

## A Response to Judith McKinlay

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To begin where Judith's text ends: "These texts come to us as gift, but they are not innocent, just as we, their readers, are not innocent. Critical care is the requirement, but as contexts and times change, there can be no closure and no end to difference" (2019, 6). As with much of Judith's rich and resonant writing on the biblical texts, several things are held in tension here. Texts that come to us as given and as gift, yet which are not in themselves innocent, bearing both poison and promise. Readers, centuries of them, who bring to the texts their own interests, often unspoken, cajoling the texts and cajoled by them in turn, both pawns and purveyors of power. And the pervasive, insidious matter of ideology, above all as it pertains to women and land. How are we, interpreters of Scripture, to negotiate between so many voices and interests, to illuminate the texts and their afterlives, in ways that are just and true?<sup>1</sup>

Judith's essay, in all its brevity and terseness, adumbrates a crisis at the heart of the field of biblical studies, to do with the affirmation of difference as a property of texts and interpreters alike. Recent decades have, as is well known, witnessed an efflorescence of methods, approaches, and reading perspectives, together with the beginnings of diversification as biblical scholarship becomes less and less the preserve of a white, male, metropolitan elite (I say "beginnings," for the decentring of biblical scholarship has a long way to go yet). Judith's scholarship has played a very important role here, interrogating texts and readers in light of both feminist and postcolonial concerns (and especially across the spaces where they overlap). Her work has perhaps had an even more significant impact to date in other parts of the world than here in Aotearoa New Zealand, though this is so clearly the context of her most important work (a prophet is not without honour ... though I trust that her time *will* come). Such have been the rapidity and extent of the developments that have taken place within the biblical studies guild that it is arguably difficult to say whether a single, discrete discipline—biblical studies—any longer exists as such. Whether this is indeed the case, and moreover whether it ultimately matters, is yet to be seen.

There have been a number of flashpoints. In particular, we have seen profound tensions between practitioners of the various methods that might conventionally be termed "historical criticism" and scholars engaged in a variety of approaches that might loosely and not always entirely accurately be termed "postmodern." There have been serious tensions around the question of the degree of subjectivity in the interpretive process, and whether we can ever be sure that a given text has a single, identifiable meaning, and whether genuine scholarship is a

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<sup>1</sup> As this is a short response to an article rather than a work of original research *per se*, I have written more impressionistically than I usually would and have not cited relevant scholarly works as comprehensively as normal. In what follows, I am alluding to debates and ideas that are current in biblical scholarship, the vast majority of which are those of others, not original to me.

dispassionate enterprise only, or whether there is room for activism, advocacy, and commitment, and if so on what terms and under what conditions. On the matter of the reconstruction of the histories of the societies and statelets that apparently once existed in Iron Age Palestine, and to whose stories the historical books of the Hebrew Bible bear variegated witness, the debates between so-called “maximalists” and “minimalists” have at times been little short of acrimonious. The possibility of an avowedly secular approach to the biblical texts has been advocated, intentionally excluding any *a priori* assumptions about the nature of the biblical texts as media of divine communication, a move to some extent anticipated by Spinoza in the seventeenth century. Partially in response to this there has been a vigorous revival of theologically committed engagements with the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and between the two approaches—secular and theologically committed—a gulf seems to be set, with debates among the one group of scholars taking place almost wholly without reference to the other (there are, of course, notable exceptions, but lamentably few). And most recently there has been a very significant interest in the reception and effect of the biblical texts, though some scholars of a predominantly historical-critical bent have been known to ask whether this is genuine biblical scholarship, or merely what biblical scholars get up to when they are on holiday.

So it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell just what it is that biblical scholars have in common—short of the text itself, and as Judith has often reminded us, in no uncertain terms: the text *matters*, just as the context of its readers matters. And, I would add, the context of its production matters. The question remains: what are the limits of permissible difference between interpreters of the biblical texts? This is, of course, a political question, for it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the act of setting limits is *ipso facto* an act of power. Who, after all, gets to decide where those limits lie, and, indeed, who gets to decide that this question ought to be put, let alone resolved? But is it simply a matter of power, or are there in fact some limits that must be recognized, no matter what? I would want to suggest, for example, that the biblical texts themselves, in the particularities of their languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, followed by the languages of the ancient Versions and those of the plethora of modern translations) and genres, do set certain intrinsic limits. Texts are open to certain meanings but not to others, and part of the scholarly task is to trace those possibilities of meaning, together with their limits, and to account for them. Why is this text open to these meanings, but not to those? Why are those meanings aberrant in relation to the properties of the text, and how might the peculiarities of their transmission and reception account for their aberrance? The ability to do this sort of painstaking work also entails particular intellectual skills, such as the ability to read an ancient text in Hebrew or Aramaic, and a modern translation in Swahili or Samoan.

