

“COURTESY OF LANDOWNERS”:  
TOWARD A POST-CHRISTENDOM HERMENEUTICS OF  
RESPECTFUL LISTENING<sup>1</sup>

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*Prologue*

The sign halted me. I was four days into a spiritual retreat. The retreat aimed to work with the specific features of land and place to engage with God. The retreat was located on Rakiura,<sup>2</sup> the Māori name for Stewart Island, the third-largest island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Rakiura is translated in Maori as “The Land of Glowing Skies” and likely refers to the night-time displays of Aurora Australis, the Southern Lights. To engage the specific features of this unique island, I set out to walk some of the national park in Rakiura (Stewart Island).

Two hours into the walk, the sign confronted me. “Rakiura Māori Land.” Moreover, in smaller letters, “Access courtesy of landowners.” The national park had opened in 2002 and, in order for access, local Māori landowners had granted permission.<sup>3</sup> The sign provided by the Government of Aotearoa New Zealand invit-

1. My thanks to Presbyterian Youth Ministry (PYM) for the invitation to offer a keynote at the Connect conference in July 2018, which enabled me to develop these ideas. Thanks also to Faculty and students from United Theological College, Sydney and their interaction with these ideas in November 2018.

2. Throughout this paper, I am working with the understanding that Māori is an official language of Aotearoa New Zealand. Hence, Māori words will not be italicized, for they are not foreign in the land from which I write.

3. Rakiura Maori Lands Trust, “Our Mission Statement,” n.p. Rakiura Maori Lands Trust is the largest private landowner outside of the New Zealand government on Rakiura. The Trust holds these lands in trust for many of the Rakiura Maori descendants.

ed me to become a guest. The steps I was about to take onto land held in trust by the island's Indigenous inhabitants were a privilege. The beauty, the silence, the access, was a gift, courtesy of another.

The sign is part of a larger story. I write as New Zealand Pakeha, my life unavoidably and powerfully shaped by my ancestors' actions, who migrated from Great Britain to Aotearoa New Zealand during the nineteenth century. Before my ancestors settled in Aotearoa, this land was already occupied. The patterns of occupation were different. Settler colonies use fences and fixed points of occupancy, "so that not for a moment would the ownership of a single square inch . . . be open to doubt or dispute."<sup>4</sup> The patterns of occupation by indigenous cultures involved movement around their land. Hence Māori man, Te Horeta Te Taniwha describes occupancy as follows:

Our tribe was living there at that time. We did not live there as our permanent home, but were there according to our custom of living for some time on each of our blocks of land, to keep our claim to each and that our fire might be kept alight on each block, so that it might not be taken from us by some other tribe.<sup>5</sup>

Land that might look empty to a European eye, for indigenous peoples remains farmed. Any steps taken are courtesy of land-owners.

Halted in front of this sign, I pondered hermeneutics. The analysis of post-Christendom contexts requires reflection on the use of Scripture to form Christian identity and mission. Post-Christendom refers to places where Christianity has been a significant, often dominant, cultural presence. Any talk of a course forward for post-Christendom churches must include reflection on the use of Scripture. As I walk this land of another, how do I, of settler descent, read the biblical text with courtesy? How might my prior conceptions, my pre-judgements about whether a place is empty or occupied, be shaping and mis-shaping my understandings of God as revealed in Scripture? This paper argues that in the

4. Park, *Nga Uruora*, 26.

5. "Te Horeta Te Taniwha," 26.

burning bush narrative of Exod 3, God calls all those who dwell in the shadow of empire to open ourselves to God's voice of love by listening to land and landowners.

*Introduction:  
Hermeneutics, Privilege, and the Burning Bush*

To read as a post-Christendom reader must include awareness of the particular tensions for dominant cultures in settler colonies. As Paul Ricoeur reminds us, hermeneutics involves reading while being aware of a world more complex than the printed text. For Ricoeur, first, there is *the world behind the text*.<sup>6</sup> Second, there is *the world in the text*.<sup>7</sup> Third, there is *the world in front of the text*. "The fact is, however, none of us are model readers. . . . Moreover, no two readers are identical; neither are we ever individually the same reader twice . . . each reader has an individual imagination and as such fills out a text in individualistic ways."<sup>8</sup> The sign that halted me interrogated the world in front of the text, the pre-conceptions I bring.

Native scholar Jione Havea expertly lays out the challenges for post-Christendom readers.<sup>9</sup> He articulates the concerns of the margins, those who experience the raw power of the colonial. He is

6. "A visit to the world behind the text is indispensable for the interpreter . . . the content of the text and its message are clothed in the terms, ideas, symbols, concepts, and categories which are current in the author's world. If the interpreters do not give serious attention to that world behind the text, whatever they say about the world within the text—the literary context—will be less than it should be." Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 56.

7. "The ability to recognize [genres] enhances a reader's appreciation for the literary artistry of literature . . . The interpretation of a text is exactly that—the interpretation of the whole and not just the stringing together of the interpretations of disjointed individual units. A narrative, a poem, a gospel, an apocalypse, or an epistle is a single generic whole, and each must be approached with full knowledge of the conventions and dynamics characteristic of it." Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 71.

