

What do I do with Contexts?  
A Brief Reflection on Reading Biblical Texts with  
Israel and Aotearoa New Zealand in Mind.

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**Abstract:** How does one “do” biblical studies contextually? If I begin by asking who am I, where am I situated, and what are the communities that have formed and continue to form who I am, what difference will this make to the way in which I “do” my biblical studies? This paper seeks to explore the issues that an engagement with texts which have their own contexts and interests brings for a Pakeha reader from Aotearoa New Zealand, recognising that this is not an easy or comfortable task, but an enterprise that continually raises questions and stretches boundaries.

“DOING” SEEMS TO BE THE “IN” TITLE at the moment – one is “doing” theology or “doing” biblical studies – so this is a reflective discussion that comes out of attempting to “do” contextual biblical studies. I like the emphasis on “doing” because it puts the stress on the verb, on the action, on the dynamic energy of the engagement. But add the word “contextual” and that adds its own challenge. I am now required, before I read the text itself or open my books, to look carefully and critically at the context out of which I “do” this. I have to remind myself that “we never *just* read, that we always read *from somewhere*”, and that that “somewhere” not only shapes me but shapes my reading and my interpretations.<sup>1</sup> So I need to ask: who am I, where am I situated, and what are the communities that have formed and continue to form who I am, because all of these factors will dictate the interests that I carry with me into my reading, and influence my interpretation. So I need to tell you something about myself and my context(s), but I will be choosing what I tell you; there will be other aspects of myself which influence what I read, and which will be part of my context, that I will not tell you and of which I may not even be aware.

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1. Pamela Thimmes, “What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist? Another Perspective”, in Harold C. Washington and others (eds.) *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 132-40, see p. 139.

For the last fifteen or so years I have been reading texts within the academic world, which has its own requirements, its own boundaries, and its own tools. I also quite consciously and deliberately attempt to work from a woman's perspective, although I am aware that different factors in women's lives mean that as women we all perceive this a little differently. These two factors already set up an interesting and ongoing conversation, as women's questions often put their own sharp edge to the traditional academic tools. Then, thirdly, I read as a Pakeha (non-Maori) woman in Aotearoa New Zealand. On my father's side I am a fourth generation New Zealander. My ancestors left Scotland to accompany a somewhat charismatic religious leader to found a Presbyterian community in Nova Scotia, some of whom travelled on to New Zealand in the 1850s. So my family history remembers not only highland clearances and the landlessness of dispossessed crofters, but the land-buying power of a self-contained community that eventually arrived here. What this means for me, as the descendant of such a settler community, is that I must read with an eye ready to detect connections with the coloniser, for colonial attitudes have a "durability". As the New Zealand writer, Jane Kelsey, expresses it, situations may change, but "colonial leopards do not change their spots; they just stalk their prey in different ways".<sup>2</sup>

It is these "different ways" that connect power relations in Aotearoa New Zealand with the Hebrew Bible, for I want to be on the lookout for stalking leopards in the biblical text that might reinforce a continuing colonising mindset in the reader. Postcolonial theory, defined by Sugirtharajah as a "critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link between ideas and power",<sup>3</sup> has identified some carefully honed questions which I need to ask of both contexts, not only mine but also those of the biblical texts. At the same time I am aware that being the person I am means that I read power dynamics in two ways: as a Pakeha, I read with an eye on the power strategies from above; as a woman I tend to read more from the underside.

Set out so baldly on the page, this reads as a very static description, as if I am saying, This is who I am, full stop, without giving any hint of the lively and ever changing engagement between people and contexts, so that who I am today may not be who I am tomorrow. It is a dynamic and life changing relationship, and it is into this already ongoing con-

2. Jane Kelsey, "From Flagpoles to Pine Trees: Tino Rangatiratanga and Treaty Policy Today", in Paul Spoonley, David Pearson, Cluny Macpherson (eds.), *Nga Patai: Racism and Ethnic Relations in Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1996) 177-201, see p. 78.

3. R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Textual Cleansing: A Move from the Colonial to the Post-colonial Version", *Semeia* 76 (1996) 7-19; see p. 13. The author continues: "It is a discursive resistance against imperialism, imperial ideologies, imperial attitudes and their continued incarnations among such wide-ranging fields as politics, economics and history, and theological and biblical studies".

versation that I bring my study of the Bible – which, again, complicates my world view, for once the pages of this ancient library are opened, a cluster of different voices can be heard vying for attention. Doing contextual biblical studies is a dialogue, a meeting place of jostling voices, where context talks to context and I, as it were, act as facilitator.

