Voices of the *Whenua*

Engaging 1 Kings 21 through Māori Lenses*

Why should ostensibly sovereign nations, residing in territory solemnly guaranteed to them by treaties, decide that they [indigenous peoples] are willing, after all, to surrender their ancestral homelands?[1]

Ko Papatūānuku to tatou whaea
Ko ia te matua atawhai
He oranga mo tatou
I roto ite moengaroa
Ka hoki tatou ki he kopu o te whenua[2]

This work rereads 1 Kings 21 within the context of Aotearoa (New Zealand) using a framework for interpretation that is situated in Māori epistemologies. This type of reading involves a shift from the conventional modes of biblical interpretation to initiate changes at the methodological level. It is not enough for contextual readers to merely recognise one's context and drawing correspondences with texts. Reading lenses and positions have to change in order for one's interpretation to be relevant to those on the ground.

Context Matters

Judith McKinlay, in her latest work*Troubling Women and Land*(Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014) attempts to read selected texts from the Hebrew Bible from the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.[3] The volume displays McKinlay's scholarships as much as it draws my attention to a significant turn in mainstream biblical interpretation in Aotearoa. Some of the worth-noting features of the volume are as follows:

- First, McKinlay takes into account not only the histories of her colonial heritage, but also their negative impacts on indigenous people of Aotearoa.
- Second, she in this volume is preoccupied neither with texts nor with her feminist-postcolonial agenda, but seeks also to listen to lost voices of people who have become victims of empire.
- Third, she stays true to her location and culture, yet has the ability to move beyond and around, and thus enables her to not only interrogate texts, but also herself and her own settler history.

While this is a commendable effort from McKinlay, and it is a good platform for scholarly dialogue around the issues of gender and land in a region where there is more water than dry space, there is more she could have done. One option is to incorporate some perspectives from indigenous Māori. The other is to *adopt* a Māori lens for reading. The latter is what this work sets out to do.[4]

Like McKinlay's work, Aotearoa is my context of reading. Unlike McKinlay, I will read the biblical story using a framework situated within the ideology and context of

Māori[5] epistemologies. *I am neither a Māori nor am I speaking for, or on behalf of, Māori.* But I have decided to adopt a Māori reading lens for several reasons:

- First, as a native of Tonga, a Polynesian island in Oceania, who resides in Aotearoa, I closely identify myself with the struggle of Māori to maintain their *tino rangatiratanga* ("paramount power and authority"[6]), especially their rights over their ancestral land. This is an experience shared by most, if not all, islanders in Oceania as they try to come to terms with colonial settlers' aggressive land grabbing over the years.[7]

- Second, there is an urgent need to expose the injustices and evils behind the ongoing aggressive (neo)colonial and neoliberal policies and practices that spawned [illegible]

> [g]ives*tangata* a sense of identity and belonging.Created realities such as *rangi*(the sky and the heavens), *whetū*(the stars), *rā*(the sun), *marama*(moon), *hau*(the winds), and the like are here understood as aspects of the creation that have an influence upon the *whenua*.[12]

Third, *whenua* is a living entity, and she is female. She is the earth mother, and her name is Papatūānuku.[13] The Māori metanarrative tells that Papatūānuku interacted with the sky father, Ranginui, and brought forth offspring who begot more offspring. Here, *whenua* is considered to be the womb or placenta (also called *whenua*)that gave birth to Māori and their descendants.[14] The connection between people and land therefore is likened to a mother-child relationship in which one does not own the other; rather they respect and care for each other. Here lies the significance of the word *tangata whenua*as a reference toMāori only as the indigenous people of the land.[15] This bond is strong and is therefore culturally inappropriate to break or violate.