8. Tate, *Biblical Interpretation*, 162.

9. Havea ("Negotiating with Scripture and Resistance," 2–3) claims native-hood in solidarity with those who belong by birth, but are not indigenous, by origin.

alert to the ways that Christendom religious readings empower the evils of colonialism and imperialism. Colonizers often arrive in the arms of missionaries.<sup>10</sup> Colonizers took not only land and resources. They also took minds, stories, and generations to come.<sup>11</sup> Havea writes: “It is painful for me when a Scripture that recognizes and respects the presence of ‘people of the land’ also demands, authorizes, and justifies another people to invade and seize.”<sup>12</sup> He continues, “I reject missionary and scholarly positions that romanticize and demonize native people.”<sup>13</sup> How do those walking only because of landowner “courtesy” read Scripture respectful of these landowners? How do those walking with dominant-culture privilege see and hear the marginalized truly?

Post-Christendom readers from dominant cultures in settler colonies face many challenges. Acts of commission and omission occur in the acts of settling. There is land theft and the use of military might. This requires truth-telling, and as Scripture reminds us, “the truth shall set you free” (John 8:31).<sup>14</sup> The acts of commission and omission might not be mine. However, their truth remains. Significantly, my location as a reader is changed by these acts. I benefit, my privilege increasing as the values of my culture were imposed. Havea argues that confronting readings are needed that “expose and ‘talk back’ to the invention and representation by the imperial regimes.”<sup>15</sup> Strategies include careful reading of Scripture, mixed in with truth-telling about our history and examining of privilege.

This article takes up these challenges. It seeks to examine the implications of reading “courtesy of landowners” by carefully reading the burning bush narrative in Exod 3:1–10. This text is potentially generative for many reasons. First, Scripture is central to the life of the church and the work of ministry. Second, the Exodus

10. Havea, “Postcolonize Now,” 6.

11. Havea, “Postcolonize Now,” 6.

12. Havea, “Negotiating with Scripture and Resistance,” 2.

13. Havea, “Negotiating with Scripture and Resistance,” 2. Lower case in original.

14. All scriptural references in this paper are from the New International Version.

15. Havea, “Postcolonize Now,” 13.

narrative is a crucial moment in the revelation of God to Israel. As such, it raises uncomfortable questions about colonization. Third, at this particular moment in the Exodus narrative, Moses was a migrant. Married to Zipporah (Exod 2:16–21), tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro, in Exod 3, he encounters God on the land on another. Fourth, I write as Principal of a Presbyterian theological college. The symbol of the burning bush is central to Presbyterian identity. A likely first use in Scotland occurred in 1635, in a poem by William Mure (1594–1657), poet and landowner in Ayrshire.<sup>16</sup> It was a reading in front of the text, for, in the context of Catholic persecution, the hope was that Presbyterian faith would not be consumed. In 1691, some fifty years after Mure’s poem, the proceedings of the General Assembly were published with a burning bush on the title page, along with the words underneath *Nec Tamen Consumeatur* (translated from the Latin as “not yet consumed”). Over the decades, the burning bush as a visual symbol continued to be a significant identity marker. When the Free Church of Scotland formed in 1843, their Acts of Assembly had a burning bush on the title passage. This was a “deliberate assertion that they were the real Church of Scotland.”<sup>17</sup> For the Free Church of Scotland, who would soon be influential in establishing Presbyterianism in Aotearoa New Zealand, the burning bush as visual was a significant identity marker. Hence my choice to focus on the Exodus story invites me to interrogate this denominational story and how settler Christians, particularly Presbyterians, read the Bible on the land of Māori in Aotearoa. What does it mean to read Scripture, including the Exodus account of the burning bush, in ways that foreground indigenous courtesy? This examination will proceed in three steps. First, engaging Exod 3:1–10. Second, reading Exodus Christologically. Third, reflecting on several indigenous visual readings of the burning bush. This allows a hermeneutical examination of how we respond to God revealed in Scripture and the sketch of a post-Christendom hermeneutic of respectful listening.

16. “I am but finfull duft; From God is my record; To mee belongeth flame; All glorie to the Lord.” Mure, “The Joy of Tears,” 161–78.

17. Redding, *Somervell Memorial Presbyterian Church*.

*Courtesy*

This article took shape first in a keynote lecture at a youth conference in Aotearoa and second as a public lecture in Australia. In both places, the presentation began with respect for the land of another. In Aotearoa, Māori call this “pepeha.” The task of a pepeha is to locate and express a commitment to place and people.<sup>18</sup> The mountain and rivers of one’s birthplace are named. While settler cultures advocate for rights, indigenous cultures advocate for obligations. The use of pepeha enhances my ability to read Scripture in a way that is sensitive to the places on which I stand. Hence, in sharing this article in Aotearoa, I honored the tribe of Te Ūpoko o te Ika and named the river and mountain of my birth. In Australia, the way to respect land and people involves an acknowledgement of country. This acknowledgement recognizes the traditional owners of the land and pays respect to elders past and present. Elvey provides a theological examination of acknowledgement of country, arguing that it must not be used to reinstate notions of “terra nullius” and elide the relationships of traditional owners to country.<sup>19</sup> Nor must it be token. However, used with courtesy, it provides a way to name the multiple thefts of country, culture, and children, each a historical manifestation of discourtesy toward landowners. It also provides a way to name the connections humans have with land. Hence, in presenting this paper in Sydney, I paid my respect to the Burramattagal people and acknowledged the elders of the Darug nation. I also committed myself to the ongoing work of justice and reconciliation. This is a way to begin a conversation about reading courtesy of landowners, for it foregrounds place, acknowledges the past and begins to make space for what Elvey calls a movement of kenosis, a relinquishing of privileges.<sup>20</sup>