Of course, having openly stated my own interests, you may well suspect that anything I write will be subjective, if not biased, and definitely not objective or neutral. In answer to this I would reply that all reading is interest laden, that no reading is ever neutral and objective, and that the only difference is that contextual, and feminist, readings attempt to lay their interests out in full view. What convinces me of the need to do this is the awareness that so often we talk as if the text reveals itself almost without any input from the reader at all. We say “the Bible says” rather than “as I read it the Bible says”. Contextual reading is a critically reflective reading that takes full note of the role of the reader on the interpretation, and then moves on to consider how this relates back to the reader’s community.

So how do I go about the task? After I have paused to remind myself of who I am, I move to the texts, which also have contexts and interests. Some of these are shared with mine, for Israel, too, had a history of land settlement. Yet Israel’s attitude to the “people of the land” (*tangata whenua* in New Zealand Maori) and ethnic difference in general is curiously ambivalent.<sup>4</sup> One might, of course, ask whether it is appropriate to use a modern term like “ethnicity”, but the term ethnic identity. But we can understand ethnic identity as

an identity that sets a group of people apart from other groups with whom they interact or coexist in terms of some distinctive criteria, which can include language, religion, history, or any other aspect of culture. Such identities involve processes of labelling and the formation of implicit and explicit contrasts between cultural traditions.<sup>5</sup>

So understood, ethnic identity describes not only the differentiations that I know from my own contemporary experience but those which appear to have concerned many of the biblical writers and editors. But there is also an ancient term “habitus”, which is much in use again at the present. Habitus refers to all those shared aspects of a culture which

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4. As Jon D. Levenson comments, in the context of the universality of God “there is no one ‘biblical’ position on this or on most other great theological issues” (“The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism”, in Mark G. Brett [ed.], *Ethnicity and the Bible* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996] 143-69; see p. 145).

5. Siân Jones, “Identities in Practice: Towards an Archaeological Perspective on Jewish Identity in Antiquity”, in Siân Jones and Sarah Pearce (eds.), *Jewish Local Patriotism and Self-Identification in the Graeco-Roman Period* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 29-49; see p. 34.

both identify and bond a people together. Such a designation may be equally or indeed more appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

There are texts where Israel clearly has a concern for “resident aliens” (*gerim*), as in Exod 23:9: “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Here Israel recognises its own historical and contextual memory of being “other” among strangers.<sup>7</sup> And certain *zarim*, such as Jethro (Exodus 18), Balaam (Numbers 22-24), Rahab (Joshua 2), Naaman (2 Kings 5), and even the poignant Uriah the Hittite (though he may have been more *ger* than *zar*), have roles in Israel’s narrative as “outsiders”, roles which are presented without apology or excuse.<sup>8</sup> But set these beside those other texts referring to the peoples who occupied the land before Israel and a contradiction is clearly visible. Such is the case with Exod 34:24: “For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders”, where the “I” speaks as the divine voice, and the promise is wholly for the benefit of Israel. The thought is sharper still in Lev 18:24-30: “the land will vomit you out if you commit the abominations which were practised by the inhabitants of the land who were before you”, or Num 33:55: “If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides”.<sup>9</sup> Often in these texts there are specific lists, as in Exod 34:11: “See, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites.”

The concern also has a domestic edge: if the Israelites let their children marry among these people, then “their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods” (Exod 34:16). Here too there are contradictions, for in the war against Midian as described in Numbers 31, Moses says to the

6. Following P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), Jones explains “habitus” as the totality of the durable and often subliminal dispositions towards certain perceptions and practices, such as those relating to the sexual division of labour, morality, tastes and so on (“Identities in Practice”, 42). He also notes (p. 37): “Over the last three decades a considerable body of research has been carried out in the human sciences which reveals that ethnic groups are not merely culture-bearing entities. That is, group identity is not a passive and straightforward reflection of a distinct culture and language. Instead, ethnicity involves the subjective construction of identity on the basis of real or assumed shared culture and/or common descent, and groups have been defined by anthropologists and sociologists on the basis of self-definition and definition by others.”

7. To what extent this was historical “fact” remains contested. But it does have a firm place in the self-identifying “memory” of the written traditions.

