Chapter 5

Interpreting the Time: Climate Change and the Climate in/of the Gospel of Luke

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Introduction

The Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World refers to the ‘signs of the time’: ‘At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task’ (Gaudium et Spes 4). The current collection of essays addresses one such ‘sign of the time’, namely human-induced (anthropogenic) climate change, and asks what might be appropriate modes of religious reading of, and response to, this sign. I take the best scientific evidence to be that climate change is occurring; is in large part induced by human activity; and requires a response. Nonetheless, the so-called ‘climate debate’ is also a ‘sign of the time’, but is not my major focus in this essay. My essay addresses the part of the statement from Gaudium et Spes that calls for interpreting the signs of the time in the light of the Gospel.

This is not a simple thing; signs of the time, and climate change as a case in point, may be, and often are, particular to their time. Thus, the gospels may not address such signs directly. How are we to discern what light the Gospel—conveyed and interpreted in the canonical gospels, Pauline corpus, other Second Testament writings, the Patristic writings, and ongoing traditions of the Church over two thousand years—sheds on a contemporary sign such as climate change? This raises hermeneutic questions. The first part of this essay will outline some of the scope of these questions and some different ways in which ecological hermeneutics have addressed them. The second part will look at the way in which Luke 12:54–56 images the notion of the ‘signs of the time’ taken up in Gaudium et Spes, especially how it does this in relation to meteorological, social, and theological signs. The third part of

the essay will ask in what ways this reading of the Lukan time or season (*kairos*) might speak to our contemporary *kairos* of climate change.

**Hermeneutic Questions**

Climate change forms part of, and is often a focus for, a range of ecological concerns in the present time. As a starting point for biblical interpretation, climate change raises a number of questions including fundamental questions about the status of the biblical text. If the interpreter addresses the text on its own terms, not only is it a document of faith, with particular social, cultural, and ultimately theological concerns, but it is also an historical document from times in which climate change was not a particular concern. We might ask why read the biblical text at all? Why not read contemporary scientific, psychological and literary works that describe climate change as an imminent concern and suggest ways in which humans might change their behaviour to address it?

Some might read biblical texts to uncover the roots of the ecological crisis in biblical religion. Other may wish to read biblical texts apologetically to show their pro-Earth stance, to rescue the Bible for today. Others may read to assuage the concern for the present through appeals to personal salvation in the promised resurrection of believers. Taken as a sacred text for Jews and Christians, the biblical text can also be read as offering modes of situated interpretations of the relationship between God, humans and their social, cultural and ecological contexts that might suggest modes of situated interpretations of such relationships today. Such dialogue is a cross-cultural conversation, between contemporary cultures and the ancient worlds and worldviews of the biblical texts, and requires a kind of cultural sensitivity and humility. How might we make such a conversation possible? On what basis can there be a conversation? What would make such a conversation fruitful for today’s context?

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4 For a good appraisal of critical, apologetic and similar approaches to reading biblical texts in the context of contemporary ecological concern, see David G. Horrell, ‘Introduction’, in David G. Horrell et al. (eds), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 1–8. However, my sense is that Horrell’s criticism of the Earth Bible Project needs some further nuance, as the ecojustice and more lately ecological hermeneutic approach taken by Habel and his team is not simply critical, but opens a range of possibilities in addressing biblical texts. Nonetheless, its approach differs from that of the UBEE Project. I discuss this briefly below.
of anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change?

Since the mid-1990s there have been several major projects in ecological hermeneutics that suggest ways forward for conversations between ecological concerns such as climate change and biblical studies.⁵ The Earth Bible project originating in Adelaide under the chief editorship of Norman Habel was the first major project to develop an ecological approach to biblical interpretation.⁶ As Habel argues in his more recent work, *An Inconvenient Text*, the Bible cannot be taken as wholly unproblematic either as a conversation partner or as a normative text from which to engage with contemporary ecological concerns.⁷ The Earth Bible Team developed six ecojustice principles for reading biblical texts.⁸ These are principles of interconnectedness, intrinsic worth, voice, purpose, mutual custodianship and resistance, principles which ascribe these characteristics to Earth and its constituents, including humans.⁹ Developed in conversation with ecologists, feminist theorists and indigenous peoples, the principles focused on both the intersection between ecological destruction and social injustice, and the extension of the notion of social justice to an other than human context, that is, to a context of justice for Earth.¹⁰ Interpreters in the

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⁸ Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, 24

⁹ Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, 24.

¹⁰ Norman Habel, ‘Introducing the Earth Bible’, in Norman C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the*
Earth Bible series were asked to bring one or more of these ecojustice principles to bear on the texts they read.

