

Biblical Entanglements: Reading David's Killings in 2 Sam 21.1-14 alongside those of Te Kooti at Matawhero in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This is a brief consideration of two narratives, one biblical and one set in New Zealand's colonial past, both of which concern matters of power, land, and the observance of covenant. The reading is informed by the statement that postcolonial narrative "confronts an indigestible past, a past that can never be fully remembered or forgotten" (Durrant 2004, 1, 31). 2 Sam. 21.1-14 hints at a seemingly not wholly forgotten incident from the past of Israel's own settlement narrative that the scribal editor has slipped into his Davidic script. Setting this text alongside an account of an early New Zealand massacre, in which there is a knotty biblical entanglement, reinforces the thesis that biblical texts such as this can be valuable tools in jolting our complacency about our present, as those of us of settler descent struggle with the complexities of our own past.

Key words

Postcolonial; cultural memory; land power; Rizpah; Maraea Morete; Te Kooti

Biblical entanglements are very much part of the complexities described by Tony Ballantyne as "entanglements of empire."¹ As he notes:

Even within the context of the increasing disparities of power that characterized frontier society, literacy and the Bible provided successive generations of Maori leaders with new skills and knowledge that could be turned against colonization. The radical potential of the Bible, particularly when wrenched free of missionary control was clear. (2014, 4)

Yet I am all too aware that entanglements frequently involve difficult and unexpected knots. As Sam Durrant observes, postcolonial narrative "is necessarily involved in a work of mourning," confronting, as it does, "an indigestible past, a past that can never be fully remembered or forgotten" (2004, 1, 31).² This paper is a brief consideration of a particular biblical entanglement that links two narratives,

¹ Ballantyne (2014) is writing of the effect of the interactions between Māori and the early Protestant Christian Missionaries in Aotearoa New Zealand.

² Durrant (2004) notes this with reference to Paul de Man's concept of "true mourning."

one biblical and one set in Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial past, both of which concern power, land, and the (non)observance of covenant, which lead to significant matters of mourning. I suggest that aligning the two together provides a tool in the task of jolting the complacency and willing forgetfulness of those of us living in postcolonial societies. The issues of cultural memory are key. As Patrick Evans recognizes, memory is "a complex process," which most political regimes have an interest in managing. His charge is that in Aotearoa New Zealand, such forgetting has been a "necessary" means by which "the white settler culture managed and continues to manage its sense of belonging" (2007, 41). It is the violence of the entry strategies that settler cultures attempt to cover over by a carefully-managed "forgetting" that leads to Michael Rothberg's call for "an understanding of the relations between memory, identity, and violence—the trauma and rupture produced by conquest, occupation, and genocide" (2013, 364).

Memory, and memory lapse, is key in 2 Sam. 21.1-14, for a seemingly forgotten past event in Israel's settlement narrative has ramifications that need to be acknowledged by the scribal editor working on a Davidic history. As Diana Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi recognize, the traditions gathered together in the Bible become part of a "network of sites of memory," a virtual "memory landscape," from which later Israel drew its own sense of identity (2013, x). So, was this an episode that later Israel wished to remain forgotten? Was it a folk memory that emerged from one particular community?³ Though not part of Israel's conquest narrative, it concerns a consequence of Israel's treatment of one of its neighbouring "others," the Gibeonites, who, as "a remnant of the Amorites" (v.2), were originally "people of the land."

As I read this tale, I imagine the scribe busily sorting through the scrolls telling of the days of King David, and then relaxing as the mess of documents is neatly gathered ready to be penned onto the new scroll. Then, suddenly, another narrative comes to light, of murders of Saul's family, in a tale beginning in true folktale style; "there was a famine" echoes the story of David's ancestor Ruth, "in the days of David" substituting for Ruth's contextual location in "the days of the Judges." No other document in the pile has referred to the actions of Saul that this narrative declares the catalyst for what is to follow.⁴ What to do with this discovery? It is clearly a tale remembered down the years, and, more significantly, it is YHWH's voice that is heard declaring bloodguilt on Saul and his house. Matters of historicity are not a concern. As a sacred tradition, this must be included. There is no question about that. Yet it is such a grisly tale, with bodies crucified or impaled, left to be ravaged by birds of the air and wild animals. But I am struck by a knotty entanglement, for I am reading this tale in Aotearoa New

³ See the discussion in Moore and Kelle (2011, 235-65) regarding views concerning the paucity of evidence of David's reign, and the suggestion that "the depiction of David" may be a response to concerns of a much later period (260-1).

