

“Difficult Dialogues”: Towards Reading The Woman Of Samaria (Jn 4:1-42) In Aotearoa New Zealand

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A decolonizing reading’s main objective is liberation. It asks the question: “How can we know and respect the Other?” It is a struggle to conceive models that are not built along the lines of relegating all differences to deficiency. It is a struggle to build bridges for liberating interdependence cross-culturally. It is the desire to have what been termed “difficult dialogues” ... that is, to encounter and to dialogue with the different Other on a level of different and equal subjects.” ... The phrase “difficult dialogues,” indeed, accepts the fact that the construction of our narratives, hence, our way of thinking of the Other, has been primarily operated on ... a denigrate and “uplift” model. In this imperialist model we have an aggressive inclusion but not equality (Dube 1997: 22).

This exploration of the Woman of Samaria of Jn 4:1-42 in Aotearoa New Zealand arises from my desire to enter into the “difficult dialogues” which Musa Dube calls for in the quotation above. My reading of the woman of Samaria’s story had been one of liberation which focused mainly on its gender implications in its ancient historical context and for today. However, that changed for me when a white Australian woman and I led a reflection along those lines in the context of a cultural analysis hui in front of

the wharenuī of Takahanga Marae of the Ngāti Kuri people of Kaikoura in 1999.¹

Before us were women of Tonga, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Australia, Guam, Ireland and the United States of America, Māori and Pākehā women of Aotearoa New Zealand. I realised that there were many reading locations of this story that differed from mine, a middle class Pākehā woman whose recent theological education was in Belgium and Australia.

The hosts, the Ngāti Kuri people and their struggle to rebuild Takahanga Marae on its stunningly beautiful ancient site in view of the snow-capped Seaward Kaikoura Mountains which sweep down to the Pacific Ocean hold a mostly forgotten story of agency and resistance in the face of the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand. Their story is repeated in locations up and down the country. This history needs to be addressed in any contextual reading of Jn 4:1-42.²

In this paper, I propose that a critical feminist reading of Jn 4:1-42 may be possible that questions the assumptions and power of dominant cultures. In Part One, I shall identify

¹ Elizabeth Dowling RSM and I gave this reflection in January 1999. I dedicate this paper to Aroha Poharoma of Ngāti Kuri, friend and mentor who was our facilitator on that occasion and whose first anniversary of death occurs about this time. This paper is an extended version of Rushton 1999.

² In what is called the Kaikoura Purchase Settlement, Ngāti Kuri had requested a specific reserve of 100,000 acres suitable to pastoral purposes. However, by the time the rights of Ngāti Kuri were acknowledged by the Crown, that portion of the Kaikoura block had been largely overrun by pastoralists, was entirely occupied by European settlers and part had actually been sold to them (New Zealand Waitangi Tribunal 1991: 115, 684) Ngāti Kuri who were one of the last tribes in the northern half of the South Island to be negotiated with by the Crown were induced to settle for nine coastal reserves totaling 5558 acres. Included was the 4800 acre reserve of Maungmaunu, which though was valued by Ngāti Tahu for its mahinga kai, was described by the agent James McKay as of the “most useless and worthless description” (New Zealand Waitangi Tribunal 1991: 118), being inadequate for agricultural purposes and as an economic base, these reserves “were encumbered with roading and railway rights.” (New Zealand Waitangi Tribunal 1991:115).

three levels of reading the biblical text that enable members of dominant cultures to begin the “difficult dialogues”. In Part Two, I shall juxtapose two key assumptions from Musa Dube’s critique of Jn 4:1-42 with an overview of how these are found in the role which the Bible and missionaries play in the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand. Attention will then be given in Part Three to three textual features of Jn 4:1-42 to open up a new reading for the Pakeha reader.³

Toward A Map For A Feminist Reading Jn 4:1-42 In Aotearoa New Zealand

I am a middle class Pakeha woman. My parents came from farming families descended from immigrants who arrived in the South Island in the 1860s and 1870s. My mainly Irish Catholic forebears were assisted immigrants who were farm labourers in Mid and South Canterbury. That family history holds not only stories of hardship and dispossession but later the acquisition of means to acquire land.

So as I read I am aware of the history of my country, a history that preceded me and that privileges me, a history in which the dominant Pakeha cultural ways and values shaped and structured the way life was in the colonial period and continues to do. Therefore, according to Judith McKinlay, I must “read with an eye ready to detect connections with the coloniser, for colonial attitudes have a ‘durability’” (McKinlay 2001: 160). This means that enduring patterns persist today in the phrase of history often termed “postcolonial”.