18. Douglas-Huriwai, “Ko Au te Whenua, Ko te Whenua Ko Au,” 13–19.

19. Elvey, “Acknowledging Traditional Owners,” 242–43.

20. Elvey, “Acknowledging Traditional Owners,” 243.

*YHWH Revealed in Exodus*

The revelation of God in Exodus 3 stands as a moment of central significance in Israel’s story. Old Testament scholar, R. W. L. Moberly argues that in the Pentateuch, God is revealed in different ways in different periods.<sup>21</sup> The patriarchs of Genesis lived before Mosaic Yahwism. They use many names for God (El Shaddai [Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25], El Elyon [Gen 14:18], El Roi [Gen 16:13], El Olam [Gen 21:33], El Elohe Israel [Gen 33:20], and El Bethel [Gen 31:13; 35:7]). By contrast, God in Exod 3 is YHWH—the I am. The religious practices of Genesis exist as “distinct from Mosaic Yahwism.”<sup>22</sup> The God of Exod 3 is one and the same: God of patriarchs and God of Israel. There are elements of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>23</sup> God is the God of the patriarchs, Israel’s ancestral God. God has gone before, yet God is self-disclosed in Exodus in ways unique. Genesis becomes the Old Testament of the Old Testament.

This divine approach to revelation provides some lines for missiology, particularly in reading Scripture on the land of another. First, the relationship to the land is one of courtesy.<sup>24</sup> Moberly notes that in Genesis, the Canaanites are regarded as the legitimate owners in Genesis. “Insofar as the relationship of the patriarchs to the land of Canaan is made explicit, it is always characterised by

21. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*.

22. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 105.

23. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 35.

24. The relationship of Israel to land is contested. Baptist Biblical scholar Mark Brett pays close attention to biblical text in light of the legacies of colonization. Brett argues that Israel emerged from within populations of indigenous peoples. This is based on broad agreement among archaeologists as to the life and culture of that time, and offers an understanding of the exodus as a movement in which the mixed multitudes of Exod 12:38 profess a growing sense of communal identity focused on allegiance to Yahweh. Brett applies this argument to the Biblical texts like Deut 20, which call for the genocide of the people of Canaan. Brett argues that these Scriptures offer a subversive mimicry of Assyrian treaty documents, that asserts national dignity over against the dehumanizing tendencies of empire. This approach to Biblical text provides ways to value Scripture as a resource for addressing the legacies of colonization and enacting friendship and hospitality modelled on Jesus. See Brett, *Decolonizing God*, 62–93.

various forms of the verbal *gur*, to ‘sojourn.’”<sup>25</sup> This is an approach of courtesy, given that “in the Old Testament the notion of sojourning always implies temporary residence and dependence on the hospitality of others who live in the place permanently.”<sup>26</sup> Another dimension of courtesy is evident in the lack of antagonism between patriarchs and religious practices of Canaanites. The priest of Melchizedek is respected. God is encountered amid diversity, given how the patriarchs build altars everywhere. We witness an open monotheism. “Although the patriarchs worship only one God . . . there is no implied opposition to the worship of other gods.”<sup>27</sup> God speaks to “pagans” as naturally as God speaks with the patriarchs.<sup>28</sup> These biblical insights provide hermeneutical resources. The God of Exodus speaks in ways that encourage courtesy and invite us to hear God through indigenous landowners.

With these general introductions to God, revealed as I am, we turn to the narrative of the burning bush. The God revealed as YHWH is a God of love. In Exod 3:7, God has “seen the misery of my people . . . I have heard them crying out . . . I am concerned about their suffering.” This Divine attention to suffering occurs again in 3:9. “I have indeed heard the cry of my people.” In both act and being, God looks, hears, and expresses concern over human suffering and works toward deliverance. This is the beginning of theology, as revealed in YHWH, at the burning bush.

Central to how God is revealed as seeking deliverance is human involvement. Moses’ first recorded spoken response to the revelation of YHWH is “Here I am” (3:4). These words echo those of Abraham (Gen 21:1), Jacob (Gen 31:1), Samuel (1 Sam 3:4), Isaiah (Isa 6:8), and Mary (Luke 1:38). In each case, humans are listeners, responding to the voice of love. Scottish Presbyterian theologian Alan Lewis described the Reformed church, the people of the burning bush, as *Ecclesia ex Auditu*, formed by hearing.<sup>29</sup>

25. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 97.

26. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 97.

27. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 87.

28. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 88.