8. Whereas the term *ger* refers to non-Israelites living among Israelites (or of Israel itself living among strangers) but not fully accepted as one of them, a *zar*, *ben nekar*, or *nokri* refers to someone who is regarded as “foreigner” or “outsider”, a “non-belonger”. See Christopher T. Begg’s useful summary under “Foreigner” in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2.829-830; also, Rolf Rendtorff, “The *Ger* in the Priestly Laws of the Pentateuch”, in Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 77-87.

9. See also Numbers 21-25 and 31; 33:50-56; Deut 7:1-11; 9:1-5; 18:9-14; 11:23; 20:16-18; Lev 20:22-24; Ps 78: 54-55; 80:8.

people concerning the captured Midian women that they should keep alive for themselves all the young women who have not known a man by sleeping with him. And at times it seems as if the Bible wants to shut a blind eye to the matter altogether and allow romance a free hand. Joseph may marry Asenath (Gen 41:45) and Moses himself chooses a Midianite, Zipporah, romantically met by a well (Exod 2:21). Do I attempt to resolve these discrepancies? Do I set them out on a time scale, as one writer suggests?<sup>10</sup> But it is not as simple or as tidy as that. Texts as late as Nehemiah (9:8) and the book of Judith have lists of nations driven out by Israel as part of the divine plan very similar to those recorded earlier, and there is certainly a more intense concern over intermarriage in the later texts of Ezra and Nehemiah. As Daniel Smith-Christopher comments, such texts “suggest that although individual foreign residents may be tolerable, you wouldn’t want your son to marry one”.<sup>11</sup> Just as throughout the Hebrew Bible the Canaanites get the greater mention in this polemic, so too the late tale of Susanna makes free use of the insult, “You son of Canaanites!” (Sus 1:56).<sup>12</sup> As Smith-Christopher observes, “[i]t appears that in most periods of Israelite history...exclusionary attitudes co-existed with idealistic laws”.<sup>13</sup>

Within this clash of voices, there are resonances with my own context in a country still struggling with bicultural respect. So I want to ask, What is going on here? What is the agenda driving these concerns regarding Israel’s “Others”? If I think of such texts as the writings of a people working out their own identity, asking themselves what made them a people Israel, I can imagine myself listening in on some ancient conversations, continuing over centuries, as the politics of the times threw Israel’s self-understanding into question again and again. But self-identity for Israel always had a God-factor, so the question was always: who are we and who is our God and what does that mean for us?

Unfortunately, then as now, the matter of who one is tends to bring with it the flip side of who one is not. “The others” become a necessary factor because they are the ones over against whom we identify ourselves, and so identifying “others” becomes a crucial task. For the

10. See Christiana van Houten: “The laws dealing with the alien developed and became more inclusive. What began as an appeal for justice for the alien in the Covenant Code (Exod 23:9), comes to be understood as a legal principle in the Priestly laws: ‘There shall be one law for the alien and native-born.’ This then opened the door for the inclusion of the alien into all the rights and privileges of Israelite society.... the inclusive tendency is the working out, in the legal tradition, of God’s purpose to include and save all.” (*The Alien in Israelite Law: A Study of the Changing Legal Status of Strangers in Ancient Israel* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991] 175).

11. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the ‘Foreigner’ in Post-Exilic Biblical Theology”, in Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 117-142; see p. 120.

12. See also *Jubilees* 25:1-9.

13. Smith-Christopher, “Between Ezra and Isaiah”, 119.

community's writers it becomes "a political and linguistic project, a matter of rhetoric and judgment".<sup>14</sup> And for Israel, because Israel and Canaan, including Phoenicia, shared an earlier history, this appears to have become a project whereby Israel was specifically Israel because it was not Canaan and must not be Canaan. As has frequently been observed, the most problematic social transactions occur precisely at the boundary, between "us" and those who are most "like us".<sup>15</sup> This can be seen, as Mark Brett notes, in the laws of warfare in Deut 20:10-18, which reserve the most violent treatment for the cities which are "near" rather than those which are "far".

Such anti-Canaanite polemic might simply be noted as an antiquarian interest were it not for the fact that, as a political and linguistic project, it had notable staying power. It gave apparent warrant over centuries for the Bible to "be deployed against whatever 'Canaanites' people wanted to loathe, conquer, or exile".<sup>16</sup> Consequently, these are texts which pose a quite particular challenge to those interpreters whose own contexts have within them a potential for violence, either verbal, institutional or physical.