³ “Pakeha” designates a person from Aotearoa New Zealand whose cultural origins are other than
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According to Sugirtharajah, postcolonialism has a multiplicity of meanings depending on location. It is "a mental attitude ... a subversive stance ... a reading posture ... a critical enterprise aimed at unmasking the link between power and idea which lies behind Western theories and learning... a discursive resistance to imperialism, imperial ideologies, imperial attitudes and their incarnations" (Sugirtharajah 1998: 93). Segovia writes of a post-colonial "optic" which is used in biblical studies for transformation (Segovia 1998: 64).

Such a reading "optic" recognises at least three levels of reading the biblical text. The first recognises that the texts of ancient Judaism and early Christianity need to be considered in their sociocultural contexts in the Near East and the Mediterranean world in which there were a succession of empires.

Second, a postcolonial optic questions my position as a feminist reader, a female outsider, one on the margins who reads knowing that there is always resistance and agency in the face of patriarchal texts. As a Pakeha feminist postcolonial reader my connection with the coloniser and privilege endures and calls for entering into in "the difficult dialogues" with the colonised and recognising their resistance and agency in the face of colonising texts.

indigenous Maori, and in particular, one of European descent.

A third level takes into account that Pakeha culture despite its particularities is a stream of Western culture, that wider culture which while not explicitly Christian, functions through perceptions, values and imaginations which have been and still are profoundly shaped by biblical texts. The face of imperialism now is the neocolonialism and globalisation of the West.

So mindful of the imperialism in the world of the biblical text, the connection between the interpretations of the biblical text in the history of colonisation and its enduring qualities, and the shifting forms of neocolonialism, how do I, a feminist Pakeha Christian read Jn 4:1-42 in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand? A necessary first step to which I now turn is to be aware of the place of the bible, and a text such as Jn 4:1-42, in the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand as well as how this legacy persists in interpretation today.

Western Interpretations Of Jn 4:1-42 And The Role Of The Bible And Missionaries In The Colonisation Of Aotearoa New Zealand

From Botsowan feminist Musa Dube's critique, I have selected two key assumptions, namely, imperialistic ideology and values and an ideology of superior and inferior knowledge. An overview of the early stages of the colonisation shows how these assumptions held by the missionaries influenced their interpretation of the Bible and exerted influence on the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. My discussion is confined to

the Church Missionary Society, an Anglican body of British missionaries.⁴ This is so because it was British colonialism and its link to that particular branch of the Christian tradition which have mainly shaped my country and created the institutions which have benefited the particular expression of Western culture known as Pakeha.

For Dube, Jn 4:1-42 is an imperialising text, one of those travel/mission texts that link the use of the Bible with colonisation. She holds that “the story authorises the Christian disciples/readers/believers to travel, to enter, to educate, to harvest other foreign lands for the Christian nations in a literary fashion openly modelled on imperialist values” (Dube 1996: 49; 2002: 63). Ignorance is depicted by the woman who is the first point of entry and is representative of the foreign land that is entered, won and subdued (Dube 1996: 51; 2002: 63). According to Dube imperialistic ideology and values led the Samaritans to acknowledge Jesus as “Saviour of the World” and to extend these fields to the whole world (v. 42).

The view of Anglican Bishop William Broughton of New South Wales under whose episcopal authority New Zealand was in this period illustrates that assumption. Before February 1840, he wrote to the missionary Henry Williams and “very strongly

⁴ Caution is needed when critiquing the CMS and missionaries from the perspective of today. See, Te Paa 1998: 89-90. Further, Ross points out that when the term “missionaries” is used in this period certain distinctions must be made. For example, when the Marquis of Normanby stated in his instructions to Captain Hobson that “You will, I trust, find powerful auxiliaries amongst the missionaries,” it was the British Protestant missionaries, and specifically, the Anglican missionaries, to whom he was referring. From the Marquis of Normanby to Captain Hobson, R.N. August 14, 1839. Further, for Maori, *mihinare*, the transliteration of “missionary” referred a member of the Protestant missions and, in particular, Anglican missions. The first French Catholic missionaries were seen to be different and so were given the name *pikopo*, a transliteration of *episcopus*, which was applied first to Bishop Pompallier and later to his converts. (1972: 136-137).

recommended” that he support Governor Hobson so that “British laws and government, and none else, should be established in New Zealand” (Benfill 1992: 76-77). Even if their activities were generally not undertaken explicitly under the auspices or direction of the Colonial Office, nevertheless, the British missionaries were at the cutting edge of British imperialist policy (Moon 1994: 33). Paul Moon calls the missionaries effective but “unwitting components” in the British imperial machine because many missionaries adhered to an anglo-centric conception of Christianity (1994: 35). Clearly, such a view fused religion with notions of monarchy, Empire, duty and civilization.