29. Lewis, “*Ecclesia ex Auditu*,” 13–37.

The formation of God’s people begins with responding to God’s grace in covenant action. Humans do not join God’s mission. Instead, humans hear love and, like Moses and those throughout Scripture, say “Here I am.” Mission begins with this posture of listening to love. It is around this Divine love that the community of God begins to form. God as love, is acting to rescue “my people the Israelites” (3:10). The formation of God’s people results from this love. The mission of God takes ecclesial shape as YHWH enlists Moses in a mission of deliverance.

Central to God’s revelation is human involvement. God begins with Moses (3:10). Angeline M. G. Song, an immigrant to Aotearoa New Zealand, argues that Moses was “the nowhere boy who became a nowhere man.”<sup>30</sup> Moses is forced into moments of boundary crossing, as a baby into Pharaoh’s court, then as a refugee fleeing as an adult from the culture and class of Pharaoh’s court. Midian is a neutral territory, in which Moses starts to build a new life. His son is named Gershon, which means stranger, alien in a foreign land.<sup>31</sup> This gives us insight into Moses’ self-understanding as a rootless and isolated person searching for a land to belong.<sup>32</sup> She reads Moses as “hybrid composite with a confused sense of identity.”<sup>33</sup> Reading courtesy of Song’s immigrant insights, I find my hermeneutical stance beginning to shift. The identity of Moses—“nowhere man,” “alien in a foreign land”—helps clarify my identity. I am not a landowner. I stand, like Moses, courtesy of another. The burning bush narrative informs a settler hermeneutic, in which my alienation is essential to a hermeneutic of respectful listening.

Martin Mariota provides another immigrant reading.<sup>34</sup> Again, like Song, he reads the burning bush narrative in ways that foreground socio-cultural locations. Mariota writes, aware he is an overseas-born Samoan. For Mariota, that means he reads from an in-between space. However, he sees his cultural hybridity as a

30. Song, *A Postcolonial Woman’s Encounter*, 192.

31. Song, *A Postcolonial Woman’s Encounter*, 194.

32. Song, *A Postcolonial Woman’s Encounter*, 202.

33. Song, *A Postcolonial Woman’s Encounter*, 202.

34. Mariota, “Moses, both Hebrew and Egyptian,” 103–15.

strength. Being a “nowhere man,” “alien in a foreign land” results in empowerment rather than marginalization. In this reading, Moses is “polycultural.”<sup>35</sup> Formed by interactions with Hebrew, Midian, and Egyptian cultures, in the early chapters of Exodus, Moses pushes new boundaries to renegotiate new meanings. His “multiple cultural exposures are the experiences that build his polycultural capital.”<sup>36</sup> What is central for Moses, as already noted, is a mission of liberation. Thus “the most pertinent polycultural capital is Moses’s drive for transformation and his concern and passion for justice on behalf of the oppressed.”<sup>37</sup> Hence being in-between is a space for growth. This provides another way to read the declaration of holiness. “Do not come any closer. Take off your shoes for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Exod 3:5). For Moses, the holy place is the place where he can listen in order to grow. This locates growth in relation to hermeneutics. First, a posture is needed that clarifies one’s social location, including in recognition of the place of another. Second, one needs a courtesy that involves listening for liberation. Third, it entertains the possibility of transformation. Whether it be standing on land courtesy of another or a social interaction with other people, cultural border crossing involves people and places that offer the holy wonder of transformation. As Mariota writes, “[Moses] is exalted as the lawgiver and liberator of Israel, but the key to his success is his actions towards the Other.”<sup>38</sup> The revelation of YHWH is central to the revelation of God in the Old Testament. We see God revealed as transforming love through postures of courtesy and hermeneutical attentiveness to social location. We now turn to invite the revelation of God in the New Testament.

#### *Jesus Revealed in Baptism and Transfiguration*

What does it mean to read the burning bush Christologically? The Gospels—particularly in the baptism of Jesus and the trans-figura-

35. Mariota, “Moses, both Hebrew and Egyptian,” 103.

36. Mariota, “Moses, both Hebrew and Egyptian,” 113.

37. Mariota, “Moses, both Hebrew and Egyptian,” 114.

38. Mariota, “Moses, both Hebrew and Egyptian,” 112.

tion—provide explicit Christological shape to the burning bush. Again, we will see a revelation of God as love, the value of listening, and the holy wonder of transformation.

At the baptism of Jesus, as Jesus emerges from the water, the heavens were torn apart. A dove appeared; the Spirit of God hovered. A voice is heard saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). Again, as with Moses, the God revealed is the God of love. The intentions of deliverance in Exodus are clarified in the life of Christ. Hence for Biblical scholar, Douglas Hare, “The one here identified as ‘my Son, whom I love’ is the Word become flesh for our salvation.”<sup>39</sup> Jesus had not said or done anything significant in his life to this point. Yet God as love speaks from eternity.

Jesus offers no protest to this heavenly voice when it speaks words of love and like over him. Instead, Jesus listens. This openness to the love of YHWH is expressed in an unfolding ministry. In response to hearing the voice of love, Jesus hears and believes.