⁴ See McCarter, suggesting the massacre or campaign referred to here originally belonged to a text no longer extant (1984, 441). Chavel (2003, 23-52) finds two quite distinct narratives combined. There is also the question of placing the narrative in "the Appendix" to 2 Samuel, against the presupposed chronology.

Zealand, remembering bodies that were, in fact, left “for hawks to clean” (Binney 2010, 316) by Te Kooti, after the massacre at Matawhero. Te Kooti’s actions are, of course, well documented, with no problems of authenticity. Yet behind both events I sense the raw politics, driven by that overarching question, “Whose is the land?” asked of David back in 2 Sam. 3.12. This is the question that drives political conflict, divides ethnic identities, and results in the making and breaking of covenants. It is the question that haunts postcolonial societies. It is presumably the question that led to the fate of the Gibeonites.

The land itself sets the plot in 2 Sam. 21.1-14. It is not productive: “there was a famine ... for three years, year after year” (v.1). This is of concern for David, king over the land. But over the king, and over the land, there is another power to be reckoned with: YHWH, who now reveals that the fault lies with Saul, the king whose body was also desecrated in defeat. There is a long back-history here: “there was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David” (2 Sam. 3.1). While the politics are murky, the point in 2 Samuel 21 is that YHWH has been displeased. David, having approached YHWH and learned of this, is now obliged to act. The reason for YHWH’s displeasure? Saul, at some point, had apparently massacred Gibeonites: “he had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah” (v.2). Who were these Gibeonites? As “a remnant of the Amorites” (v.2), they were undoubtedly a grouping of “people of the land.”⁵ So why should this be a problem? Saul had disregarded the treaty that Joshua had previously made with the Gibeonites, and YHWH was, of course, the patron deity of all such treaties.

We, as readers, are being taken back in 2 Sam. 21.2 to the days of Israel’s entry into the land, as recorded in the book of Joshua, with murky politics on all sides. For, according to Joshua 9, the Gibeonites, realizing whose the land will be, and therefore the fate awaiting them as “people of the land,” had cunningly managed to pass themselves off as travellers from a far distant country.⁶ They had spun a good story, which Joshua and the leaders had not questioned, and, more damningly, had not taken to YHWH for direction (v.14). The consequence? A treaty and an oath sworn, which could not be revoked. Joshua had been fooled.⁷ There were clear instructions concerning the land’s indigenous people: not only was Israel to “make no covenant with them and their gods” (Exod. 23.32) but such peoples were to be annihilated, anything that breathed was not to be left alive

⁵ According to Blenkinsopp, “We may take it as certain that the Gibeonites constituted an enclave which was ethnically distinct from other elements described as ‘Amorite’ (Joshua x. 5) and, *a fortiori*, from the Israelites” (1972, 28); original italics.

⁶ Note that Josh. 9.7 identifies the Gibeonites as Hivites. Na’aman reads 2 Sam. 21.2b–3a as an insertion that “artificially combines the bloodguilt of Saul with the breaking of the treaty concluded between the Israelites and Gibeonites, according to Joshua 9,” in which case, the original story does not provide the background of the bloodguilt (2009, 103). See Rosenberg for the ruling in Deut. 20.15 regarding those from far away (2014, 71-2).

⁷ As Hawk notes, “the flow of conversation has been dictated by the inhabitants of the land rather than by Israel ... Although the intentions of the Gibeonites are evident to the reader, the narrator reveals little about the thoughts or perspective of Joshua and the Israelite leaders” (1991, 84).

