

Editorial

Editorial for the Special Issue “Intercultural Hermeneutics of the Bible in Aotearoa New Zealand”

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On 5 September 2024, six days after the death of her father, Kingi Tūheitia Pōtatau Te Wherowhero VII, Ngā Wai Hono I Te Pō Paki became Māori Queen. The coronation ceremony involve not a crown, but Te Paipera Tapu (the Holy Bible translated into Māori) placed upon her head.¹ The use of the Christian Scriptures in such an important Māori ceremony may belie the complex history of the Bible and Christianity within Te Ao Māori (the Māori world and culture) and Aotearoa (New Zealand) over the last two hundred years.

Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries brought the Bible to Aotearoa New Zealand in 1814, although it was not fully translated into Māori until 1858. Aotearoa New Zealand was only the third missionary outreach of the CMS, early on in what is now known as the Modern Missionary Movement. At the same time, Aotearoa New Zealand was the last significant landmass in the world yet to be colonised by British and European powers. The missionary activity of the CMS and others, and the subsequent conversion of many Māori to Christianity, took place within the expansion of the British Empire, whose state religion was also Christianity. This created myriad tensions that continue to resonate today.

In the 1830s, the Clapham Sect, or “Saints”, who belonged to the evangelical Christian movement within the Church of England, was highly influential in Britain’s governing circles. Having triumphed with the abolition of slavery in 1833, addressing the dire effects of colonisation on indigenous peoples within the British Empire became a major focus. The 1837 *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements)* (the *Buxton Report*), representing “a high point of humanitarian influence” in British politics at the time² (Alan and Fae 2008; Zoë 2004), captures the sentiments that would shortly result in the 1840 Te Tiriti O Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), signed by Māori leaders and the British Crown (Claudia 2020; Hugh 2022). Te Tiriti, translated into Te Reo Māori³ by the missionaries, and mediated to Māori by the same, sought to protect the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand from the depredations outlined in the *Buxton Report*. Te Tiriti, however, was unable to withstand the colonising impulse, and in the decades after its signing, Māori lost much of their land (Vincent 2019).

As a result of this complex history, attitudes today towards the work of the missionaries and the introduction of the Bible in Aotearoa New Zealand run on a spectrum. One end of the spectrum is critically positive, recognising the missionaries as children of their times who were caught up in colonial history, but who genuinely introduced Christian faith and the Bible to Māori. The other end of the spectrum is altogether negative, seeing the missionaries as an integral part of the colonial project to dispossess Māori of their whenua (land), and the chief agents in the destruction of traditional Māori culture. The reader will discern that the essays in this volume represent different points on this spectrum.

This Special Issue, *Intercultural Hermeneutics of the Bible in Aotearoa New Zealand*, has its genesis in the 2023 26th Annual Meeting of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Biblical Studies (ANZABS).⁴ Earlier that year, the Bible Society of New Zealand (BSNZ)



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published *He Timatanga*, which contained ten different portions from the Bible translated into Māori by individuals, as opposed to a committee, and also into their own mita (tribal dialect).⁵ The purpose of *He Timatanga*, meaning “a beginning”, was “to engage Māori Christians in the planning of the new Māori Bible translation project”.⁶ *He Timatanga* succeeded in evoking a number of responses, positive and negative, from both Māori and Pākehā (non-Māori) Christians. In my role as Māngai Māori (Māori spokesperson) for ANZABS, I chose the theme of “Māori and Pasifika translations of the Bible” for the Hui-Talanoa stream of the Annual Meeting. Of the five essays in this volume, those of Drake, Fuimaono, and Galbraith were presented at the conference.

Deane Galbraith (Ngā Puhi)⁷ “Nephilim in Aotearoa New Zealand: Reading Māori Narratives of Tāwhaki with Gen 6:1–4’s Ancient Divine Heroes” challenges negative responses to the translation of Genesis 1 in *He Timatanga*, which translated some of the Hebrew words with the names of atua Māori (Māori deities/spiritual beings), e.g., “Ranginui” for אֱלֹהִים; “Papatūānuku” for אֶרֶץ (earth). Rather than argue for or against the use of the names of these atua in translating Genesis 1, Galbraith challenges the basis of the objections, namely that no other “gods” or spiritual beings apart from the God of the Bible exist. Rather, Galbraith argues that the Māori conception of the spiritual realm was more in tune with that of the Bible than the monotheism of nineteenth-century missionaries in Aotearoa New Zealand was. To demonstrate this, Galbraith reads the short and enigmatic account of Gen 6: 1–4 alongside the pūrakau (founding stories) of Tāwhaki, a tupuna tupua (ancestral demigod). From reading the two accounts together, Galbraith proposes a better Māori translation of 6: 4, and, more significantly, suggests that the pūrakau of Tāwhaki help us to better understand Gen 6: 1–4.