Through the Society of Biblical Literature Ecological Hermeneutics consultation, Habel and his collaborators developed three ecological hermeneutics as a further point of reference for the engagement between biblical studies and contemporary ecological concern. The hermeneutics of suspicion (especially of anthropocentrism in texts, readings, and readers); identification (with a wider Earth community of which human readers are part and with Earth others as agents within the text); and retrieval (of an Earth perspective and voice in the text), like the eco-justice principles, focus on the Earth as primary in the conversation. This is somewhat in the mode of the liberationist ‘preferential option for the poor’, where the Earth, through human action, has become ‘the poor’.

A second major project in this area takes a different approach. The Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics (UBEE) Project at the University of Exeter, under the leadership of David Horrell, has been developing biblically-based doctrinal and ethical lenses for an ecological hermeneutics. Criticising on the one hand a ‘recovery’ position, that seeks to reclaim the Bible as a book with ‘a clearly “green” message’, and on the other hand what they read as an unsympathetic approach of the Earth Bible to the biblical texts, the UBEE Project seeks middle ground. They offer ‘an attempt to construct an ecological theology which, while innovative, is nonetheless coherent (and in dialogue) with a scripturally shaped Christian orthodoxy … sufficiently faithful to the tradition to be authentically Christian yet sufficiently creative to reshape a tradition that has by and large been preoccupied with issues of human behaviour and salvation’.

This last point is key for all ecological readings of biblical texts; while considerations of human behaviour are critical for a response to climate change, the focus needs to be broader. Ecological hermeneutics need to situate human behaviour in a wider context where humans are interconnected and interdependent with a wider

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Perspective of Earth (The Earth Bible 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 25–37.
constituency of Earth beings, with which they might co-exist and share something like agency.\textsuperscript{15} The Earth Bible project puts the focus on this Earth context as the prevailing hermeneutic key; the UBEE project seeks to uncover biblical hermeneutic keys that are resonant with, and can be applied to, this Earth context.

Both the Earth Bible project and the UBEE project acknowledge that biblical texts cannot be read as uncritically ecologically-friendly in a contemporary sense, but need to be understood within their contexts and traditions of interpretation, as generally addressing different questions than those we bring to them with climate change in mind. Several related approaches have appeared over the same recent fifteen to twenty year period; these bring together liberation theological and ecological perspectives; ecological and feminist perspectives; postcolonial and ecological perspectives; multi-dimensional hermeneutics; and ecological materialist approaches.\textsuperscript{16} In each case ecological concerns such as climate change; ecological principles such as interconnectedness and interdependence; feminist foci such as embodiment; postcolonial critiques of empire; liberationist understandings of social justice; and the new materialist foregrounding of matter, are brought together to develop ways of reading biblical texts from and for a contemporary context.

While this could be understood as tending toward a form of \textit{eisegesis} (reading into) the text, at their best ecological hermeneutics uncover, for example, relationships (human and other than human) we may not otherwise have noticed in the text, and raise important questions. For example, what models of relationship between God, humans, and the wider Earth and cosmic communities does the text suggest? Does the text have inbuilt assumptions or overt images/paradigms that are counter to, or unhelpful for, an effective engagement with the challenge of climate change today? More specifically, for the purposes of this essay, can our contemporary context of climate change call forth questions about climate in Luke, where we have a direct reference to understanding the signs of the weather in Luke 12:54–56? How might the climates of Luke speak back to our contemporary context of climate change?


Interpreting the Time: Climate in Luke

Luke 12:54–56 reads:

But he also said to the crowds, ‘When you see the clouds rising in the west, immediately you say, “A rainstorm is coming”, and it happens thus. And when the south wind blows, you say, “There will be scorching heat”, and it happens. Hypocrites, you know how to interpret the face of the earth and the sky, but how is it that you do not know how to interpret this season/time (kairos)?’ (my translation).

This short passage, which has a ‘remote’ parallel in Matthew 16:2–3 and a partial parallel in the Gospel of Thomas 91, juxtaposes knowledge of meteorological signs with another kind of knowledge, knowledge of what Luke calls this season/time (kairos) and which the New Revised Standard Version translates ‘the present time’ and Joseph Fitzmyer ‘the season that is here’. As Robert Tannehill notes, in this short speech, for the purposes of the comparison it is assumed that weather prediction is unproblematic. The background to the meteorological ‘signs’ can be explained as follows: ‘In Israel, clouds coming from the direction of the Mediterranean Sea to the west mean approaching showers. Conversely, a south wind blowing from the Negeb desert brings sudden scorching heat.’ As Sharon Ringe notes, in a largely peasant culture the ability to read or interpret these meteorological signs might be assumed.