(Deut. 20.16-17).⁸ When the truth is revealed it is too late; the Gibeonites had already craftily gained Israelite protection. All that can be done is to lower their status (v.21). In Gil Rosenberg's words, theirs is to be an "exclusionary inclusion" (2014, 69).⁹ They are "in" Israel, but not entirely "of" Israel, and with this change of status come consequences. Five neighbouring kings attack Gibeon, so that Joshua is now obliged to intervene, and, in an ominous foreshadowing of 2 Samuel 21, the defeated kings are not only killed but their bodies hung up on trees (Josh. 10.1-27). As for the covenant itself, as Daniel Hawk notes, this "represents the most serious breach of Yahweh's commandments yet encountered ... The story of the Gibeonite covenant deconstructs the plot of obedient Israel" (1991, 85, 88). Ironically, then, it is Saul who has acted in accordance with Torah, and Joshua's act that has made that a bloodguilt. Killing Gibeonites is now a sin requiring atonement, which, in turn, requires a killing. YHWH, of course, has already acted: "there was a famine in the land," which 2 Sam. 21.1 links with the Gibeonite affair, although only after David's approach. Or is this linkage David's interpretation? Or the scribal narrator's? Who does one trust in this so-called history?

According to the tale, David then calls the Gibeonites, and, in another crafty conversation, asks "What shall I do for you?" (2 Sam. 21.3). But is this really an open question? The Gibeonites reply, obsequiously denying their right to make demands. Another question follows, teasing the reader. For what exactly is David's response? The NRSV has, "What do you say that I should do for you?" (v.4). The "you say" appears to hint at a power shift; yet, if David's words are translated with Fokkelman as, "Whatever you say I will do for you," then, as he argues, "what the king says borders on the granting of a mandate" (1990, 278). To the Gibeonites! Their grievance now spelt out, they call for Saul's sons to be handed over and impaled (vv.5-6).¹⁰ The wording is crafty, with the jussive passive (let seven ... be given) covering over the one responsible for this killing. This makes the final response all the more dramatic. Now it is "the king said"—not the personal name David, but the title (v.6). And what he says is that "*I* will hand them over," with the emphatic pronoun *'ānî*. Is this a blot on David's part? The scribal narrator hurries on with the sparing of Jonathan's son (v.7), for David is to be seen as the oath keeper, and here is another oath to be kept. So the acts are carried out—seven impalements on the mountain in the presence of YHWH (vv.8-9). And there the bodies are left (v.10).

⁸ Exod. 23.32 refers specifically to the Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites. This is repeated in Exod. 34.12, which includes the Amorites Perizzites, and Jebusites. Deut. 7.2 adds the Girgashites, while Judg. 2.2 simply has "inhabitants of the land."

⁹ He describes their roles as "hewers of wood" and "drawers of water" in terms of "forced labor" (2014, 73), noting that these involve both subjugation and marginalization.

¹⁰ The meaning of the verb translated here as "impale" (*yq'*) is uncertain and translations vary widely. Elsewhere, the hiphil form appears only in Num. 25.4, describing a form of execution "in the sun." As McCarter concludes, what is clear is that "the execution is of a special kind and that an important part of it is the exposure of the bodies of the dead" (1984, 44).

It has all been a matter of oaths and the rightings of wrongs. Or has it? Who are these who have been impaled? Are they not the last remaining sons and grandsons of Saul, apart from the disabled Meri-Baal (Mephibosheth)? David has finally eliminated any possible rivals from the fallen royal house. While the text does not explicitly declare this, the name of Saul has been present throughout, functioning as the *inclusio* for the whole narrative of 2 Sam. 21.1-14. Yet the deed has been carried out with the responsibility supposedly lying with the Gibeonites. This would seem a clever instance of dirty politics. Not that this is anything new. Getting rid of the opposition is, as Blenkinsopp wryly comments, “what usurpers have always done, as history attests” (2013, 37).¹¹ Seven bodies impaled, unburied—victims of a power struggle set within a history of brutal land entry that demanded death of “people of the land.” This is an unhappy memory, of one indigestible past event.