Lyndon Drake (Ngāti Kuri, Ngāi Tūāhuriri, Ngāi Tahu) “The Māori and Ancient Near Eastern Pantheons in the Context of Genesis 1 in Te Reo Māori” also engages with the use of atua Māori in the translation of Genesis 1 in *He Timatanga*. Drake looks at Genesis 1 in its original context of ANE mythology. In this context, Genesis 1 emerges as a monotheistic polemical work, in which entities of divine status in the ANE accounts, such as the sun and moon, are presented as creaturely, and humans are elevated to rule over the world, instead of the ANE gods. Drake then looks at Māori pūrakau timatanga (origin stories), noting similarities to the ANE creation accounts in the interaction of divine beings resulting in creation. Since Genesis 1 deliberately de-sacralised the cosmos, Drake suggests that the translation should maintain this communicative intent, which is not achieved by introducing atua Māori into the text. Furthermore, Drake questions the propriety of employing atua Māori for the translation of another text, as they belong to purākau, which have their own tapu (sacred or restricted status). Although Drake disagrees with the translation approach of Genesis 1 in *He Timatanga*, he appreciates it as a test translation that provides opportunity for discussion and feedback.

Just as these two biblically focused articles came from different approaches, so do the next two articles on missionary translation. Eugene Fuimaono (Ngā Puhi, Ngāti Hāmoa) “‘Not My God’—Challenging the Usage of ‘Te Atua’ as Māori Terminology for the God of Christianity” is the first of two essays assessing key term development by the early missionaries in their translation of the Bible. Fuimaono uses a kaupapa Māori methodology to critique the early missionary choice of “Te Atua” to translate “God”. Fuimaono, similar to Galbraith’s argument, suggests that “atua” is too broad a term to accurately refer to the supreme God presented in the Bible, because it can denotemany different classes of supernatural beings.. The Pākehā missionaries, Fuimaono maintains, did not have sufficient knowledge of Te Ao Māori to understand this, supporting his argument by examining recent research into the meaning of “atua”. Fuimaono outlines three possible approaches

to find a suitable term to translate “God” instead of Te Atua, as part of an ongoing journey of indigenizing the Christian faith into Māori.

In his essay “A Historical-Contextual Analysis of the Use of ‘Tapu’, ‘Utu’, and ‘Muru’ in the Māori Bible and Book of Common Prayer”, Samuel D. Carpenter (Ngāti Pākehā, Ngāi Tiriti) pushes in a different direction to Fuimaono. Carpenter does not ask whether particular Māori terms used in Bible translation were legitimate, but rather how their use effected change in both how the biblical concepts were understood and also in the meaning of the Māori words themselves. To do this, Carpenter looks at the meaning of three related words—tapu, utu, and muru—in their original pre-European context, where the three concepts played a foundational role in Māori society. He goes on to look at how missionary translation used these same words to translate biblical and Christian concepts. Carpenter then explores how these intertextual encounters created an “epistemic middle ground” in which the concepts of tapu, utu, and muru came to be understood differently than they were by either the Pākehā translators or the first Māori recipients. It was through this process of translation and reception, Carpenter argues, that the Bible became indigenized.

The final essay in this Special Issue, “Authenticity and Divine Accommodation in a 19th Century Māori Context”, is by Bradford Haami (Ngāti Awa), who develops a case study of intercultural hermeneutics. Considering the conversion of his tipuna (ancestor), Whangataua, a rangatira (chiefly warrior) with mana (executive authority) and tapu (power), Haami rejects the idea that he was somehow tricked or coerced into accepting the Christian faith. Assuming Whangataua’s agency in the process and drawing on relevance theory, Haami begins with Whangataua having no other way to assess the biblical stories apart from his own language and culture. Haami considers how the narratives from the Bible would have intersected with the narratives in Whangataua’s intellectual and cultural realm, reading the Lukan account of Jesus’ virgin conception and birth alongside the ancestral story of Tamatea, a founding ancestor of the Tākitimu people. Haami shows how different aspects of the Gospel story would have resonated with Whangataua and his contemporaries within their intellectual and cultural world, in a way that the British missionaries could not have anticipated. This resonance of the Bible within Te Ao Māori, Haami proposes, was part of the process of validating the Bible and the Christian message to the early Māori recipients.

The legacy of the complex history of the Bible and Christian faith in Aotearoa New Zealand is on display in these five essays. The different authors have different attitudes to that history, yet all the essays complement each other in different, albeit unintended, ways. Each of the essays contributes to the theme of the “Intercultural Hermeneutics of the Bible in Aotearoa New Zealand” by showing the different ways in which Māori received, and continue to receive, the Bible. A strong theme that comes through in the essays is that the contextualization of the Bible was a process that took place, and continues to do so, within Te Ao Māori. The British missionaries faithfully and sacrificially shared their own thoroughly and unavoidably contextualised understanding of the Bible and Christian faith. The different essays bring out how Māori developed, and continue to do so, their own insights into and understandings of the Bible. These insights often emerge, as the essays have demonstrated, from the fact that aspects of Te Ao Māori are closer to the world of the Bible than Te Ao Pākehā is.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The reader will observe that, for the most part, Māori words are not italicised in this Special Issue. This is to acknowledge the status of Te Reo Māori as the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as one of its official languages. For New Zealanders, Māori is not a foreign language.
- ² For the report <http://nationalunitygovernment.org/pdf/2020/aboriginal-report-London-1837.pdf>, accessed on 14 May 2025.
- ³ Māori language.
- ⁴ Held at Te Kupenga—Catholic Theological College, Auckland, 4–5 December 2023.
- ⁵ <https://biblesociety.org.nz/he-timatanga/>, accessed on 1 May 2025.
- ⁶ Clare Knowles, BSNZ, private communication.
- ⁷ “Ngā Puhi” designates Galbraith’s tribal affiliation within Māori. Ngā, Ngāti and Ngāi are prefixes for tribal groups.

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