I would also want to suggest that, notwithstanding the often-extreme difficulties of historical reconstruction, there are certain *facts* that matter, even if those facts are unobtainable. This is an issue of ethics, at least as much as of epistemology, for when facts are open to dispute and historical research is not undertaken with critical distance and discipline, the consequences can be severe. This may seem obvious to us when we consider the ideological uses to which competing claims about the details of the firebombing of Dresden, or the killings in the Jasenovac concentration camp, or the precise circumstances of the displacement of a large proportion of the Palestinian population during the Nakba, can be and

have been put. Yet there are, and can be, no “alternative facts”: even if the precise facts are difficult to obtain, and even if competing interpretations and uses of them will persist, it matters to try as best one can to get them right. So there is a matter of principle involved when we consider, *mutatis mutandis*, the reconstruction of events in the ancient world, especially when those events, and the ideologically shaped witnesses to them, have had significant long-term effects. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of the settlement of southern Canaan (Palestine) during Iron Age I, whose political ramifications have, remarkably, persisted into the present, but it is also important to consider the religious reforms attributed to Hezekiah and Josiah in terms of their historical veracity (or otherwise), for their effects have also, equally remarkably, persisted into the present, albeit in a more subtle and surreptitious way. Even if we might never know whether or not, or in what sense, a religious reform during the reign of King Josiah actually took place, it is a matter of ethical principle to work out as best one can at least how the most probable solution might be found, even if a decisive answer remains elusive, and then to go on to account for the effects of the narratives of the reform (in Kings and Chronicles) throughout history. Here there are, in my view, necessary ethical limits to difference.

The openness of the scholarly guild to feminist and postcolonial approaches, however, raises a different range of questions to do with difference. Perhaps “diversity” might be a more apposite term, for it connotes, I think, the matter of power and exclusion more clearly than does “difference,” especially in a socio-cultural context increasingly (albeit again imperfectly) attuned to the concerns of, among many others, the gender diverse. It connotes the matter of the demographic variety (or otherwise) of the Guild, not simply the heterogeneity of opinions held, and methods practiced, by its members, though it should encompass those, too.

In light of this, the critical matter of interpretation can be said to be a matter of diversity, and as such, it is particularly appropriate that Judith’s paper touches on Josiah and Huldah. For when we consider these figures, we begin to see how the reception of the biblical text and the attitudes of modern biblical scholars are extensions of properties present in the biblical text itself. I want to suggest something not terribly novel or radical, but I think not yet widely recognized enough among biblical scholars and other interested readers of the biblical texts, that the Hebrew Bible is broadly speaking composed of two kinds of literary work that, very loosely adapting the terminology of Umberto Eco, might be termed “open” and “closed.” Different biblical texts are, by nature, more or less open to a certain range of construals, and equally more or less closed, but they differ from one another in their relative degrees of openness and closedness. Some of this has to do with the inherent properties of the language in which the texts were written, but much of it has to do with the concerns of the ancient scribes who composed, redacted, and collated the works that now form the Hebrew Bible, and with the social and political conditions under which they were working at particular periods in the histories of Israel and Judah, both before and after what we have come to call the Exile. Now this perhaps sounds somewhat abstract, even speculative, so I am going to offer by way of illustration another engagement with the narrative of the reign of King Josiah in the book of Kings—what I would call a more-or-less *closed* work—to set alongside that offered by Judith, to try and draw out some of the elements of the narrative that set limits to diversity, for a very decided ideological purpose.

The narrative of Josiah's reform in 2 Kgs 22:1–23:30 puts a very particular “spin” on events that supposedly took place during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, as does the parallel in 2 Chron. 34:1–35:27, but the differences of historical detail and religious ideology between the two versions raise significant questions about when, why, and even whether the reform took place, and about the causes, circumstances, and significance of Josiah's death. The narrative in Kings in particular has had a fundamental role in the development of the modern scientific (viz *wissenschaftlich*) study of the Hebrew Bible, and especially the study of the origins, purpose, and literary growth of the book of Deuteronomy, but the character of the (probably composite) narrative itself, and its histories of reception and effect (not quite the same thing, though related to each other), are worth paying attention to in their own right.