It is, of course, a tale in an ancient text. Yet I am reading this with Te Kooti’s massacre at Matawhero in mind, a nineteenth-century act in Aotearoa New Zealand, seemingly far removed from this early Israelite narrative. What links the two is that question: whose is the land? The immediate context was one of armed conflict between the Crown and certain Māori iwi (tribes), despite a treaty signed in 1840 between the Crown and certain chiefs.¹² Once again there is a murky back-story. Te Kooti, formerly an enterprising trader, had been used by the Crown’s Government forces in their dealings with disaffected Māori. Yet, with accusations flying and judgments being made as to who had sided with whom, Te Kooti found himself charged, by these very same Government forces, with “spying” and supplying ammunition to “the enemy.” Although maintaining his innocence, he was denied any chance of defense, and was arrested and deported to the Chatham Islands, illegally, as was later acknowledged.¹³ As Alan Ward writes, “truth is ever a casualty of war” (1980, 25).¹⁴

It is at this point that the biblical entanglements appear. Once in exile, having been mission educated, Te Kooti, like David, claimed to have heard God, and so the metamorphosis to Te Kooti, the religious leader, who now daringly plans and executes an escape from bondage in the tradition of Exodus. It is indeed a case of biblical entanglement. He is now the Māori Moses, back to reclaim the land of Canaan, with the Bible itself in support, using texts such as Josh. 23.5-6 as

¹¹ See also Stone (2006, 220).

¹² Although the Treaty of Waitangi was signed between Queen Victoria and more than 500 Māori Chiefs, there were others who did not sign the documents. Differences in meaning and nuance between the English and Māori versions led to different understandings. According to the English version, the Chiefs ceded to the Queen “absolutely and without reservation all the rights and powers of Sovereignty”; in the Māori version, the word translated as “Sovereignty” simply meant governorship. Consequently, as Claudia Orange writes, “Māori might well have assumed, therefore, that their sovereign rights were actually being confirmed in return for a limited concession of power in *kāwanatanga* (i.e. governorship)” (1987, 41). Such misunderstandings have led to a long-conflicted history.

¹³ Binney (1995, 129-30) refers to a report in the *Wellington Independent*, 2 October 1869, stating that it was “admitted to have been illegal.”

¹⁴ For a discussion of the charges, see Binney (1995, 60-1, 109).

the promise of God to drive out colonialist landholders.¹⁵ For “whose is the land?” Not those who enter only to confiscate. Denied safe passage and refusing to give up their arms, Te Kooti and his followers were declared outlaws. Ironically, though Moses led, they were now like the Gibeonites, foreigners in their own land, and under attack.

So, in November 1868, Te Kooti also turned to a significant killing, at Matawhero. It is Joshua’s battle at Jericho replayed, with the tables turned, for this is Te Kooti, of the tangata whenua (people of the land). Fueled with biblical zeal, he makes his response to colonial injustice and land confiscation, particularly of the land to which he has long held rights.¹⁶ For whose is the land? Thirty-four Europeans, and a number of Māori were killed, and other Māori aligned with the British were taken prisoner. Recognized as the “most bloody single assault the settlers had experienced in New Zealand” (Ward 1980, 30), it is also described as “one of the most cleverly planned guerrilla raids ever launched” (Belich 1986, 229), which makes a further link with David, renowned for his own guerrilla warfare skills. There is, however, a more significant link with 2 Samuel 21: the killing was understood as not only a matter of biblical zeal but of divine instruction. As a survivor later revealed in court, “Jehovah had told him that those who had been separated from us were to be killed” (cited in Binney 2010, 318).¹⁷ What followed chillingly echoes the Gibeonite event in 2 Sam. 21.9. There is, significantly, a further biblical entanglement, for the bodies of prisoners selected by Te Kooti for execution were to be left “for hawks to clean,” following Ps. 63.10, where, if one follows the inscription, those who “seek to destroy” David’s life will be put to the sword and left as “prey for jackals” (Binney 2010, 316). One wonders if Te Kooti had also read Deut. 28.26, where this is one of the curses to fall on those who disregard YHWH’s commands and decrees. The point, however, is that for Te Kooti, it is the Bible that has provided the warrant. It has been a tool turned against the colonisers.