The outcome of such notions led to what Dube identifies as an ideology of superior and inferior knowledge. She points out that the portrayals of Jesus and his disciples in Jn 4:1-42 convey an ideology in which they function as authorised “superior travellers who represent the superiority of their origins” from above (3: 34; 8: 26; 20: 21-23) (Dube 1996: 50; 2002: 69). The Church Missionary Society, which arrived in 1814, was led by the Rev Samuel Marsden who preferred mainly lay “artisan missionaries with a useful trade and a clear commitment to an Evangelical gospel” (Bawden 1992: 38). These fitted his strategy of first introducing “civilisation” as a first step towards conversion (Glen 1992: 35). Judith Binney refers to the writings of missionaries which show how they sought to interfere with Maori society and thereby create inroads for Christianity and European civilisation. However, no inroads were made until after 1833 (Lange 1992: 11) when three discernable steps had been taken in the process of cultural dislocation and transition to render Maori receptive to Christianity (Binney 1969: 165).

First, with regards to trade and new skills, the missionaries sought to create new needs that would make the missionary indispensable to the Maori. Second, as Judith Binney points out the missionaries endeavoured to attack Maori social custom and beliefs. Further, she states that “Christianity was not presented to the Maori ‘divorced from a European framework’, it was specially taught in connection with the stressed inferiority of Maori culture and the superiority of European culture” (Binney 1969: 152).

For Dube, “what seems to be an inclusive gospel of Spirit and Truth is the installation of Christianity as the universal religion” which is above all geographical boundaries, claims power over the “world” and relegates “all other religions and cultures to inadequacy” (1996: 53). Such a framework of thought led to the third step in which Maori religious beliefs such as tapu were attacked in order to assert the truths of Christianity (Binney 1969: 153).

Among the Church Missionary Society, the belief prevailed that the quality of faith depended on exposure to the Bible and scriptural truth (Lineham 1992: 152).⁵ Therefore, the priority was to provide the scriptures in their own language. The bible, then, was crucial in the development of written Maori and had consequences for colonisation for indigenous Maori is not the language of Te Tiriti o Waitangi but *mihinare* Maori. Its interpretation and explanation both at Waitangi itself, and in the main at locations beyond, was monopolised by Anglican and Wesleyan missionaries

⁵ Lineham stresses the enormous authority placed on the Bible as a source of authority in Protestantism and especially in the evangelical philosophy from which the CMS originated.

(Ross 1972: 138).⁶ The influence of the Bible in the text of Te Tiriti is most graphically shown by Henry William’s choice to use the word *kawanatanga* in the preamble and in article one.⁷ Although there is debate over whether Williams’ actions were deliberate or accidental, the point to stress is that the missionaries and the Bible influenced the language of the treaty and its interpretation.

I want to raise the question of the participation of women in the colonial tasks. The advisability of missionaries being married or single, or marrying suitable wives is often referred to in the writings of such as Samuel Marsden (Porter 1996: 135). While Henry Williams was emphatic that he and Marianne would set out to New Zealand as an equal partners (Glen 1992: 33) and Frances Porter’s reflection on missionary wives show that they had a status because of their vocation which was not given to settler wives, it is impossible to generalise on their roles. It is fair to conclude that in their primarily domestic roles they were exhorted to use every opportunity of influencing Maori women. They were “help-mates” of their husbands in the task of “civilising” Maori women in the European way of becoming proficient housewives and in the training and

⁶ An overview of the drawing up of the treaty texts illustrates this fact: On 3 Feb an English-language draft is prepared by Hobson, Freeman (Hobson’s secretary) and Busby... This first English language draft has not survived. On 4 Feb the draft is given to the Rev Henry Williams for translation into Maori. On 5 Feb there is a preliminary discussion of William’s translation, and some alterations are made to it. Some Maori rangatira are involved in the discussions. A revised Maori version is copied out onto parchment by Rev Richard Taylor. The original of this Maori has not survived either. A copy of the revised Maori is presented to the chiefs for signature on 6 February. Five English version are sent abroad by Hobson, but none of these are translations of the 6 February Maori text, nor is the Maori text a translation of them ... (Ross 1972: 138).

⁷ Two examples illustrate this. *Kawanatanga* is found in the order for morning service: “that all our doings may be ordered by the governance” – *ki tou kawanatanga*. More significantly this word is associated with *mana* in I Corinthians 15:24 “Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom of God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power” – *Ko reira mutunga ino oti*.

teaching of Maori girls were often called matua (mother) suggesting a parent-child relationship (Porter 1996: 137-38).

