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The Road: A Review of Touch the Earth

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Abstract

"*Touch the Earth* draws heavily on the Black prophetic tradition, and the work bears witness to the injustices endured by marginalized people under the shadow of the American empire."

Posting about the book *Touch the Earth* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/the-road-a-review-of-touch-the-earth/>

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The Road: A Review of *Touch the Earth*

Rose Postma

February 21, 2023

Title: *Touch the Earth: Poems on The Way*

Author: Drew Jackson

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For many, reading the Gospel of Luke is walking a well-worn path. From reciting the Christmas story to the parable of the Good Samaritan, much of the gospel is familiar ground. The words, phrases, and even the beats of the narrative are deeply engrained in our cultural consciousness the way that other portions of the Bible are not. Drew Jackson changes that.

Drew Jackson is a New York-based pastor and poet, and his work is a deep collaboration of both. Jackson's recent collection *Touch the Earth: Poems on The Way* is a follow up to his 2019 collection *God Speaks Through Wombs: Poems on God's Unexpected Coming*, also published by InterVarsity Press. Both collections systematically illuminate and respond to passages from the Gospel of Luke. In fact, Jackson's homiletic background is seen in the way he divides passages as he works through the gospel. The methodical structure of both collections feels akin to sitting under a pastor preaching through a book of the Bible week after week, which ultimately propels the reader through the collection. It could be easy for a collection to falter under the weight of a self-imposed structure, but each poem in *Touch the Earth* stands on its own. While both collections match the arc of the original book, they also both work as a cohesive collection.

Touch the Earth picks up in Luke 9 where Jesus sends out the twelve to "proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."¹ Jackson's opening poem is quiet meditation on the speaker's own sending, "I am still grieving my mother/ still/ gleaning what my father taught me/ Gather it from memory/ Let it touch the earth." In the gospel, Jesus' presence quickly makes its way to Herod the tetrarch who is "perplexed" because of reports that John may have been raised from the dead, or another ancient prophet may have returned. Herod says, "I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?"² And then Herod tries to see Jesus. Jackson's corresponding poem "In Their Garden" contains an epigram from activist Fred Hampton about

never being able to kill a revolution. The poem's speaker says, "And the truth is/ they can never/ put us down/ Like weeds in their garden/ Pull us out/ and we will/ pop up again." This is one of the central themes of Jackson's work—the gospel is revolutionary, and if it is to be believed, the empire will be shaken.

The empire is never far from the edges of the individual poems—whether it is the Roman Empire or the American one. They are less a retelling of the traditional narrative and more of a response or a conversation with the text. There is much that happens in the space between the text and the poems, many of which include a wide variety of voices in the epigraphs. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Nina Simone, Miles Davis, Thomas Merton, and Nas (among others) all make appearances adding depth and nuance to the poems, which range in form from free verse to haiku to prose poem. Jackson even includes a ghazal (a Persian form that uses couplets and repetition).

Touch the Earth draws heavily on the Black prophetic tradition, and the work bears witness to the injustices endured by marginalized people under the shadow of the American empire. In a poem that corresponds with Luke 17:3 Jackson says, "If another disciple sins/ diminishes the Image in another/ refuses to be a keeper of a brother/ or sister/ ignores our kin in prison ... we are in the wrong/ if we don't/ give them hell." In a poem entitled "Thanksgiving Etiquette" responding to Luke 14:1 Jackson says, "Ensure everyone is able/ to stuff their faces/ without giving thought/ to kids in cages ... do not mention *that video*/ we do not have/ all the facts."

The poem "Nobody Talks About The Road" opens with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr. about the parable of the Good Samaritan. King says, "It is also necessary to work to change the conditions of the Jericho Road which made robbery possible." The poem unfolds from there, "Nobody talks about the road," says Jackson. "Save for Martin/ and every prophet under heaven's sky/ To me it is no surprise/ why we focus on a compassionate act/ Does it not cause your brow to furrow/ that this thoroughfare/ is known for its bloodlust?" Jackson repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the brokenness of the American enterprise that has led to inequity and racism, and while much of the collection is filled with necessary critique and lament, it also celebrates the Black experience and uses Black voices to bring new light to Scripture.

Jackson trusts the reader to sit with and partake in his work. It could be easy for a pastor using Scripture as a source text to tell the reader what to think and how to interpret, but Jackson always resists that impulse. He says in "Ascension," the final poem of the collection, "And this is what poetry does/ It carries us ... It gives no plan/ no blueprint for the future ... It flies away but does not leave ... It leaves us with questions/ gazing toward heaven/ for answers ... Its intent/ to get us to sit/ with the questions again." The source material of Luke will likely not be new to most readers, but the collection does bring the gospel and its implications to the forefront and allows the reader to meditate and ask questions. And even if Jackson doesn't say it explicitly, the intent is for the reader to take a hard look at the road that has been clearly painted in poetry and to go and do likewise.

1. vs. 2

2. vs. 9