These are narratives of powerful male leaders, although 2 Sam. 21.8 does mention the mothers of the impaled Saulides, Rizpah and Merab.¹⁸ I sense again the Deuteronomist hesitating. This is David’s story, and yet, in this one document, Rizpah, the pawn of power hungry men back in 2 Samuel 3, acts as the catalyst for David’s further act of appeasement.¹⁹ What is the scribe to do with this? For, as

¹⁵ This was the text chosen for the day on October 24, 1868. See Binney (1995, 115); also Gunn (1998, 138-42).

¹⁶ See Binney (1995, 108-14, 129-30) arguing against the view that it was “utu (i.e. revenge) for Te Kooti’s treatment after his capture at Waerenga-a-hika, three years earlier,” as stated in the online New Zealand History, at www.nzhistory.net.nz/te-kooti-attacks-matawhero, and held by historians such as Belich, who also cites the more general “atrocities committed by the British” (1986, 229).

¹⁷ The statement made by Maraea Morete in court, as reported in the transcript in the *Wellington Independent* September 28, 1869.

¹⁸ *Pace* Masoretic Text, which reads “Michal.” Two Hebrew manuscripts and some LXX versions have Merab, who, according to 1 Sam. 18.19, was Adriel’s wife.

¹⁹ See Stone (1996, 85-9), also Melanchthon (2014, 171-90), whose essay led me, in turn, to engage with this text.

Fokkelman notes, “the plot had the appearance of being finished at the end of v.9” (1990, 290). Should he include what seems to be the sequel, perhaps using the phrase “at the beginning of the barley harvest” as the link, pointing to better things ahead, as in the book of Ruth? And what is he to do with Rizpah? He decides to make her the subject of the opening verb in 2 Sam. 21.10 and those immediately following, and will even tag her with her own lineage, besides noting she was a concubine of Saul’s.²⁰ Added to which, her appearance in vv.10-14 will also bring a certain frisson of surprise.²¹

So, following the narrator’s script, we, as readers, watch this mother of the two impaled royal sons, seated on sackcloth, on a rock, protecting the bodies from the ravaging birds and wild carnivores (v.10). Is this an act of deliberate disobedience, rebutting that last clause of Deut. 28.26, that there should be no-one to frighten away such ravagers? Or is this a mother’s last desperate act, caring for her children even in death, perhaps even a move to honour the sons and grandson of Saul? Perhaps it is all of these. For a brief two verses she holds the focus, before it shifts again to David. The two never meet, nor converse. David is told of her acts, and is moved to act in turn. Yet he does not go to her, but to Jabesh-gilead to retrieve the bones of Saul and Jonathan, whose bodies had earlier been strung up by Philistines in Beth-shan. For this is not to be a story about Rizpah but of David and Saul. While the bones of the sacrificed sons are also gathered up, the burial concerns only Saul and his son Jonathan, and the tale closes with the focus once more on David. Through his manipulations, the junior Saulides are dead, the bones of Saul and Jonathan respectfully buried on his orders, and YHWH now appeased and ready to respond to entreaties concerning the land. For whose is the land? Whose is the power? A grisly tale has ended well. For David. Did he remember to thank Rizpah?

Women were also involved in the aftermath of the Matawhero attack. Maraea Morete, like Rizpah, was also forced to watch a “ritualised execution,” in her case, of her husband, whose body was also left for “for hawks to clean” (Binney 2010, 316). Again, the politics are murky, for it was Maraea’s husband, Pera Taihuka, who had earlier “maliciously fingered Te Kooti” for supposedly supplying gunpowder to “the rebels” (Binney 2010, 316), the very charge on which he had been arrested and exiled. While this death was ostensibly meted out by Te Kooti as a consequence of Pera’s false accusations against him, it was also for choosing the wrong side. For whose was the land? Whose was the power? Māori or the British? There was no chance of Maraea keeping watch by the body. She and her young son were also on the sacrifice list, following God’s supposed instructions. Escape was her only option, with her son, who did not survive the years of wandering. Eventually, in a curious nineteenth-century twist, she turned

²⁰ Exum refers to her as “a wife of secondary rank” (1992, 111).