However, Tricia Laing and Jenny Coleman's study of Sarah Selwyn (married to Bishop Selwyn), her friend Mary Martin (married to the first chief justice and arrived in 1841), Ellen Ellis (emigrated in 1869) and Suzanne Aubert (arrived 1860) highlights the complex positioning of some "white women" (Laing & Coleman 1998: 4-11). These women were agents of colonisation and while they did not "dismantle the empire" or "explode the social order" they disrupted significantly the project of colonisation (Laing & Coleman 1998: 5). They espoused views of colonial policies that opposed current practice and acted accordingly. While, some women today may be more aware of how positionality influences thought and action, these women offer an insight into "the politics of envisaging a legacy for contemporary Pakeha women" to which I offer a scriptural voice colonisation (Laing & Coleman 1998: 5).

A Feminist Contextual Reading Of Jn 4:1-42

So mindful of the imperialism in the world of the biblical text, the connection between interpretation of the biblical text in the history of colonisation and its enduring qualities, I shall now look at three aspects of Jn 4:1-42. These suggest a transformative reading for a feminist postcolonial reading and take account of what may be surmised from the socio-cultural world of the text, from the text itself and the symbolic world which it projects.

The first aspect is to read the text aware that there is a dominant culture in the text. While the symbolic universe of the Fourth Gospel is problematic in regards to its representation of "the Jews," a careful reading shows that "many Jews" did believe in Jesus. Among them are Mary and Martha of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, the mother of Jesus, and Mary of Clopas. These are most likely all women of Jewish cultural heritage. They are representative of the majority culture, the culture of higher status in the sociocultural and religious world in which Johannine Christianity arose. The text of Jn 4:1-42 raises questions about the place of Samaritan Christians within the often supposed egalitarian Johannine communities. This was not just an issue for the males of the dominant ethnic group. Women of the dominant culture(s) then and now must contend with concerns arising from gender. However, the tradition of the woman of Samaria highlights that then and now women of the dominant culture(s) must also contend with their assumptions and participation in the privilege which originates in their ethnicity and cultural heritage.

It is the place of and the extent of woman of Samaria, a woman not of the supposedly dominant culture, in the Johannine narrative that I want to highlight. I want to ask the questions raised by rhetorical criticism which lead one to search for what is the experience and context of the communities which led the writer of the Fourth Gospel to place this "Other", this non-Jewish woman in a story such as Jn 4:1-42. How would ancient readers have heard this story? What is it that we of the present day do not readily see? What is the world of Christian discipleship which is projected by these stories and emerges to invite the transformative participation of the reader? (Schneiders 1999: 180)

This leads to my second point: that the woman is portrayed as knowing her culture and religious traditions. She engages assertively in the most extended, sophisticated theological discussion in the Fourth Gospel. Her conversation weaves backwards and forwards. In contrast, that of Nicodemus in Jn 3 fades out and ends with a monologue in which only Jesus speaks. This woman has voice, she takes action, leaves her water jar (v. 28) - her tool of trade evoking a call story - and communicates to her own people about the one whom she believes to be the Messiah (4: 28-29).

Third, there is evidence of several theologies in this gospel. The Johannine community is comprised of different cultures. There is evidence of Greeks, Galileans, Judaeans, and Samaritans. The late-first-century of Israel from which Christianity arose was certainly not monolithic in belief and practice. The nuances of the Johannine gospel are quite different and depart from other Jewish beliefs and practices and their appropriation in earliest Christianity. Factors in this may be accounted for by the possible influence of Samaritan Christians. I do not want to raise the question of authorship of this gospel but Sandra Schneiders highlights the significance of this woman when she contends that the "textual alter ego of the evangelist, whatever her or his actual identity and gender might have been" is the figure of the Samaritan woman (Schneiders 1998: 535). Schneiders underscores the contribution of this woman whose Otherness I have sketched when she writes that:

The Samaritan Woman in the text would represent a theologically astute, second generation Johannine Christian well able to blend Jewish and Samaritan into the peculiar Johannine synthesis with its "I am" God theology, anti-temple bias, high Christology, egalitarian and inclusive ecclesiology ... She is the recipient of Jesus' direct self-revelation which constitutes her message and establishes her authority (Schneiders 1999: 533-534).

In other words, the culture, theology and authority of this Other is woven into the very fabric of the Fourth Gospel and its communities' expression of faith despite the traditions of the dominant Jewish culture.

In summary, I have shown how my interpretation of the woman of Samaria, one not of the dominant culture of the Johannine community questions the assumptions of the dominant culture. She is depicted as knowing her Samaritan culture and religious traditions and these have greatly influenced significant characteristics of the Johannine communities' synthesis of theology, its attitude to the temple, its ecclesiology and self-understanding. Such a narrative reading of Jn 4:1-42 as I have proposed shows that in the symbolic universe of the text this woman, this "Other", her culture, her spiritual and religious tradition may be traced thus evoking astonishing "equality" and opening up to the Pakeha reader a vision of a community in which "to encounter and to dialogue with the different Other on a level of different and equal subjects" (Dube 1997: 22).

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