The idea of selling land was unknown in Māori culture until the arrival of colonial settlers with their alien and aggressive attitude to the land with no regard for Māori worldview and sovereignty. Tui Cadigan writes,

> Māoritraditionally donotsellthelandbecausesheisarelativeandoftheprimarylineoftheirgenealogy.For*Pākeha*landwasandisacommodityforuseanddisposal**accordingtoone'sdesire.**From a*Pākeha*perspectiveapersonwithoutlandisstillfullyapersonandalthoughlandownership canarticulatewealth,apersonwithoutland**canstillrisetoimportanceinsociety.However,aMāoriwithout*whenua*is**nothing,ano-body.[16]

Fourth, *whenua* not only has a mutual link with its inhabitants, but also creates a connection from one generation to the next, and ties the whole of creation together and to *Atua* (god/creator). This link is what Māori refer to as *whakapapa*.[17]*Whakapapa* signifies the interconnectedness of everything in creation, and everyone to the past, to each other, to their surroundings, and to the divine. To disturb the *whenua*is at the same time a disruption of the relationship amongst these parties.

Fifth, *whenua* is a source of *mana*. The word *mana* is a common Polynesian term but in Māori culture it refers to spiritual power or prestige.[18]*Mana* is understood to be an essential part of existence and is derived from three primary sources: *Atua*(god/creator), *whenua* (land) and *tangata*(people). With regard to *whenua*, Māori speak in short about *mana whenua* but the longer version goes like this: "*te mana o te tangata ki runga i te whenua* (the *mana* of people in matters pertaining to the land)."[19]*Whenua* empowers *tangata*. However, this spiritual empowerment and prestige is tied specifically to one's particular place in the *whenua*, which is known amongst Māori as *tūrangawaewae*. That is the sixth aspect of this framework.

Sixth, *whenua*gives *tangata* a*tūrangawaewae*, which means 'a foot-hold, standing place or home-land.'[20]*Tūrangawaewae* is one's place to stand; it is where one can speak with no fear or restriction. One's standing place is where one gets his *mana* and finds spiritual strength. A *tūrangawaewae* gives a person a sense of rootedness and stability. To lose that place, for a Māori, is to become home-less, and without connection to the *whenua*.

These six points are the basic elements for a *whenua* hermeneutic, and they serve in this work as lenses for engaging 1 Kings 21.

Revisiting Naboth's Vineyard: A *Whenua* Reading

At this point, I will revisit Naboth's vineyard with particular focus on land/*whenua* as my hermeneutical key. I will also look at events that happened there, how land is perceived by different parties in the story, and the consequences of clash in perceptions when power is involved.

The sequence of events have been discussed above. The key question now is: What contribution, if any, can a Māori reading bring? Through the lens of *whenua*, here are some important insights:

First, Ahab's request to Naboth ignores the importance of ancestral land. It is not just a piece of real estate. The land is Naboth's main link to his *tupuna* (ancestors) and to God. To let go of it is to cut himself loose from the past and from God; it breaks the continuity of his *whakapapa*. It is not just about the land; it is also about the story it carries and represents. Ahab in the story resembles the colonial attitude to land which led to colonial power's land grabbing practices in Aotearoa. As a result, many Māori tribes have either lost their link to the past or struggled to maintain their identity. The scarcity of land is a fact of life, and at some point there is a need for compromise. But what colonizers and their modern counterparts ignore is the fact that to Māori, the *whenua* is not just scarce, it is also sacred. To violently negotiate one's access to *whenua* as colonial settlers did to Māori and Ahab did to Naboth is not acceptable by any means.

Second, Ahab's purchase request shows a lack of understanding and respect for the 'womb' that begets them as Israelites. From a Māori perspective, Ahab was persuading Naboth to sell the 'mother' that nurtured and nourished him and his ancestors. When Naboth refused, Ahab and those around him snatched from Naboth his main source of life and sustenance: his ancestral *whenua*, his 'mother.' This is a form of rape, and it has grievous consequences. Even if Ahab took Naboth's land without killing him, Naboth would still be 'dead' so to speak. That is the reality for some Māori, and for those whose land had been taken from them forcefully by colonizers and irresponsible neo-liberal puppets.