The narrative in Kings is of the discovery, supposedly during the process of restoring the Jerusalem Temple, of “the scroll of the teaching” (*sēpher hattôrâ*), which, apparently, only Shaphan the scribe is able to read. It is a narrative whose characters, with the ambiguous exception of Ḥuldah (of which more below), are men—Josiah the king (*hammelekh*), Shaphan the scribe (*hassōpher*), Aḥikam son of Shaphan, Akhbor son of Mikhaiah, Ḥilkiah the high priest (*hakkōhēn haggādōl*, a term perhaps indicative of composition during the Persian period),<sup>2</sup> Asaiah the servant of the king (‘*eved hammelekh*)—and men of an only partially literate upper class (inasmuch as class is a meaningful category of analysis in this context and at this period). The content of the scroll, which, since ancient times, has been understood in various ways in relation to the book of Deuteronomy (or part thereof), provokes severe distress in the king. Following consultation with Ḥuldah, it is understood to predict the imminent catastrophe of divine retribution and exile for the people of Judah for their culpable disobedience to the terms of a treaty binding them to the service of an uncompromising male deity, YHWH. When this narrative is read in the context of the broader historical narrative from the entrance of Israel into Canaan to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, we get a sense of how the reader of the whole, especially when casting sideways glances to Jeremiah and further sideways glances to the narratives and poetry of return in Ezra and Nehemiah, may be conditioned to read the entire history of Israel in terms of theodicy, the justification of a male deity inflicting indiscriminate horror on a people whose own despair is only really given voice in Lamentations and occasional Psalms.

This is a narrative that, notwithstanding the predominantly illiterate context in which it is set, creates a strong link between writing and the mediation of the word of this male and apparently unconsorted deity, YHWH. It is at least plausible that the discovery of the scroll is no more than a trope here, the discovery invented in line with a known literary convention in order to lend authority to what the scroll is supposed to contain, and by extension to justify the religio-political revolution which then takes place in the narrative. But it is not wholly beyond doubt that there did in fact exist such a scroll, even if it was invented for the purpose of inspiring an illiterate, or largely illiterate, king to sponsor a religio-political revolution in the name of a text he apparently could not himself read. The historical and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. also 2 Kgs 12:11, part of another narrative of Temple restoration, on which this one may ultimately be based.

hermeneutical problems here are many, and cannot be addressed further in this article. The key point I want to make, however, is that here we have a strong link between *a written scroll* and the authoritative word of a deity gendered as male, who is about to wreak havoc, not long after Josiah's demise, on the women and children of Judah and Jerusalem in addition to their men, for the sins of their fathers (*'āvōtēnū*, 2 Kgs 22:13) against the words of the scroll.

So the men go to consult Ḥuldah. She is a prophet, but unusually a woman, and a rather different sort of female prophet from Miriam (Exod. 15:20), Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Isaiah's partner (Isa. 8:3), and Noadiah (Neh. 6:14). Her words sound a lot more like those of her male contemporary, Jeremiah, who is suggestively absent from Kings. She is defined by her gender as "prophetess," *n<sup>e</sup>vi'â*, and as the wife of Shallum, guardian of the garments (*šōmēr habb<sup>e</sup>gādīm*). A woman, she belongs to a man. Whether or not the narrator (or his source) has appropriated for YHWH the quondam prophet(ess) of a goddess here (not impossible, though beyond our ability now to determine, I think), this woman is made to ventriloquize the voice of this male unconsorted deity, ready to unleash his anger in fulfilment of the words of a putatively ancient scroll. Ḥuldah's gender and voice are appropriated only to be erased, by the narrator and the narrator's god.

This question of the erasure of voice and gender extends from earth to the heavenly household. For in obedience to the "covenant" or "treaty" (*b<sup>e</sup>rīt*) of the scroll, the religious revolution sweeps away vessels dedicated to "the *ba'al*, the *'āšērâ*, and all the host of the heavens," which are then burned in an act of religious zealotry that will prove to be the first act in a veritable orgy of religious violence. Also dragged out of the Temple in Jerusalem, according to the narrative, then burned in the Wadi Kidron and beaten to dust, is an image known as "the *'āšērâ*," presumably some kind of wooden image associated with a goddess.<sup>3</sup> It is not simply a matter of removing sacred vessels and images, but of removing any suggestion of a divine household that includes anyone who might compromise the absolute sovereignty of the male unconsorted YHWH. If, in the living religion of ancient Israel and Judah, worshippers of YHWH once recognized and honoured a female consort, Asherah,<sup>4</sup> the memory of such devotion is occluded here, even if the author of the narrative once knew of it. Also occluded is the ancient connection between indigenous religious devotion and the land, which Israel's worship of YHWH was meant, judging by the testimony of Deuteronomy and associated texts, not only to obscure but to exclude, and with violence.

