

Book Review by John Littleton 31/3/2020

Balabanski, Vicky. 2020. *Colossians: An Earth Bible Commentary, An Eco- Stoic Reading*. London/New York: T&T Clark. Pages 202. Hardback \$80.50; ebook \$56.92.

Vicky Balabanski's book is brilliant; well-crafted and outstanding in scholarship: biblical studies and philosophy. The author shines a light on theological reflection processes used within the context of *The Letter to the Colossians*, and then spotlights twenty-first century ecological and ethical issues by reflecting theologically.

The author of this eco-biblical commentary on the “remarkable” and “intriguing” letter skilfully employs a well-respected conversation method of reflective Bible study; bringing three ‘worlds’ into dialogue (3-6). The first ‘world’ behind the letter introduces Stoic philosophy, the ideas, concepts and life that background the hearing of Colossians; the second ‘world’ in the text of the letter outlines the distinctive Christology of the letter, provides an exegetical commentary on each passage translated by the author, and notes resonances with Stoic philosophy; the third ‘world’ in front of the text, our own twenty-first environment, addresses ways to approach the issues of our time in the light of biblical teaching in the letter about Cosmic Christ “the icon or image of God, making God’s presence visible and tangible”(Col.1.15; 1).

The author argues that the biblical scholar’s task is “to consider what sort of ontological framework the original audience would have had” (173). Hence, she creatively explores Stoic philosophy which was widespread in the Lycus Valley context of *The Letter to the Colossians*; the Lycus Valley in the Roman province of Asia, south west Turkey today. “Stoicism’s highest value – Virtue – is expressed most fully in a life that is in harmony with nature, being prepared for self-sacrifice, and prioritising generosity of Spirit” (20). This Stoic philosophy provided the context for the spread of the Christian Gospel in the Lycus valley. “For Stoics the ultimate Good is virtue. For those in Christ, the ultimate Good is Christ” (175). Many concepts in the Letter have resonances with Stoic ideas, others do not (171).

Upheld by Paul, Epaphras, a significant leader and educator with the Christians in the Lycus Valley helped people express their faith in Christ in the light of the Jesus tradition and the background of Stoic philosophy (9, 11, 45, 46, 53, 60, 65, 105, 161,170). That reflection led to a cosmic vision of Christ, the high Christology articulated in Colossians; that “in Christ all things hold together and all things are reconciled” (Col. 1.17, 20). The presence of Christ permeates all things, including the natural world. Such an “all things” teaching relates Colossians to the ecological crisis of our times. The visual, Figure 7.1, is very effective in illustrating our interconnectedness with all things in Christ (123). Extensive Footnotes enrich the discussion.

Nympha’s Notes, included at the end of each chapter, highlight the importance of understanding the feelings and thoughts of an original hearer of the letter and a member of a Christian household. Nympha is the only woman named in the letter. Balabanski ingeniously presents her as an imaginative reading partner; a piece of historical imagination (17, 163, 171). Nympha recognised “the presence of Christ – even and especially in the vulnerable creatures of the earth” (105-106).

Balabanski’s book is guided by at least two learning questions: what does being ‘in Christ’ mean? (46), and what is their faith in Christ demanding of the reader/hearer? (169). An eco-

stoic reading of Colossians suggests responses to those questions. Solidarity with Christ through baptism means a Christ-like human(e) life (Col. 3.12-17; 140-143) and an awareness of the presence of Christ in the earth community (169-170); valuing and caring for our “Common Home” (2, 80); “the sacredness of all things” (81).

I write this review as a biblically and theologically informed Christian educator, one who has a learning community focus for Christian education in parishes. Balabanski’s book provides evidence to show how the early church communities mentioned in the letter did their Christian education; nurturing “a cosmic vision of Christ” (80). 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” (Littleton 2017, 13-14).

Evidence of holistic, collaborative and theologically reflective learning processes exists in *The Letter to the Colossians*. Theological reflection has already been mentioned in this review; Epaphras reflected theologically. Many examples of collaborative processes are evidenced as mentioned by Balabanski: collaborative authorship of the circular letter written by Timothy with Paul, from Rome, in prison c. 62 CE (7, 156, 163; Col.1.1,7-8, 4.12-13), consulting Epaphras; shared leadership; Paul with his ministry and missionary team (8, 153, 165); networking amongst Paul’s eleven colleagues and the faith communities in the Lycus Valley, Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis and Nympha’s household (164-165).

Holistic processes include individual, group, congregational, community engagement and dialogical learning. Nympha’s Notes illustrate individual learning. Team learning and congregational learning have already been mentioned; part of the functioning of the ‘body of Christ’ (122-124, 170). Examples of community engagement include pre-evangelism with the Stoic world (20, 29, 142) and disaster relief due to earthquakes (11-12, 38, 161). Dialogical learning, navigating differences with learning from dialogue about different viewpoints (Littleton 2017, 95), is very evident. The writers of the letter presented a series of pastoral warnings about “deceitful types of philosophy and human traditions” (112). Such influences may mislead the community of believers, drawing them away from being in Christ. The Colossians were confidently encouraged to seek, learn and practise wisdom in Christ (105-120); to do everything in the name of Christ (Col. 3.17). From such evidence we may discern, albeit anachronistically, that the community of believers in and around Colossae was a learning community, where people were growing as disciples of Jesus the Christ (Col.1.6).

Even though the book is expensive, this brilliant and enlightening publication is a must purchase for Theological Libraries, so that it is easily available for the student and any serious reader of books interested in biblical studies, philosophy and ecological education; so well written and easy to read. *Colossians: An Earth Bible Commentary, An Eco-Stoic Reading* was an enjoyable and rewarding read; so many insights to enhance knowledge, understanding and practice of the Christian faith for people who value and care for our Common Home; and by extending the reflection, people who care about ecumenism (141,174,176) and people who uphold ethical living in civic society (138,169,170,175).

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Littleton John. 2017. *Enhance Learning in Parishes: A Learning Community Approach for Church Congregations*. Unley, Adelaide, South Australia: MediaCom Education Inc. www.tjhlittleton.com.au

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