Third, Naboth resembles the status of the *tangata whenua.* It was his land, and he was the *kaitiaki* (guardian), and they have a reciprocal connection. Naboth never claimed ownership of that land. He saw himself as the guardian of the ancestral land and he belongs to it. An important aspect of being a *kaitiaki*in Māori culture is that you are not acting as a steward looking after someone else's property. One is a *kaitiaki* because one belongs to what one is guarding. Ahab did not acknowledge that responsibility, so too did the colonial settlers who showed no respect for the indigenous people of Aotearoa. A common colonial and imperial nonsense that annoys me from time to time is the claim, 'We are a nation of immigrants, so we should have equal access to resources.' This is often uttered by those who do not know what it means to have their own land, and who are only interested in land for financial gains. This implicitly implies that there should be no special regard for those who are indigenous to, and have special bond with, the land. Such a claim, as mentioned, is nonsensical and should be resisted.

Fourth, Naboth's land was his source of *mana*; it gave him spiritual sustenance, and a prestigious position. When taken from him, he lost his *mana whenua*, his position and also his life. Colonial land acquisition in Aotearoa has had a similar impact on Māori. What colonizers did not realize that taking land that belongs to Māori did more damage than just loss of one's property. It took away from them the very basis upon which their lives depended, it displaced them, and they eventually became homeless and disoriented in their own *whenua*. They became exiles at their own home. That is what happened to Naboth, and that is what continues to happen in Aotearoa, and Māori in most cases are the victims.

Fifth, Naboth did not just lose his ancestral land. He also lost his *tūrangawaewae*, his foot-hold or his standing place. With that went his sense of belonging, his link to the past and his ancestors, to the world around him, to others, and to the divine. Where his vineyard was is the only place on which he could stand. And rightly so, that is where he stood his ground and had the courage to reject Ahab's proposal. He spoke as a person rooted in his own place. Yet that's the very place that he was murdered for. A lot of Māori in Aotearoa have lost their places, and that is due mainly to imposition of alien political measures and economic policies that serve no one else but the market and its greedy agents. Neoliberalism demands that land needs to be traded for profits. When profits are sought at the expense of Māori rights, and are not fairly distributed, injustice prevails.

Sixth, the *whenua* laments when one of her children passes. In Naboth's case, one needs to listen to the text carefully in order to hear the *voices of the whenua*, and how she mourns the death of her *kaitiaki*, her guardian. It is the voice of a mother who lost the only child who cared for her. Her voice awakened the *Atua* (god) to what had happened, and led to the prophet's visit to Naboth's vineyard to sort things out with Ahab, saying, *"...you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD"* (v.20NRSV). To violate the sanctity of life and sacredness of the *whenua* is evil. Similar evil deeds happened during the height of colonization in Aotearoa, which resulted in death of Māori and loss of land. The *whenua* will continue to mourn until justice for the *tangata whenua* is restored.

Why *whenua*?

Reading through Māori lenses highlights at least two significant points. First, unless there is an attempt on the part of biblical scholars in Aotearoa to shift from Eurocentric ways of interpretation, the interpretive task will continue to yield meanings that are irrelevant to people on the ground. Jione Havea is probably correct when saying that the Bible is "going stale" in Oceania, because the methods of interpretation have gone stale already.[21] Māori of Aotearoa deserve more than the "shit" of the West.[22] They need fresh reading, and that has to start from employing fresh approaches to the task of interpretation.

Second, adopting a framework that is different from the traditional Western modes will open up new avenues for interpretation that not only brings excitement back to the task, but a repositioning of one's "reading posture" (to use Sugirtharajah's terminology) that is grounded in real life and in the community of real people, like Māori, who value the sacredness of the *whenua*, and not as a commodity to serve the interest of a market that is

controlled by a manipulative minority. To that minority, I say, *"respect the whenua, stupid!"*

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Notes

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[1] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4 (2006), 391.