The comparison with the ability to read or interpret the ‘present time’ (this kairos) can be read in at least two ways. Is it that the crowds are incapable of interpreting the present time or is it that they correctly interpret the present time but pretend otherwise? The word ‘hypocrites’ links the crowds at this point with others in the Lukan narrative, against whose ‘hypocrisy’ the Lukan Jesus warns the disciples in

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the presence of the pressing crowds (12:1). While the term ‘hypocrite’ can refer to one who acts a part, who pretends, it seems to carry in Luke a resonance of judgment.22 By their inability (willed or otherwise) to interpret rightly the present time, the crowds are judged. At the same time, in the Lukan Jesus’ judgment on the crowds, the reader hears a call to interpret this kairos.

What does the capacity to interpret this kairos effectively entail for Luke? I will explore three aspects of this question. First, the local narrative context of Luke 12:54–56 suggests the tone of judgment. Secondly, both the local and wider narrative context give content to the term kairos. Thirdly, the repetition and placement of words in Luke 12:56, stemming in part at least from the oral character of the Gospel (its being written to be heard or recited rather than read), emphasises the verb dokimazō (to interpret) and prompts the hearer to search out what dokimazō means in this context.

The Narrative Context and Judgment

Luke 12:54–56 occurs immediately after a section describing the division the Lukan Jesus will bring to the earth: ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed. Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!’ (12:49–51 NRSV). The images are of crisis and stress, and pick up a thread of violent upheaval (for example, 2:34–35; 3:9; possibly also 16:16) in tension with a promise of peace (2:14; cf. 19:41–44). This tension is important to a Lukan understanding of the divine purpose and I will return to this point when discussing the ‘present time’ (‘this kairos’) below. In 12:49–53, the primary example of division is division within families or households (12:52–53). Prompted by the advent and reception of ‘good news to the poor’ that marks the liberation brought by the Lukan Jesus (see 4:18–19), this familial division forms the context for the sayings to the crowd concerning interpreting the ‘present time’. Household division is a metaphor, and likely a lived reality, that highlights the way in which not only the disciples and the religious authorities, but also the crowds, are judged by their response to this advent of ‘good news to the poor’. Because reception

of the divine purpose is so critical (see 7:30; 19:44), this purpose occasions division between those who reject and those who welcome the divine visitation, even within the same household.

As 12:54–56 implies, the focus is not on the division itself, but on interpreting ‘the present time’. For Joel Green, the present time is signalled by this family division. As 12:54–56 implies, the focus is not on the division itself, but on interpreting ‘the present time’. For Joel Green, the present time is signalled by this family division. Ringe focuses, however, on what follows in 12:57: ‘And why do you not judge (κρινεῖτε) for yourselves what is right (τοῦ δικαίου)?’ As I. Howard Marshall and Tannehill note, the verb κρίνω (to judge or discern) is used here with a similar meaning to δοκιμάζω (to interpret) in the previous verse. While Judith Lieu suggests that 12:57–59 does not fit well after 12:54–56, Ringe makes a good case for interpreting the ‘present time’ in relation to the social structures of debt set out in 12:58–59. The division in families could also be read in this context. On 12:58–59, Ringe writes:

The social and economic context for the saying is the rampant debt that was destroying families and communities throughout Palestine. If disputes about debt reached the Roman legal system, one of two verdicts would greet the debtor. Either the debtor would be forced into indentured service to work off the debt, or the debtor would be thrown into prison until family members managed to scrape together the needed money to pay off the debt (usually by selling off any remaining lands). ... In order to avoid playing into such blatant injustice, the only solution would be to settle cases before they went to court.

As Ringe goes on to argue, in Luke for justice to occur and for the visitation of God to be welcomed, the situation of debt and credit, whatever its actualities, ‘must be brought to an end’, in the liberation promised as ‘good news to the poor’ (4:18–19). Release from debt forms in Luke not only a metaphor for forgiveness (see, for example, 7:40–48), but its material expression in the ‘present time’.

