s conclusion, named “Luke’s Ecological Resonances in Acts”, contains an overall summary, ecological insights, and Trainor’s six theses. What more could readers want as they seek to understand, appreciate, and respond to Trainor’s holistic ecological hermeneutic?

The author of *Acts An Earth Bible Commentary* writes caringly about the whole natural environment, human and non-human as discerned in the biblical text of *Acts of the Apostles*, providing a deep awareness of the vital role that Earth’s elements play in the spiritual life journey of disciples of Jesus, then. This awareness affirms and resonates with twenty-first century spiritual experience of divine presence evidenced by disciples through Earth’s elements, in a garden or on the beach or mountain for example.

Trainor shifts interpretation of the biblical text from a mainly dominant “anthropocentric interpretation” (170) to a more comprehensive appreciation of the role of the total environment in human life in the world of the biblical text. People today “concerned about the environment and the natural world that surrounds them” (171) will be pleased that a biblical scholar highlights the interconnectedness between human experience of the divine presence and Earth’s elements.

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<sup>2</sup> Littleton John. 2017. *Enhance Learning in Parishes: A Learning Community Approach for Church Congregations*. (Unley, Adelaide, South Australia: MediaCom Education Inc.,13-14). [www.tjhlittleton.com](http://www.tjhlittleton.com)