Christologically, it is important to note that the baptism proclaims, rather than bestows, divine sonship. The Spirit has been upon the life of Jesus from the beginning, named in 1:18, 20. God continues to gift the Spirit throughout the ministry of Jesus (Matt 3:16; 10:20). Jesus’ words and deeds emerge from the centre of his being—out of a sense of being at home with the voice who speaks love over him. Once love has been heard, Jesus does not fear rejection or need praise. In response to hearing of love, Jesus loves. He is a good man, the Son of God, as the centurion at his crucifixion observes (Matt 27:54).

In the baptism of Jesus, there is the holy wonder of transformation as well as love and listening. At Jesus’ baptism, John speaks of being unworthy to stoop and untie Jesus’ sandals (Matt 3:11). John the Baptizer then announces the necessity of “unquenchable fire” (3:12). Biblical scholar Eduard Schweizer suggests an allusion to First Testament texts, including Isa 34:10 and 66:24.<sup>40</sup> However, it must indeed also reference the narrative of the burning bush (Exod 3:2). The revelation of YHWH in the fire that nev-

39. Hare, *Matthew*, 22.

40. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew*, 52.

er burns up in Exod 3 is given Christological shape at baptism. The manifestation is transformation, a fire not of rage and wrath but loving presence and filial openness.

The transfiguration provides a second Gospel narrative and gives further Christological shape to the burning bush narrative. It makes sense to pair baptism and transfiguration. For biblical scholar R. T. France, the transfiguration is a unique event in the ministry of Jesus, comparable only to the baptism of Jesus: “Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, first declared in 3:17 [at baptism], is now reiterated [at transfiguration] with the same heavenly authority.”<sup>41</sup>

First, in the transfiguration, as in the burning bush and baptism, there is a revelation of love. The words of baptism are repeated exactly: the voice from heaven speaking, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt 17:5). Revelation unfolds. For Hare, the “clause ‘with whom I am well pleased,’ although reported verbatim from [the baptism narrative], now gains additional significance. God is pleased with Jesus’ obedient acceptance of his suffering role.”<sup>42</sup> What is revealed is Jesus, Divine. “Here . . . Jesus is presented as the one who is like Moses but vastly superior.”<sup>43</sup> Hare helpfully argues that this is a Christophany, not a theophany, a manifestation of Jesus as the messiah, not a manifestation of God.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, this Christophany is grounded in love, Love affirming the Beloved. The revelation of love includes the command “Listen to him!” (Matt 17:5). In the context of the revelation of Love, God affirms that Jesus is also a revelation. God as Love is known, in speaking and in listening, in the words and deeds of the ministry of Jesus.

Second, there are descriptions of striking visual impact. In both Matt 17:2 and Luke 9:29, the radiance of Jesus’ face is emphasized. In Matt 17:2, the images of sun and light replace the descriptions in Mark 9:3, of the whiteness of new cloth. This provides another Christological development of the revelation of God

41. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 642.

42. Hare, *Matthew*, 200.

43. Hare, *Matthew*, 200.

44. Hare, *Matthew*, 199.

in the burning bush. For France, the word “vision” in Matt 17:9 is unique, only used of Jesus’ revelation in the transfiguration narrative and Moses’ external vision of the burning bush.<sup>45</sup> In response, Peter senses something holy. The three disciples want to stay, suggesting the making of three booths (Matt 17:4), but Jesus is moving on. For Jesus, holy ground is not on the mountain but in the large crowd where the disciples have questions (Matt 17:10–13), and an epileptic boy needs healing (Matt 17:14–21). In that place is the holy ground of unbelief challenged and lives transformed. Again, as with the burning bush, the holy place is the place of growth focused on “actions towards the Other.”<sup>46</sup>

Third, like the burning bush, there is respect for those who have gone before. At the burning bush, the I am is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod 3:6). At the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear (Matt 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:31). God is revealed in the context of those who have gone before. In indigenous cultures, genealogy is essential. *Tangata Whenua: A History* provides an excellent summary of the role of genealogy in indigenous knowledge.<sup>47</sup> They begin with lament that “in the broader fields of historical and anthropological scholarship, and widely in popular discussion, the historical credentials of tribal traditions have often been debated, scorned or ignored.”<sup>48</sup> This lament could equally be applied to theology, particularly by scholars shaped by the Christendom project. Written from a Maori perspective, Anderson, Binney, and Harris argue that genealogy contains actual historical evidence. There is reliability through the use of formulaic language. There is rigor, with genealogy tested independently by narrative. Like any historical record, genealogy can be partial, contradictory, and invested in hierarchies. Nevertheless, an overall consistency, “coupled with intricate, deep and widespread lineage connections, substantiates the claim of traditions to historical intent and comparative reliability.”<sup>49</sup> There is also reproducibility,

45. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 643n9.