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29 See further, Anne Elvey, ‘Can There Be a Forgiveness That Makes a Difference Ecologically? An
The Present Time (This Kairos)

At this level, then, the present time (this kairos) is a time marked by Roman occupation, debt slavery, and the divisions within families these political and social conditions may bring. Luke does not stop here, but interprets the political, social, cultural, and religious conditions of the time theologically. Two critical events for the Lukan gospel are the death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem. Both are interpreted through the lens of the divine purpose, so that, as Tannehill comments, the ‘present time’ (12:56) is to be identified with the ‘time of your visitation’ (19:44), a visitation of both liberation and judgment. In this context of divine visitation, temporal events of oppressive force, such as Jesus’ execution and the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem, become enmeshed with a divine necessity that, in the midst of dissolution, enacts and promises peace. Moreover, the temporal dissolution is understood as a consequence of failure to respond to the divine visitation that marks the ‘present time’ (see esp., 19:41–44).

While Luke’s interpretation of the outcomes of Roman imperialism in relation to a failure to welcome the visitation of God could be thought crass, even unjust, Luke’s theology is more complex. There is an interplay between the material events of the present time and the present time of divine purpose. Although they are not equivalent, neither are they separable. The Lukan divine necessity takes history...
seriously as the place of encounter with God, in a divine visitation enacted by the Lukan Jesus. There is a two way movement between divine necessity and history, so that even in the unfolding of an oppressive rule, the interwoven and enfolding divine rule (the basileia of God) opens a space of liberating possibility; and the possibilities of continuing oppression or liberation are linked with rejection or welcome of this divine rule respectively.

Luke’s juxtaposition of Roman rule and the visitation of God is most clearly shown in the narrative of Jesus’ birth where the reign of peace claimed by the saviour, Caesar, is set in parallel and contrast with the peace announced at the birth of the saviour, Jesus (2:1–14). The ‘present time’ is also this ‘today’ of salvation (2:11; 19:9). A time of fulfilment (1:20; 4:21), the kairos is imagined as seasonal time that marks the time of sowing, harvesting and feeding (12:42; 20:10; Acts 14:17), the time of the imminence of the basileia of God (10:2, 9, 11), requiring response. What does it mean to interpret this time?

To Interpret (Dokimazō)

While the verb dokimazō occurs twenty times in the Second Testament outside Luke (in Pauline and other letters), it occurs in Luke only at 12:56 and 14:19. Where in 12:56 it appears in relation to interpreting both the ‘face of the earth and the sky’ and ‘the present time’ (this kairos), in 14:19 it relates to ‘trying out’ a new group of oxen. From these two instances, it seems that the Lukan usage relates to a kind of physical discernment probably related to agriculture, through the discernment of the weather and of the ways of animals to serve human purposes. It may be that this linking of physical everyday signs with the present time is not simply a contrast but says something about ‘this kairos’ as a material reality that needs to be interpreted not in opposition to, but in close association with, the signs of earth, sky and human political and social institutions, as Ringe has suggested in relation to ancient structures of credit and debt.

An ecojustice approach would focus in Luke 12:54–56 on the winds, earth and sky and might ask whether the face of earth and sky appears in the saying solely as a point of reference for a more important spiritual point. Or does the capacity to read the movements of earth and sky, the shifts of wind for example, show an interconnectedness between God’s time (this *kairos*, the time of visitation), and the physical climate which might encompass not only meteorological states, but also political and social ones? In both cases, the Lukan narrative world is one in which, just as God is active in opening the storehouses of the skies for the wind and rain to come (Ps 135:7), God is also active in opening a space within the oppression of Roman occupation and the related intransigence of some of the religious authorities, for the visitation of peace (1:79; 2:14; cf. 19:42) and liberation (*aphesis*) (1:77; 4:18–19) in the *basileia* of God. The capacity to interpret ‘this *kairos*’ is, for Luke, evident in a quality of responsiveness to the unsettling, but liberating, visitation of God. If Ringe is correct, it is a quality of responsiveness that has implications for social relations in the present. It implies the capacity to discern, and presumably act on, what is just.36

The meteorological metaphor enables the ‘interpreting the times’ pericope to function. As the use of this metaphor suggests, social relations in Luke’s world are embedded in wider more than human relations. The weather matters to the crowds, because it has implications not simply for their comfort but for their sustenance, for the conditions under which their food supply is grown and harvested, and their households subsist, if not flourish. The social reality of credit and debt matters to the crowds, because it, too, has implications for their survival. The visitation of God in the present time should, the Lukan Jesus argues, therefore also matter to the crowds because it speaks to these conditions of their survival in such a way as to open up the possibility of liberation from life-denying systems, not through war, but through a kind of ‘grace’, through Luke does not use the word in this context. This ‘grace’ stands in the present with the capacity to enact a shift toward a promised future, such as that described in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37, whether experiment, ideal, or both.