Realising this means that I have to ask myself how I am to read such polemic. It is easier to tease this out with some specific texts in mind. I have recently been reading some of the Elijah and Elisha stories, and trying to imagine the task facing that ancient Israelite scribe who was responsible for gathering together the traditional material which was to be set down on the scroll of the book of Kings. I have been imagining him sitting there, with tale after tale telling of the miraculous power of the God of Israel as revealed through these "men of God", the prophets.<sup>17</sup> But he is aware that the final arrangement is to be part of a much

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14. J. Z. Smith, "What A Difference a Difference Makes", in J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs (eds.), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 46, (quoted in Mark G. Brett, "Interpreting Ethnicity: Method, Hermeneutics, Ethics", in Brett [ed.], *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 10). See also L. Daniel Hawk, "The Problem with Pagans", in Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn (eds.) *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 153-63, who comments (pp. 161-62) in respect to the story of Achan in Joshua 7: "Outsiders may become insiders, but transit in the opposite direction will not be tolerated: *Israelites* may not cross the boundaries that differentiate Israel from Canaan. Canaanites may find a space among the people of YHWH, but the people of YHWH must not take to themselves anything of Canaan."

15. Brett, "Interpreting Ethnicity", 6, 10. See such works as Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient History: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988) and *The Canaanites and their Land: The Tradition of the Canaanites* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). Angel Sáenz-Badillos sets the Phoenician language within the Canaanite group, and notes its closeness to Hebrew (*A History of the Hebrew Language* [ET; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993] 38-39).

16. Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) p. x.

17. I take this view in line with "a persistent opinion...that this block of material consists of a number of originally separate stories and fragments of tradition" (Burke O. Long, *1 Kings, with an Introduction to Historical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) 175.

more complex work which is to carry some quite particular messages to its immediate audience. He, or the team of which he is a part, is to convince the people that there is one God to be worshipped in Israel, and that that God is not the god of the neighbouring peoples. For, as I read it, this is the undergirding theme of the Jezebel and Ahab/Elijah and Elisha clashes. Who are the people of Israel going to worship, Yahweh or Baal? That is where the ties of a shared history falter. Difference has become important, and practices, such as the worship and devotion to gods like Baal and Asherah, which appear to have been an accepted feature of Israelite religious practice at least among a section of Israel, are made the boundary markers, the point at which people are labelled either "Us" or "Other". The question centres around which god has the power over life and death, and over the forces of creation. So the scribe has become a player in what is both a religious and an ethnic struggle. For if Canaanites and Phoenicians were not markedly different from Israelites, then one of the first tasks was to make sure that the people were able to differentiate the one from the other. As Regina Schwartz suggests, there are always two interrelated tasks here: "how to identify her (that is, the foreigner) and what to do with her".<sup>18</sup>

Note the "her". I have a particular interest in "her" factors, and so I briefly want to consider this "her" factor. But how do I do this? Do I take up the matter of identification and attempt to read the "Othered" against their own background? That is not easy for biblical readers, for the Hebrew Bible looks at its world from the perspective of Israel. My feminist and academic contexts urge me to read between the lines, to employ a hermeneutics of suspicion. But what can I read of Jezebel as Phoenician, or of Rahab as Canaanite? For just as settler history, in general, "effaces and distorts the complex histories and societies of indigenous peoples which existed prior to and during prolonged periods of contact with Europeans"<sup>19</sup> in order to focus on the arrival and settlement accounts of its own people, so details of ancient Phoenician and Canaanite culture within the Bible are either missing or worked over with an Israel-favouring pen.

The "what to do with her" takes me back to the matter of the linguistic and rhetorical projects. Certainly one rhetorical strategy was to create a stock figure, a female embodiment of evil "Otherness", that could be used again and again, almost as a leitmotif. The sages used this wily strategy well, bringing in the motif of the death-bringing "outsider" woman to stalk the first chapters of Proverbs. But it is fleshed out further in other texts. So Jezebel appears not only as the

18. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 79.

19. Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Introduction: Beyond Dichotomies – Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class in Settler Societies", in Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class* (London: Sage Publications, 1995) 1-38; see p. 4.