46. Mariota, “Moses, both Hebrew and Egyptian,” 112.

47. Anderson et al., *Tangata Whenua*, 33–35.

48. Anderson et al., *Tangata Whenua*, 33.

49. Anderson et al., *Tangata Whenua*, 33.

what Walter Ong, calls “memorised experience” as a valid historical source.<sup>50</sup> The use of formulaic language, coupled with the sophisticated skills of memorization evident in indigenous cultures, along with the significance of genealogy in determining status, encourage reproducibility.<sup>51</sup> Claims for status and property ownership are made based on genealogy. Hence genealogy is transmitted through generations with a great degree of accuracy. It is a unique source of knowledge, essential in the social construction of identity formation. This knowledge is utilized at both the burning bush and transfiguration. The identity formation for God’s people occurs in dialogue with God, revealed as “I am” in relationship with ancestors. A posture of courtesy toward landowners will require respect for their ancestors. A respectful hermeneutic will include openness toward the possibility that God might be revealed in those who have gone before.<sup>52</sup> Reading the narrative of the burning bush Christologically, particularly in the baptism of Jesus and the transfiguration offers rich connections. Again, we see a revelation of God of love, the value of listening, the holy wonder of transformation, and a valuing of ancestor knowledge. These insights offer different ways of understanding post-Christendom hermeneutics and witness. I stand not on *terra nullius*, but on the land of another. On inhabited land, I seek wisdom from those who have walked before. This requires a respectful listening, expecting a transformation in Christ as I attend to the cry of all who suffer.

### *Visual Revelations*

This article has read the burning bush narrative, first in the First Testament, second Christologically in dialogue with baptism and transfiguration narratives. What has become evident is the possibility for “nowhere” people, those on the land of another, to engage in a hermeneutics of respectful listening. However, listening

50. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

51. Anderson et al., *Tangata Whenua*, 56.

52. For an examination of genealogy in mission, focused on Matt 1:1–17, see Taylor, “Where Does Mission Come From?” 28–35.

involves not only hearing but also seeing. What does it mean to engage in a hermeneutics that includes “visual thinking”?<sup>53</sup> Moses sees an angel appearing in flames of fire on the land of another, a bush on fire though it does not burn. This seeing happens (Exod 3:2) before Moses hears God’s voice of love (Exod 3:4–10). Equally, the baptism of Jesus involves seeing the Spirit descending like a dove (Matt 3:16), before the voice of love speaking (Matt 3:17). Further, as already noted, “vision” is central to the transfiguration narratives.

Indeed, looking is “intrinsic to the ongoing journey of discipleship.”<sup>54</sup> This is evident at the beginning of John’s Gospel. The Word might be from the beginning (John 1:1), but for John the Baptist, sight enables revelation. “Look, the lamb of God” (1:36). This theme of looking continues as two of John’s disciples are invited by Jesus to look (“Come and you will see,” 1:39). Next, Philip invites Nathanael to “Come and see” (1:46). The pericope ends with Jesus’ invitation to Nathanael (1:50). “I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.” These acts of looking invite reconsiderations of identity. Seeing is a hermeneutical act.

How might a courtesy toward landowners be practiced in relation to “visual thinking”? One way is to practice an “eyes open” courtesy, particularly concerning indigenous art. In what follows, three visual readings are considered. Two are courtesy of indigenous landowners, while a third is a close looking at land. Each inform a hermeneutics of respectful listening.

First, from indigenous peoples of Australia, *Our Mob, God’s Story* celebrates the Biblical story as portrayed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. It features one hundred and fifteen artworks by sixty-six artists, reflecting on biblical verses from Genesis to Revelation.<sup>55</sup> Each work is accompanied by a short statement from each artist describing their work. Katrina Tjitayi, in a piece titled “Burning Bush,” engages with Exod 3:2.<sup>56</sup> The

53. As quoted in Engelhardt, *Burning Bush*.

54. Taylor, “Looking closer at Sieger Koder’s *The Last Supper*,” 156.

55. Sherman and Mattingley, *Our Mob, God’s Story*.

56. Tjitayi, “Burning Bush,” 46–47.

painting is alive with intensity and movement, expressing the dynamism of God's active presence in this Biblical narrative. It also expresses the reality of fire in the continent of Australia. Importantly, if we embody courtesy, we must read the fire as an act of management. Gammage outlines how the entirety of Australia was a managed estate. Fire was used in a planned rotation that ensured an abundant harvest.<sup>57</sup> Conservation meant maintaining abundance rather than repairing damage.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the burning bush fire is a way that God is acting to bring Israel into a different, abundant relationship with land and place.

Red and ochre, the Australian outback's characteristic colors, are used by Katrina Tjitayi to portray both earth and fire. The shared color suggests that God, who is present in fire, is also the God who is present through the land. Within this intensity of Divine presence is the burning bush. A feature is the leaves, painted in colors of green and turquoise. The colors speak to the life present and possible, amid the harshness of the Australian outback. In addition to the painting, an initial pencil sketch of the burning bush by Tjitayi is featured.<sup>59</sup> Located in *Our Mob, God's Story* at the beginning of the Old Testament, this provides a theology of revelation, affirming the burning bush narrative as central to the revelation of God.

It is illuminating to bring the work of Katrina Tjitayi into conversation with *Yarta Wandatha*, a recent work by indigenous Australian theologian Denise Champion. The title—*Yarta Wandatha*—is derived from Champion's mother tongue, Adnyamathanha, the language of her people from the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. It means "the land is speaking, the people are speaking." The title provides a concise summary of the theological method that integrates Champion's work. It also provides a way to theorize the burning bush. Paying attention to the land, respecting the possibility of hearing the Divine speaking through place results in God's people finding a voice. In Moses' case, this finding of voice is the missional response, "Here I am" (Exod 3:4).