[2] Mere Roberts et al. "Kaitiakitanga: Maori Perspectives on Conservation," *Pacific Conservation Biology*, Vol 2 (1995): 10.

[3]Judith McKinlay, *Troubling Women and Land: Reading Biblical Texts in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014). From here on I will use the name Aotearoa unless otherwise indicated.

[4]This attempt at constructing a framework is done with *epistemic humility* and with a spirit of *indigenous solidarity* more than anything else. There is no intention whatsoever to argue that this is the model for Māori. Nor am I claiming that I have the right to (mis)represent Māori and their rich cultural capital.

[5] The term Māori refers to the indigenous people of Aotearoa (or New Zealand).

[6]As defined by MargaretMutu in "Constitutional Intentions – The Treaty of Waitangi Texts." In Mulholland, M. and V. Tawhai (eds.) *Weeping Waters* (Wellington: Huia Publishers), 13.

[7]Miles Fairburn, "'Wakefield, Edward Gibbon,' from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand" http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1w4/wakefield-edward-gibbon (accessed 19 March 2015). I must also acknowledge that Tahitians of Maohi Nui, Kanaks of New Caledonia, natives of the Marshall Islands and most part of Micronesia are still under colonial rule and control. Some of those natives had to live with the consequences of nuclear tests by colonial regimes like the United States and France.

[8]This is "a written agreement made in 1840 between the British Crown (the monarch) and more than 500 Māori chiefs. After that, New Zealand became a colony of Britain and Māori became British subjects. However, Māori and Europeans had different understandings and expectations of the treaty." Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the document Maori understood and signed. The Treaty of Waitangi is the document government upholds, but its meaning is at odds with the Maori version of Te Tiriti. See Orange Claudia, "Treaty of Waitangi" http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/treaty-of-waitangi (accessed 19 March 2015). I am indebted to Arapera Ngaha for the distinction between the Māori version and the English version of Te Tiriti.

[9]See Nasili Vaka'uta, "Myth of (Im)Purity and Peoples of the (Is)Lands: A Tongan Reading of Ezra 9-10," *The Pacific Journal of Theology* II, no. 42 (2009): 13-25.

[10] See Ilaitia S. Tuwere, *Vanua: Towards a Fijian Theology of Place* (Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, 2002).

[11]Henare Arekatera Tate, "Towards Some Foundations of a Systematic Māori Theology" (PhD Thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, 2010), 38.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Tui Cadigan, "*Tangata Whenua,* People of the Land," *Concilium* 5, no. 10: 60.

[14]*Whenua* also refers to the placenta which is often returned to the earth in a ceremonial practice that recognizes the connection between humanity and Atua (Papatūānuku) and acknowledges the obligations of the parents to retain their whakapapa by returning sporadically throughout the child's life to the land and the *hapū* (tribal group) where the placenta is buried. Maintaining both a physical and spiritual connection to the land and the people of the land.

[15]Tate, 2. Pākeha (non-Māori people of European descent) and everyone else is referred to as Tangata Tiriti (people of the Treaty). Treaty here points to the Treaty of Waitangi.

[16]Cadigan, "*Tangata Whenua*," 61.

[17]Ibid., 60.

[18]Ibid., 61. See more discussion on the link between *whenua* and *mana* in *Ngāpuhi Speaks: Hewakaputanga o te rangatiratanga o NiuTīreni and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.* Independent Report, Whangarei: Te Kawariki& Network Waitangi, 2012, pp.171-177.

[19]Tate, 105.

[20]Ibid., 289.

[21]Jione Havea, "Engaging Scriptures from Oceania," in *Bible Borders Belonging: Engaging Readings from Oceania*, ed. Jione Havea, Elaine Mary Wainwright, and David Neville(Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 3-20.

[22]Ibid., 7.