

A Response and Tribute to Judith McKinlay

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It is a delight to read Judith's paper and an honour to be invited to respond. Like all Judith's publications, this piece is characterized by respectful and incisive engagement with both biblical texts and wide-ranging secondary literature, which is complemented with sensitive awareness of her own historical and immediate contexts and the bearing these have on her reading. Judith's writings are original and wise and yield multiple insights that are woven together from many strands, using language so clear that the complex becomes accessible.

For me, the act of reading Judith's paper is anything but "a dispassionate enterprise" (Stulman 2015, 95; cited in McKinlay 2019, 1) and *where I am now* is in no small part due to both Judith herself and to Robert Carroll, to whom the statement she cites (about biblical criticism not dismissing historical awareness but beginning with *where we are now*) is attributed.

Robert Carroll was my PhD supervisor. I am well aware that people had strong opinions about him and that his scholarship is deemed polemical—but he and I got along fabulously well and I miss him greatly. But long before I embarked on my PhD at the University of Glasgow, I was taught by Judith. In fact, it was Judith who stood at the front of the classroom in my first class of my first semester as an undergraduate at the University of Otago. I was only taking Hebrew to qualify for the living away from home allowance and was not intending to last with the language for more than one year. But in no small part due to Judith, that would change. Judith guided me through the various gymnastics of the Hebrew verbal system up to the threshold of the biblical text, when she handed us over to Paul Trebilco.

So much from that first semester of Hebrew still rings in my ears and has gone on to echo onwards into my own classrooms when I taught Hebrew. I recall *boomaph* (Judith's invented word to remember the bilabials before which "w" becomes "û") and I still hear "who (= *hû*) is he and he (= *hî*) is she"—a mnemonic familiar to most learners of Hebrew—in Judith's voice. I continued with Hebrew and I took more courses in Hebrew Bible with Judith. Judith had us acting out scenes from the prophets (there were not many women in our courses and I got to play Gomer, which seems to have stayed with several of my former classmates) and Judith supervised my final year dissertation (on names and naming in Ruth) and my independent study on women in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Like the student from East Germany Judith refers to in her paper, I always felt included in Judith's classes—even though, as a non-religious woman taking Hebrew as an Arts not a Theology subject, I was a bit of an anomaly.

Reading Judith's paper and her account of how her interpretation combines a variety of approaches, including ideological-critical, postcolonial, and gender-sensitive lenses, resonates with me; because interpretation is no zero sum exercise requiring or prescribing commitment to just one, to the exclusion of all others. All

of these approaches are central to much of my own work. And I recognize, too, that Judith's insistence on searching for ideological markers in not only the biblical text but also our own context (or *Umfeld*), including with regard to Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history, has influenced me, as has Judith's openness to finding fillips for reflection in inter-texts—not only within the Bible but also in creative writing (such as novels, for instance). Judith's skill in combining multiple lenses is evident not only in this paper and in her books¹ but also in an earlier chapter entitled "Sarah and Hagar: What Have I to Do with Them?" (2005) to which I will turn shortly.

Susanne Scholz—who is mentioned also in this (2019) piece of Judith's—has been agitating for some time for biblical studies to be bolder. In a recent publication (2018), Scholz identifies two widespread shortcomings with feminist biblical exegesis on sexually violent texts (and the story of Sarah and Hagar certainly qualifies here). The first shortcoming is a tendency, particularly among white feminist scholars, to adhere to a scientific-empiricist epistemology that transpires in avoiding, downplaying, or even rejecting socially located readings (2018, 190-1). Scholz characterizes this as a restrictive form of historical-literary approach. As I see it, such also befits the label of "dispassionate," which is used in this paper by Judith (2018). When it comes to texts of sexual violence, Scholz points out, such dispassion not only "minimize[s] and obfuscate[s] the[ir] violent and coercive nature," but also leaves unaddressed important questions pertaining to "power, intersectionality, and issues of social location" (2018, 192). While this tendency may result from an effort to avoid anachronism or of imposing one's own cultural meaning on an ancient text, such an effort is, according to Scholz, futile, because "an escape from particularity, locatedness, and partiality is impossible" (*ibid.*).

The second limitation raised by Scholz pertains to method and methodology. Here Scholz concurs with Esther Fuchs (whose writings provide one fillip for Judith's piece here) and finds fault with "feminist exegetes employ[ing] this or that method in service of this or that biblical rape text, but ... not explain[ing] what makes this or that reading feminist or not" (2018, 192).