57. Gammage, "The Future Makers," 27–41.

58. Gammage, "The Future Makers," 27.

59. Tjitayi, "Burning Bush," 22.

Champion develops this theology, using another phrase from her language, “ngakarra nguniangkulu” God is revealing so that we can see.<sup>60</sup> Respectful listening has a confidence that God is the revealer. As the sketch by Katrina Tjitayi suggests, the initial revelation of YHWH in the burning bush, almost pencil-like, will in time be brought to full color in the person of Christ. Acts of courtesy expect to see God revealed in the land, commits to original landowners having voice and looks for the unfolding revelation of God in Christ.

A second example of “visual thinking” in dialogue with the burning bush comes from Maori as the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. Te Aka Puaho is the name for the Maori Synod of Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>61</sup> The phrase was gifted to the Maori Synod in 1996 by an acclaimed Maori leader, Hohepa Kereopa of Waimana.<sup>62</sup> The name can be translated as the glowing vine. The notion of a glowing vine provides a textual reference to the burning bush. Simultaneously, it provides a theology of indigenization. First, the bush is a vine, presumably one growing in Aotearoa. This becomes a declaration regarding revelation. The use of the glowing vine suggests that “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6) is experienced here in Aotearoa. Divine encounter is located neither in the bushes of the Sinai desert nor the highlands of Scotland. Instead, it is in Aotearoa that one must take off their shoes. The land of the long white cloud, as Aotearoa is transliterated, is holy ground, a place where God is experienced.

For Te Aka Puaho, there are further dimensions to this theology of revelation. In 2018, the Moderator of Te Aka Puaho, at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, interpreted the name Te Aka Puaho in relation to the transfiguration narratives, in which Jesus glows with light, shining like the sun. In the trans-

60. Champion, *Yarta Wandatha*, 28.

61. Given Māori is an official language of Aotearoa, neither Māori nor English is italicized in this article. While this requires more from the reader, the use of italics would “alienate” as foreign an indigenous language in the country from which I write.

62. Te Rire, “Hihita me ngā Tamariki o te Kohu,” 221n18.

figuration, Jesus is revealed as God's "beloved son," a repetition of the affirmation from God at baptism.<sup>63</sup> Those who "listen" to the "I am" in the vines that grow from the lands of Aotearoa are blessed. Te Aka Puaho are working with a Christological reading of the burning bush. These are hermeneutical moves of creative and interpretive agency. Such is indigenization in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the transfiguration, dignity and agency are affirmed.

A third "visual reading" occurs in the work of Danish artist Maja Lisa Engelhardt. She paints within the traditions of Northern Romantic Landscape, with a particular focus on the burning bush. Trained at Funen Academy, Maja Lisa Engelhardt has exhibited internationally, including France, Sweden, and New York. The exhibition catalogues offer a spirituality, with titles like "Rainment," "Illuminations," and "Crown of Thorns."<sup>64</sup> Unlike many contemporary artists, "all too concerned with mere doubt," Engelhardt's work provides a portrayal of faith as "the highest passion."<sup>65</sup> Nature is scrutinized as a manifestation of the sacred.<sup>66</sup> Engelhardt's "visual thinking" informs the way I read the sign that halted me in Rakiura. The painting invites a posture of wonder. It summons a posture of openness, a willingness to see faith as the "highest passion," present in this land. Rakiura is translated as "The Land of Glowing Skies," and indeed, the land glows in Engelhardt's work. A hermeneutics of respectful listening is possible because God is present. Halting is an act of courtesy, a wise and faithful response. Listening to landowners and their insights regarding land is a way of seeing God revealed.

Given the priority of the visual in the above biblical narratives, this section of the paper has examined visual portrayals of the burning bush, focused on theologies of land. The land is speaking. This speaking is of God, entwining the "I am" of the First Testament with the revelation of Christ in transfigured glory. In our

63. See Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; and Luke 3:22.

64. "Rainment" for a 1985 exhibition catalogue in Nikolaj, Copenhagen; "Illuminations" for a 1986 exhibition catalogue in Brandts Pakhus, Copenhagen; "Crown of Thorns" for a 1988 exhibition catalogue in Galleri Weinberger, Copenhagen.

65. Carrier, "Toward the Promised Land," 7.

66. Carrier, "Toward the Promised Land," 6.

willingness to act with courtesy and adopt postures of wonder, we find the land “glowing” with the passion of faith.

### *Embodying Courtesy of Landowners*

Post-Christendom refers to the historical dominance of Christianity as a significant cultural presence. One result is readings that ignore the rich insights of original landowners. In response, this article has examined the complexity of reading Scripture on the land of another. A particular biblical text has been used, in dialogue with readings sensitive to place, including written and visual scholarship from people of color.

The implications for Christian identity and mission in the contexts of post-Christendom is hopeful yet challenging. The burning bush, baptism, and transfiguration invite a hermeneutics of respectful listening in expectation of transforming growth. We are to halt, shaped by a missiology of love for the marginalized, open to hearing from land and landowners.