“bad” wife of one of the kings of Israel, by which is meant Baal and Asherah worshipping Phoenician, but she is visibly a prime example of that stock figure of “foreign” evilness, whose seductive powers are inevitably deathly, and painted so well that she has never been forgotten. Even in our own times one of the World War II missiles was called “Jezebel”, a name thought appropriate for “part of an arsenal developed to defeat hated enemies”.<sup>20</sup>

But it is not only the name, Jezebel, but the strategy itself which brings this discussion into the present. Augie Fleras and Paul Spoonley in a recent book draw attention to the way in which such a strategy of stereotyping has been used in New Zealand film. They comment that

to the extent that individual and collective identities are shaped by being recognised and misrecognised by others, damage can be inflicted through demeaning or contemptible images.<sup>21</sup>

Repeat such images often enough and they will be accepted as “truthful”, rather than questioned as polemical tools. So, in an address to the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1903, he then Bishop of Salisbury could state

Nothing, I think, that has been discovered makes us feel any regret at the suppression of Canaanite civilisation by Israelite civilisation.... the Bible has not misrepresented at all the abomination of the Canaanite culture which was superseded by the Israelite culture.<sup>22</sup>

The results of reading according to the grain of the text can be as disturbing as reading against it.

Depicted as the killer of God’s prophets, the murderer of the faithful Israelite Naboth, Jezebel was a convenient ploy for the Deuteronomists’ project.<sup>23</sup> She is literally thrown to the dogs and no one weeps, for her death is fully justified; there is to be no place for her in the land even in death. So what are Phoenicians and Canaanites meant to do? The Deuteronomists’ answer is “be a Rahab”. For Rahab is also a foreign woman, a Canaanite, and where Jezebel is accused of harlotry, Rahab is openly a prostitute. Yet she is rescued from the capture and destruction of Jericho not only because she saves the Israelite spies, but because she acknowledges the power of Israel’s God. Her reward: a place among Israel. The contrast is sharp: Jezebel holds to her Phoenician habitus and

20. Noted by Janet Howe Gaines, *Music in the Old Bones: Jezebel Through the Ages* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999) p. xv.

21. Augie Fleras and Paul Spoonley, *Recalling Aotearoa: Indigenous Politics and Ethnic Relations in New Zealand* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1999) 65.

22. Quoted by Edward W. Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims”, in David Theo Goldberg (ed.), *Anatomy of Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 210-246; see p. 221.

23. Form-critical studies reveal the discrepancies in the final text on this issue. See Saul Olyan, “Hasalom: Some Literary Considerations of 2 Kings 9”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984) 652-68.

is virtually demonised, while Rahab seemingly takes hers off and is saved. The word assimilation comes sharply to mind.

My own interests are now finely tuned. I know about assimilation, I know about the praise given to “other” groupings when they achieve well in the ways of the dominant culture. In Aotearoa New Zealand that means achieving well in the European education system, speaking fluent English, and living according to norms that are Pakeha. Pierre Bourdieu has a term “symbolic violence”, meaning that

gentle, invisible form of violence, which is never recognised as such, and is not so much undergone as chosen.... the “cultural capital” which those wanting to advance in the material terms of the dominant culture need to acquire.<sup>24</sup>

As he and Terry Eagleton comment, resistance to this form of institutional colonialism is “more difficult, since it is everywhere and nowhere, and to escape from that is very difficult”.<sup>25</sup> The attitudes to those who hold to their own ways, to their own habitus or ethnic identity, even when this means poorer living conditions without the benefits that dominant cultures grant to their own, are provocatively articulated by the journalist Rosemary McLeod:

if they won't get on with living our way of life, whose fault's that? It's their own fault that they fail in the education system, that they're dying from Third World diseases, that they fill our prisons and live in a cycle of welfare dependency – so we can uphold the democratic cause with a clear conscience.<sup>26</sup>

This is the contemporary “Us” and “Them” discourse, which I, one of the dominant like Israel in Canaan, recognise and hear .

Yet I am mindful of a further complicating factor. Depending on the “somewhere” of the reading, texts can look quite different. Another “foreign” woman comes to mind: Ruth the Moabite. Coming to her by way of Rahab and Jezebel, I can detect a similar strategy, for Ruth clearly gains the plaudits for taking off her Moabite habitus and donning the Israelite one of Naomi, the woman of Bethlehem. Read this way, the story of Ruth easily becomes one of assimilation. But what has happened to the treasured story of Ruth, the model of faith? Is there to be one and only one accepted reading? Or am I to act as a facilitator and accommodate both?

There are readings of the story of Exodus which raise similar questions. Exodus as the “salvation” story of stories has had a long and

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24. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 192.