Judith's writing does not fall into either of these two pitfalls and I want to highlight her terrific chapter of 2005 alongside this current article to make this very clear and to praise her. In her 2019 article, Judith acknowledges that "engaging [with biblical texts] without drawing upon at least some of the historical-critical tools would, I think, be somewhat anarchic! Careful historical research remains a must, as does redaction and genre studies. And we certainly cannot engage at all without the aid of textual criticism" (2). But in her earlier chapter (2005, 163), Judith also

¹ I am thinking here particularly of Judith's books published by Sheffield Phoenix Press in the Bible in the Modern World series: *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (2006) and *Troubling Women and Land: Reading Biblical Texts in Aotearoa New Zealand* (2014). While Judith is internationally known and admired, she has also continued to write about and for New Zealanders in particular. It is excellent to see the inclusion of New Zealand voices in postcolonial-critical studies of the Bible. Also to be mentioned here is Judith's teacher and mentor Maurice E. Andrew and his fabulous *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (1999). No one who knows Maurice or Judith's scholarship has any doubt as to its world-class calibre. It is probably also true, however, that both would be much better known and considerably more widely cited had they not committed the bulk of their careers to being in their homeland. Biblical studies in Aotearoa New Zealand is all the more enriched for Maurice and Judith, of course. The under-representation of voices from the Global South more generally is highlighted (and resisted) in a recent volume edited by Liew and Segovia (2018).

expresses explicitly her full awareness of the limitations of confining herself to such a method: “While the historical-critical method encouraged scholars to pay careful attention to the surface levels of the text and the historical contexts behind them, it paid little attention to the gaps and omissions within the texts themselves.”

In exploring a biblical text Judith is clear about her own social location. This applies to this current article, where she describes cringing at the passages of land-grab in Deuteronomy, which are all too recognizable given Aotearoa New Zealand’s own colonial past. It is also pertinent to her earlier (2005) chapter. There Judith describes herself as a reader in front of the text, asking herself whether it is possible to find connections with Sarah and Hagar: “For it is ‘I’, the reader that I am, who is attempting to meet the Sarah and Hagar of the text” (2005, 159).² Judith then refines her locatedness and its impact on the reading of Genesis 16 and 21 by describing that “the interests that I bring to my reading of this text include those of a woman of the dominant culture, living in the postcolonial context of Aotearoa New Zealand” (2005, 166). Just as Scholz (2018) urges, Judith rejects the idea that reading such texts can ever be “perspectiveless,” stating instead, “my situated placement ... does make a difference ... whether I am conscious of the fact or not” (2005, 166). Next, not only to demonstrate but also to draw interpretive strength and colour from her situatedness, Judith facilitates a dialogue that connects biblical text and interpretive context. She does this by bringing in an event from nineteenth-century New Zealand described in a series of letters: a triangle, comparable to that of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, between William, his wife Elizabeth and Ripeka, a Māori woman, with whom William had a mixed race child, Wiremu.

With sensitivity and discernment (captured so much better in a German word *Fingerspitzengefühl*, which translates as “the feeling in or from the tips of one’s fingers”), Judith probes a variety of perspectives on this historical situation, and complements this with insights from postcolonial scholars and with scenes of expulsion of “foreign” wives and mixed race children in Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13. From this vantage point, she then explores the stories of Genesis and the character of Ishmael. In doing so, Judith gives neither conclusive answers, nor offers any platitudes. Instead, she highlights *both* the vulnerability and exploitation of Hagar and Ishmael *and* the surprise that “it is Hagar who sets th[e] rhythm [of a divinely appointed destiny in Israelite history] in motion, being canonically the first person approached by God in the wilderness” (2005, 174). Judith aptly describes this as “arresting” (*ibid.*). She asks, “What is God doing, coming to the rescue of an

² Let me add here that Judith’s self-location is not demonstrative but protective of privacy. Judith is certainly critically conscious of her location and of its effect on the reading process and she describes this very systematically, giving the various influences on the formation of her argument. In doing so, she is less revelatory than—in some publications—Athalya Brenner, for example, who discloses her status and identity markers beyond being feminist and her ethnic/cultural affiliation (Jewish and Israeli in Brenner’s case, Pākehā New Zealander in Judith’s). Hence, Brenner adds that she is a mother and divorced, for instance, which are examples of more private identity markers that Judith chooses not to bring into her publications. Brenner offers an insightful and personal reflection on autobiographical criticism, including on whether and how identity and personal experience are formative for academic work, in her introduction entitled, “‘My’ Song of Songs” (2000). I have tremendous regard for Brenner and I enjoy her distinctive style and flamboyance (down to the hallmark long earrings). Judith’s is a gentler wisdom, which maintains a quiet discretion I have also valued enormously over many years now. Actually, when viewed together, Judith and Brenner convey some sense of the wonderful breadth and diversity that is biblical feminism.