My article has focused on what it means to read as members of a dominant culture. This post-Christendom hermeneutic can be developed as five practices. These draw from the revelation of YHWH, the Christology of Jesus, and the “visual thinking.” Together these become ways to show courtesy. As they do, they increase the likelihood that our privilege as being dominant culture Christendom readers will be disrupted:

- Acknowledge prior landowners—every reading needs to begin with an acknowledgement of country, for as Havea reminds us, while we might read as natives through birth, we are never indigenous through origin.
- Sit in silence as a lament for the loss of voice from prior landowners—for as Champion reminds us, the loss of voice by landowners results in a loss of voice from the land. The result is a loss of faith as the highest passion.
- Commit to solidarity with all those who cry for justice—A post-Christendom missiology begins with the voiceless and dominated, for God is revealed in the burning bush as

the liberator, in baptism as love and at transfiguration as a healer of the demon-possessed.

- Read not as givers but as receivers—Dominant cultures carry the privilege of knowing the language games more intimately. As a result, we often expect to speak. Yet God commands us to begin with listening, for in silence, “I am” is heard.
- Seek the interpretive skills of prior landowners—In the scholarship, written and visual, from people of color are insights that require us to “Take off our shoes” for we are about the experience the possibility of transforming growth.

These hermeneutical postures inform the shape of post-Christendom witness. The mission of God prioritizes attending to the margins with the suffering rather than seeking power at the centre. Discernment of God’s life begins with listening for the work of the Spirit already present. Partnerships replace white savior mentalities.

In offering these practices, I will add some words of caution. First, silence will be long. Mariota notes that “Moses has theological and ecclesial capital . . . whereas the majority of young Samoans are still watched and not heard.”<sup>67</sup> A key challenge for dominant cultures is to inhabit spaces in ways that the historically voiceless might sense we are worth trusting with their insights. Second, listening will be uncomfortable. Dominant cultures have well-honed skills in defence of their privilege. To truly listen will require true humility. Third, we must do the work of repentance. The voices of landowners are already present. Dominant culture readers must be proactive in engaging the written and visual scholarship of people of color.

#### *Gift Courtesy of Landowners*

I began with a story, the request on Rakiura to act with courtesy toward landowners. I end with another story, the gift of landown-

67. Mariota, “Moses, both Hebrew and Egyptian,” 115.

ers. It is my experience of "Access courtesy of landowners," shared with permission, after checking with the traditional owners of the place in which the experience occurred. In sharing is an invitation to face the implications of reading courtesy of landowners.

During 2017, as Principal of Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, I attended the graduation of nine indigenous Maori leaders, trained through Te Aka Puaho, the Maori Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. Following the graduation, I asked if I could stay for a few days, to further relationships. I wanted to do more than pay a flying visit and instead to create space in a more relational culture for deepening connections.

With permission from Te Aka Puaho, I slept in the wharenuī (meeting house) at Te Maungarongo Marae. For Maori, sleeping in the wharenuī involves mattresses laid on the floor in a large shared communal space. The central beam of the roof of the wharenuī is understood to be the backbone of the central ancestor. Around the walls are poles on which more ancestors are carved. You sleep surrounded by those who have gone before. On this marae, the central ancestor is Ihu Karaiti, the Maori word for Jesus Christ.

That night, alone in the wharenuī, curled up in my sleeping bag on a mattress, I awoke, immersed in bright light. Wondering if a motion sensor switch had been tripped by a passing cat, I roused myself and looked for the light switches. The brightness of the light made looking easy. I tried all the switches, yet the bright light remained.

Wondering if the motion sensors needed time to deactivate, I went to the toilet. When I returned, the bright lights remained on. Seeking sleep, I moved my sleeping bag and mattress into the darkest corner of the wharenuī. Pulling the sleeping bag over my head, I eventually returned to sleep.

I awoke the next morning to birdsong and daylight. But no bright lights. When the marae's caretaker arrived, I described my night-time experience and asked him where the motion sensor lights were. "There are none," he replied. I walked with him to where the lights had been the brightest. Looking up, I realized that

there were no light bulbs on the roof. The caretaker looked at me and grinned. “Must have been God,” he said and walked off whistling.

Later that day, I met two significant Maori leaders of Te Aka Puaho, the Moderator and the Chair of the Marae committee. I shared with them my experience and that I was unsure of how to understand it. Like the caretaker, they also grinned. “Must have been God,” they said. “Inviting you to pray,” said one. “Sending you a message. To remind us that God loves us,” said another.

Reading the burning bush narrative and writing this article has been one way to reflect theologically on this experience. On the marae and in the wharenuī, I was on the land of another. I was locating myself in relation to a long line of ancestors. I was able to sleep, courtesy of landowners. These landowners interpreted my “visual” experience as a call to prayer. God, who sees misery, hears crying, and is concerned about suffering, had invited me to listen in love. It required me to take off my shoes, literally in the wharenuī, hermeneutically, as I relied on the interpretation of those who had extended me courtesy.

As post-Christendom readers, we walk as dominant cultures on the land of another. It is time we act with courtesy and take off our shoes. God is speaking, through land and voices long silenced. As we listen to land and landowners, we open ourselves to hear God’s voice of love.

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