What this deeply unsettling narrative represents is a profound resistance to certain kinds of difference and diversity, particularly diversity in the location and object of religious devotion, a resistance that is connected to gender (Ḥuldah and the goddess) and writing (the scroll of the teaching). While there is uncertainty about the meaning of some of the words used in the narrative, there is essentially no openness, and no ambiguity: interpretive difficulties are owing to the limitations in

<sup>3</sup> Perh. cf. Deut. 16:21; note also the *masc. pl.* *'āšērīm* in 2 Kgs 23:14.

<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of the inscriptions of Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom is contested, as, for that matter, is the interpretation of occurrences in the Hebrew Bible of *'āšērâ* with (and without) the definite article. See e.g. 2 Kgs 23:4, 6, 7; contrast anarthrous *'āšērâ* in 2 Kgs 23:15, and also in Deut. 16:21 in connection with a wooden object of some sort that is not to be placed beside an altar dedicated to YHWH.

our understanding of the language of the text, and to the vagaries of manuscript transmission, not to the character of the work as such. And yet the very fact of the rigidity of the author's vision hints at a religious world, if not in the living world of late seventh century BCE Judah then at the very least within the world of the text (which cannot be wholly at odds with the world behind it, even though there will of course be a gap), in which there was a great deal of colour and variety, perhaps belonging to a tradition stretching back centuries. Women were no longer to weave garments for the 'āšērâ (2 Kgs 23:7). Nor, for that matter, were people any longer to subject their children to the terror of sacrifice at the Tophet in the valley of Ben-hinnom (2 Kgs 23:10). The world the text helped to create is one in which both the ideal theocracy of covenanted Israel and the deity of the covenant were to be characterized by a particular kind of masculine authority, that would lend divine sanction to a certain kind of masculine domination within the human community. The world in front of the text—that is, the world of its reception and effect—is one in which orthodoxy and orthopraxy would be defined by adherence to a written source of authority, by a certain kind of holy scripture. Many centuries later, this would explain why the textual memory of Josiah and his violent revolution would play such a key role in Protestant polemic, for example during and in the wake of the Edwardine reformation in sixteenth-century England and Wales, with its violent rejection of Catholic devotion, together with a staunch adherence to the written authority of holy scripture. This narrative is the ancestor not only of Protestant biblicism, and thus of the many varieties of modern biblical fundamentalism, but indirectly of Protestant biblical scholarship itself. As such, *the text matters*, as do the contexts through which it has been transmitted, which have helped to shape and determine the very scholarly interest that has led us to focus our attention on *this* text in the first place.

The Hebrew Bible, however, somehow manages to resist the ideological violence of Josiah and his counsellors, if we are willing to read between the lines, and listen closely for quieted voices. In the Hebrew Bible, we are not presented with a corpus that speaks with one voice. The same corpus that claims to mediate the voice of the male unconsorted deity YHWH to his sometimes battered spouse Israel, conditioning its readers and hearers to identify themselves with the sins of the ancestors that this deity will justly punish, is the same corpus in which the living voice of Wisdom says that she once cavorted before YHWH, “playing in the world, His earth, and my delight with humankind” (*m<sup>e</sup>šaḥeqet b<sup>e</sup>tēvel 'aršô w<sup>e</sup>ša 'āšu 'ay 'et b<sup>e</sup>nē 'ādām*, Prov. 8:31; trans. Alter 2019, 3.380). The ideological violence has not been carried to completion. And even in those places where the other voices do seem to have been utterly silenced, where the gendered ideological violence has been enthusiastically at work, such as in the case of the Queen of Heaven (*m<sup>e</sup>lekhet* or *malkat haššāmayim*) in Jeremiah (Jer. 7:18; 44:17, 18, 19)—whoever she may have been—the fact that she and her worshippers are at least *mentioned* hints at some tradition that may once have been handed down amongst the faithful in ancient Judah, and perhaps among subsequent communities in the Egyptian diaspora. Women will no longer bake cakes for her, but the text cannot silence her worshippers completely.

The critical matter of interpretation, then, is one that requires the scholar to be awakened to the possibility of diversity, a diversity that is present in texts, in the

contexts through which they are handed on, and among their readers. As the texts *matter*, so do their contexts, and so does the diversity of those who read them.

## Reference List

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