Egyptian?” (ibid), highlighting but without explaining³ tensions in the text that balance *conformity* to an ideology favouring one particular people with a radical *undercutting* of that ideology.

I appreciate both Judith’s lack of certainty and her shifting from ancient text to more recent context. Concerning the former, it does not strike me as either possible or appropriate to claim to know what a text *really* means, or even definitiveness as to when, how, where, by whom, or why any biblical text was committed to writing. I like Judith’s designation of the “disturbing elusiveness” of biblical texts (2005, 161). Regarding the latter, Judith shows that just as the present is fraught and complicated (Judith refers in this piece to the current conflicts in Israel/Palestine, which serve as an effective illustration), so is the past. By showing affinities between Genesis and a nineteenth-century colonial account, Judith demonstrates that the stories of Sarah and Hagar cannot so easily “be dismissed as an ancient story” (175). Be it Aotearoa New Zealand, or modern Israel, “our own present is equally built on the inequalities of an ‘othering’ history” (ibid.).

Judith’s way of reading “refuses to leave texts in a closed world of the past,” because biblical texts cannot be “locked up and examined only under the rubric of ‘what the text meant’, but read with an eye opened to the present and the future, with a concern for their political and ethical influence” (2005, 176). In doing so, moreover, Judith is very careful to state what kind of feminist she is and to spell out the steps in her method—which addresses Scholz’s second point.

In this current article, Judith leads us from statements by Esther Fuchs and Louis Stulman, which initiate her stream of thought and analysis, via (among others) Gale Yee, Terry Eagleton, Walter Brueggemann, Pamela Milne and Susanne Scholz, Diana Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, the text of 2 Kings and the role of Huldah, Lester Grabbe, a parallel of Egyptian Shabaka, Robert Carroll, Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah and Mary Callaway, back to Esther Fuchs. This diversity of texts and scholars are all deftly woven into the stream that then comes back on itself to Fuchs’s statement concerning crisis, concluding that there need not be a crisis but we have to acknowledge “disturbing and challenging ideologies,” because neither texts nor readers are innocent. This discussion could have easily become confusing or an exercise in name-dropping; that it does not is because Judith navigates her many texts with such surety and clarity of purpose.

This is likewise evident in Judith’s (2005) chapter on Sarah and Hagar. There, too, she begins, deceptively simply, with herself vis-à-vis the biblical text. As if hearing Scholz’s call from more than a decade on, she states, “If I am coming to this tale as a feminist reader, I need to consider how this will influence how I hear these texts” (2005, 159). Judith adds that it is an obligation to take “seriously the ethics of interpretation, keenly aware [that] ... biblical understandings ... impact upon our present” (160). Next, she locates the text in its literary context, emphasizing the chaotic world that is depicted here—one where “the motifs of sin, punishment, intercession and reprieve, breaches of the hospitality code, incest,

³ Judith does this kind of destabilizing of the familiar so well. In another article (1995), she brings Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39) into dialogue with a range of female biblical characters. In the course of this, she exposes the co-existence of ideologies and counter-ideologies and demonstrates that no text can ever be read in (what she so effectively calls) “solitary confinement” (69).

invitations to rape, and divine protection from violation tumble into view in quick succession” (161). From here, Judith brings in the dialogic technique she attributes to Mikhail Bakhtin, a gender lens credited to Luce Irigaray, and creative stimulus from novelist Jenny Diski. Next, Judith introduces a dialogue with the historical texts from colonial Aotearoa New Zealand and postcolonial-critical theoretical input from Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah and Homi Bhabha, as well as other biblical texts of expulsion. Each step of Judith’s developing argument is carefully but briskly acknowledged and described, constructing a persuasive and strongly founded conclusion.

Again and again, Judith has found new ways to illuminate both the biblical text, as well as something about who and where we are now. I am lucky to have been your student, Judith, and lucky, too, to have had scholars like you paving and pointing the way. Here’s wishing you a fulfilling retirement and hoping that you will continue to write and publish on the Hebrew Bible.

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