25. Pierre Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton, “Doxa and the Common Life”, in Slavoj Zizek (ed.), *Mapping Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1994) 265-77; see p. 270.

26. Rosemary McLeod, “We're all right, mate”, *Sunday Star Times*, June 4 (2000), p. A9.

established place in faith communities over the centuries, and is a linchpin in many contemporary liberation theologies. Read from the "somewhere" of Aotearoa New Zealand, it has been well documented how Maori applied the Exodus event to themselves; for example, in 1845 the warrior leader Heke is recorded as "addressing the people, comparing themselves to the persecuted children of Israel".<sup>27</sup> During the 1860s the belief grew that the Maori race was descended from the Israelites, which made the identification with their situation all the stronger. The Pai Marire called themselves *Tiu* (Jews), others used the term *Morehu* (Survivors or Remnant).<sup>28</sup> The land was the New Canaan, and therefore in the eyes of the Pai Marire Movement there would be a restoration of Maori control. That was reading from a Maori perspective.

Robert Warrior, an indigenous scholar from North America, has been much quoted for raising the question of how this story reads from the other side, that is, from the viewpoint of the displaced Canaanites.<sup>29</sup> And what happens when those who read realise they are not so much the suffering Israelites in Egypt but the Israelites who overrode the Canaanites? A postcolonial reading sees immediate connections between the Israelite account and the history of Pakeha in this land, for

colonialism involves a struggle for scarce resources, namely land, and the Crown's primary reason for establishing its sovereignty and signing the Treaty was to ensure exclusive control over the land trade.<sup>30</sup>

The question that quite naturally follows and which all settler peoples have to answer is this: by what authority and on what grounds can settlers justify their moves to gain and preserve authority over land and the people of the land?<sup>31</sup> The culture's master narratives offer a convenient and powerful way of addressing this. Both Israel and Aotearoa New Zealand have these carefully shaped.

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27. R. Burrows, "Journal, 27 April 1845", from *Extracts from a Diary kept by the Rev. R. Burrows During Heke's War in the North, in 1845* (Auckland 1886), 32, quoted by Bronwyn Elsmore, *Mana from Heaven: A Century of Maori Prophets in New Zealand* (Tauranga: Moana Press, 1989) 167.

28. Elsmore, *Mana from Heaven*, 177.

29. R. A. Warrior, "Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians", *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (1989) 261-65.

30. Fleras and Spoonley, *Recalling Aotearoa*, 13. As Wendy Larner and Paul Spoonley note, "Differences in attitude towards land ownership were to leave a legacy of bitterness and hurt. Individual and private ownership of land, and its exchange as a commodity were not Maori concepts." ("Post-Colonial Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand", in Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Unsettling Settler Societies*, 39-64; see pp. 42-3).

31. As Fleras and Spoonley note, "Traditionally, three explanations were used to justify the settlement and appropriation of indigenous lands: (a) the doctrine of *terra nullius* (empty or under-utilised lands)... (b) conquests... and (c) voluntary consent through treaty or legislation" (*Recalling Aotearoa*, 14).

But is a contextual biblical study only about hunting down the Israelite strategies for legitimating and continuing their possession of land and their authority over it? Are we only to watch the Jezebels and Rahabs playing the roles assigned by their rhetorical movers? As Mark Brett points out, we are now living in a world where “the homogenising presumptions of Western liberalism have been challenged by a ‘politics of difference’ which emphasises the uniqueness of particular social identities, like ethnicity and aboriginality”.<sup>32</sup> So is there a place for a reading that recognises and celebrates difference? Paul Ricoeur talks of every society possessing, or being part of, “a socio-political *imaginaire*”, which “can function as a rupture or a reaffirmation”. In his use of such terms Ricoeur aligns the reaffirming task with the maintenance of the master narratives, and the rupture as “a symbolic opening towards the future”.<sup>33</sup> These two aspects are, of course, closely related. Again Fleras and Spoonley show what this means in contemporary terms:

The resistance to colonialism and its dominant structures and ideologies is driven by the desire to restore the integrity of colonised peoples, and to create space for their institutions, practices, and values. But in doing this, many of the practices, institutions, and values of other groups – notably majority or dominant groups, who cohabit the same society – are also challenged and forced to undergo close examination in terms of the role they might have played in a colonial past.<sup>34</sup>

With these distinctions and concerns in mind, I move back to the biblical texts, and recognise moves from reaffirmation to rupture recorded in its pages. I listen to Jesus and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30) and hear the cultural barriers splintering as they talk. She is demanding that the discourse of the master narrative be opened up to include “Others” in its centre, and he, after notable hesitation and sharp rebuttal, eventually agrees.<sup>35</sup> I hear Paul’s insistence on the entry of Gentiles into the early Christian communities, against the resistance of his opponents. I wonder too whether Ruth’s act on the threshing floor where she comes so close to being seen as the sexual foreign stereotype can be read as another circle stretcher, allowing a Moabite to become an ancestor of David.