²¹ As Fokkelman observes, “It has the quality of surprise ... indebted to the quite unforeseeable appearance of a woman [whose] intervention ... arouses the ruler to take equally unpredictable steps” (1990, 272).

to the life of a Salvation Army Evangelist, whose published memoir, “Life of Maria, The Converted Half-Caste,” bears the sub-title “I pardoned Te Kooti.”²²

Yet who remembers Rizpah or Maraea Morete? The scribal editor has included Rizpah, but while her act is the catalyst for the appeasement, and so “the focal point of the story,” it nevertheless, as Cheryl Exum notes, “receives the least amount of narrative space” (1992, 113). Both women are minor figures in these conflicts, caught between warring sides. Identity is crucial: Rizpah suffers and is seen to suffer as a Saulide mother, though her act works for David. Maraea’s is more complex: identifying herself as half-caste, yet wearing a moko (facial tattoo), she moves between settler and Māori communities, distancing herself from Te Kooti to the extent that she testified for the Crown in the treason trials of some who had fought with him. Indeed, as Judith Binney reports, “she became a bereaved heroine for settler newspapers and photographers” (2010, 316). Yet she receives no mention at all in Maurice Shadbolt’s novel, *Season of the Jew*, concerning Te Kooti and the Matawhero event, and appears very rarely in the general histories, although her *Autobiography of a Maori Woman*, which includes her war experiences during the years 1865–1869, remains a significant historical source.²³

Both women are minor figures in the “myth-making ... the casting of villains and ... culture-heroes” that Ward sees as part of truth being “ever a casualty of war and of the aftermath of war” (1980, 24-5). For scriptural readers, David is indeed an Old Testament/Tanak culture-hero, and Te Kooti, too, revered as the founder of the Ringatū faith, although a villain in Pākehā memory. It is a matter of neatly categorizing, with memories chosen accordingly, and the forgetting complies. For those “confront[ing] an indigestible past” (Durrant, 2004, 31) find that it slips down the gullet more easily when reduced to hero/villain tales. Details of dirty politics and the ideologies driving them can be glossed over and forgotten. This is particularly true of “settler” histories, and those that follow in their wake, even centuries later. As Peter Gibbons writes, these histories “share an essential characteristic ... they propose the settler presence to be unproblematic, and they problematize the ‘Other.’” If uncontested, they themselves become “sites of (textual) colonization” (2002, 14). So, I am thankful to the scribal editor for including this small narrative in 2 Samuel 21, as reading it alongside the Matawhero massacre account helps to break through the supposed victors’ positioning.

What has also been apparent in this double reading is the way in which the shadow of YHWH lies over both histories and their players. Even the Gibeonites

²² Binney (2010, 319). This was published in the Salvation Army *War Cry*, 1 October, 1887. She also gave evidence for the Crown in the trials “for treason and murder” held in 1869.

²³ Written under her European name, Maria Morris, it is held as MSS 2296, at the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. See Shadbolt (1986). Also Ihimaera (1986), who includes references to the Matawhero event. Belich (1986, 229) does refer to “Pera’s wife,” though not by name, and quotes, from her “Recollections,” Te Kooti’s order that “God has told me to kill women and children, now fire on them.” It is Judith Binney’s work that has brought her recognition.

are heard to declare that the impalement will take place “before YHWH” (v.6). And not only is the Bible and its word paramount for Te Kooti, but, as Chris Hilliard notes, “early Victorian economic theory and practice,” which lie behind the British colonizing project, was significantly influenced by an evangelical theology, which was typically biblically based (2002, 91).²⁴ As these two narratives highlight, the Bible and colonial history are so often entangled. While we are disturbed by the land power struggles revealed in the former, we are, however, led though this very knottedness to deal with those of the latter. As we are led by both Rizpah and Maraea in the “work of mourning,” we come to recognize that these biblical entanglements help us to engage in the postcolonial task of remembering and to confront the “indigestible past” of our own colonial history.

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²⁴ See also Gunn, who sets out the various ways in which “the Bible was implicated” in “the European settlement of New Zealand” (1998, 129-33).

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