Brendan Byrne suggests that this present focus also has an eschatological dimension, the present time is ‘a space for conversion before the storm of judgment

arrives’, the final year in which the fig tree might be productive (13:9). Whether an eschatological focus, especially an apocalyptic one such as found in parts of Luke 17 and 21, is helpful for our contemporary discourse around climate change needs further consideration, but it is important to understand that in Luke 12:56 the ‘present time’ (this kairos) has both a present and a future orientation.

Re-framing Climate Change

The discourse around climate change itself has a present and a future orientation, and concerns not only observed changes in climate in the recent past and the present but also, and more particularly, carefully judged scientific predictions about the future climate, its changes, and the impacts of these changes on atmosphere, seas, lands, biological communities and species, including humans. Catherine Keller uses Luke 12:56 as an epigraph to her 1993 essay, ‘Talk about the Weather’, where she writes: ‘Talk about the weather has lost its innocence.’ She discusses the eschatological tone of descriptions of ‘the ecological crisis’. As Bill McKibben wrote, this crisis signals the ‘end of nature’, not that the Earth and its constituents will disappear, but that what we call ‘nature’ is under stress because of, and no longer exists separate from, human actions; the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘human-made’ conditions is thus collapsed. For Keller, eschatology ‘is the doctrinal lens through which Christian culture, consciously or not, imagines any “end of the world”’. While both biblical and contemporary perspectives present a variety of eschatologies, there remains a challenge to reconstruct the ‘end’ or ‘ends’ (of habitats and homelands, communities and species) that climate change challenges us to imagine. This entails a kind of cultural change: ‘We will still talk about the weather, just because we are in it together. That’s what weather talk always did. But now the damage to the earth-home binds us all together as never before, as members of a species, indeed members of a planet.’ This new or renewed sense of what it is to be human contains a hope

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that calls forth ‘the green ecumenacy’. But what might this ‘green ecumenacy’ be like?

If what Luke offers is a holding together of ecological, social and theological contexts in a way that is determined by the logic of divine visitation, which enables a kind of liberation from (or better within) oppressive modes of relating in the present, how might this speak to our contemporary context of climate change?

While different, the first century CE context of the Lukan narrative and our contemporary experience of climate change are situations of grief. In the Lukan context, this is grief at the material consequences of Roman domination, the system of debt, and more particularly the Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem (see esp. 13:31–35; 19:41–44). Luke relates this grief to the inadequate response of some of the religious authorities and the crowds to the present time, the time of visitation (this \textit{kairos}). Our contemporary experience of climate change is framed by grief, when climate change is described in terms of loss (of biodiversity, habitat, home), as an imminent disaster. It is also framed as a question of social justice (where more marginal communities seem likely to be most adversely or first affected by climate change). At another level, like empire, climate change is ‘bigger than us’ and appears simultaneously resolvable (if we have the will to change our behaviour individually, communally, nationally, and internationally) and unresolvable (because we seem not to have the will, or because global systems, such as markets, are too complex, or because we have not acted adequately and in time). It is something we as humans accept, fear, ignore, deny, and act on, sometimes at the same time in the same person or community. Into this complex of action, inaction, and grief, the Lukan motif of interpreting the present time (this \textit{kairos}) suggests a different mix of action, inaction, and grief.

The litany of climate change effects, present and to come, is cause for grief, prompt for action, and something more. Seán McDonagh writes: ‘From a Christian theological perspective, we are living in a \textit{kairos} moment. It demands concrete choices for individuals and institutions.’ Framed by the knowledge that this is ‘bigger than us’, this \textit{kairos} warrants interpretation, not only in the mode of scientific research, although this is crucial, but also in the mode of theological understanding.

\footnote{43 Keller, ‘Talk about the Weather’, 48.}
\footnote{44 Seán McDonagh, \textit{Climate Change: The Challenge to All of Us} (Blackrock, Dublin: The Columba Press, 2006), 194.}
Luke does not identify the signs of the weather with the signs of the time. To interpret contemporary climate change as the visitation of God, as if it were divinely ordained, would be counter to the subtlety of the Lukan presentation of ‘this *kairos*’. However, when we look at Luke 12:54–56 from the perspective of climate change, there is an irony that interpreting the present time, rather than arising as a contrast with interpreting the weather, the face of earth and sky, requires instead interpreting the weather as a priority. The challenge of Luke is not to stop here, but to ask in what way our response to this present material situation—like the release from debt that is not only a metaphor for a theological concept of forgiveness but material good news to the poor—can be understood as calling forth a response to the visitation of God, a liberating visitation that might make another future possible.