But these are not isolated islands of text. For Israel the rupture was always there, enshrined in the priestly manual of Leviticus: “The alien

32. Brett, “Interpreting Ethnicity”, 4.

33. Paul Ricoeur, “The Creativity of Language”, in Mario J. Valdes (ed.), *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 475.

34. Fleras and Spoonley, *Recalling Aotearoa*, 94.

35. I do, however, have some lingering doubts about the presentation of this encounter, particularly in Matthew’s version. I raise these in “Framing Jezebel and Others” in the electronic journal *SeaChanges* 1 at [www.wsrt.com.au/seachanges/](http://www.wsrt.com.au/seachanges/).

(*ger*) who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens (*gerim*) in the land of Egypt"; and this is underlined with the divine formula: "I am Yahweh, your God" (Lev 19:34). Again, in its vision of the divinely-ordered future the Isaiah scroll sings of bringing the *ben nekar* to God's holy mountain (Isa 53:6-7).<sup>36</sup>

The Bible as an edited library thus knows both discourses – the reaffirming and the rupturing – and offers them both as dialogue partners. But that simply grounds the question: what does all this mean in the most practical terms? How do I make connections with my context, showing respect for difference?

Here, I find I have to monitor myself very carefully. It is tempting to give a work a "New Zealand" flavour by drawing upon familiar symbols of Maori culture and I realise that I have done that on occasion. But Maori culture is not my context, and I need to respect that as I make my own connections with the texts. Trinh Minh-ha describes this use of others' culture as like "American tourists looking for a change of scenery",<sup>37</sup> or a consumer shopping for some exotic colouring, saying I will have a piece of this and piece of that, with little understanding or respect for the culture as whole.

The postcolonial Biblical scholar R. S. Sugirtharajah, writing from his Indian context, raises another aspect, suggesting that "in a postcolonial, post-missionary era" there should be a move to "a wider intertextuality which will link biblical texts with Asian scriptural texts". When I read this, I realised that just as I am Pakeha in this land, so the Bible itself is a "resident alien". To privilege this collection of writings as sacred scriptures moves, or has in effect moved, the sacred traditions of the *tangata whenua* to the margins. As in India, written text has been pitted against oral tradition. Sugirtharajah's comments reflect a similar history when he writes that "[b]y privileging written texts as the valued medium for sacred communication, missionary translations devalued the orality and rhetoric of hearing".<sup>38</sup>

But who is to make the wider intertextual moves that Sugirtharajah is suggesting? He writes as an Indian. But it is not for New Zealand Pakeha such as myself to link biblical traditions with those of the *tangata whenua*. Our task can only be to open up the space so that this might be possible.

36. See also Isa 66:18-21. However, as Jon D. Levenson notes, "the degree of integration of a foreigner into ancient Israel remains shrouded in obscurity": "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism", in Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible*, 143-69; see p. 162.

37. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue'", *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 88, quoted by Lynne Alice, "Unlearning Our Privilege as Our Loss: Postcolonial Writing and Textual Production", *Women's Studies Journal* 9 (1993) 26-46; see p. 37.

38. R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Textual Cleansing: A Move from the Colonial to the Post-colonial Version", *Semeia* 76 (1996) 7-19; see p. 12.

Contextual reading is a critically reflective enterprise, demanding an alertness to the interests of the reader and the text. It is an enterprise that raises questions and stretches boundaries. The fact that it is neither an easy nor a comfortable task might lead to the question why one should bother. I keep hearing in my mind the words of Patrocinio P. Schweikart, “[w]e cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realised as *praxis*. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers”.<sup>39</sup> All the more so, surely, when the literature in question is Scripture (with a capital S).

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39. Patrocinio P. Schweikart, “Towards a Feminist Theory of Reading”, in Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweikart (eds.), *Gender and Reading* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1986) 39, quoted by Pamela Thimmes, “What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist?”, 137.