

Article

The Māori and Ancient Near Eastern Pantheons in the Context of Genesis 1 in te reo Māori

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Abstract: The recent test translation of Te Paipera Tapu (the Bible in the Māori language) has aroused considerable debate for its use in Genesis 1 of the names of atua Māori (Māori divine beings). These names of atua have been used instead of names of features of the natural world, which stands in contrast to the use of other kupu Māori (Māori words) in the earlier translation and its revisions. In this paper, I outline relevant members of the Māori pantheon and of some ancient Near Eastern pantheons, which are not identical. I then discuss the Hebrew text of Genesis 1 in its ancient literary context, making proposals about the use of the names of atua Māori in translations.

Keywords: Māori; Indigenous; translation; pantheon; creation; Enuma Elish; origins; Hebrew

1. Introduction

In 2023, the Bible Society of New Zealand released He Tīmatanga ('A Beginning'). (Bible Society New Zealand 2023). This small book offers what are effectively test translations of a few sections of the Christian Bible¹ in order 'to get quality feedback from te reo ["Māori language"] speakers, which will help shape the new Māori Bible translation of the future'.²

One of the striking features of He Tīmatanga is that in its translation of Kenehi 1 ('Genesis 1'), it uses the names of atua Māori ('Māori divine beings') for some of the nouns in the Hebrew text.

He Tīmatanga does not provide translator notes,³ and so it offers no substantive rationale for the choice. The use of these divine names seems to be a distinctive approach to translation, which while obviously not a 'literal' or 'formal' attempt at translation, also cannot easily be described as a 'dynamic' translation. The novelty of the approach is not represented by how idiomatic the tone of language is but in what seems to be a more theological choice of how to construct a Māori text which adequately represents the Hebrew text. My own view is that this represents a constructive attempt to syncretize the ancient Māori spiritual world with the Christian Bible, in effect showing their compatibility by integrating these names into the text and in fact placing them within the created order of Genesis 1. In this paper, I will draw together some comparative material in an attempt to problematize the approach, which I infer from the translation itself.

To my mind, there are at least three aspects of methodology which might usefully be interrogated about the translation choice:

1. Locating the Hebrew terms used within the text's setting(s) of origin.
2. Identifying the theological claims of Genesis 1 and locating them within the wider setting of the Hebrew Bible and the cultures (for example).
3. Assessing the communicative result of using the names of atua Māori within a translation of the text of Kenehi 1.

I will proceed by outlining the relevant points of the text of the new Māori translation of Genesis 1 before summarizing the ancient Near Eastern setting: the Māori ideological world within which the names of atua Māori are situated. I will then make some proposals



Citation: Drake, Lyndon. 2024. The Māori and Ancient Near Eastern Pantheons in the Context of Genesis 1 in te reo Māori. *Religions* 15: 984. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080984>

Academic Editor: John Hans de Jong

Received: 30 June 2024

Revised: 9 August 2024

Accepted: 11 August 2024

Published: 14 August 2024



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about how to assess and—in the words of the Bible Society quoted above—‘shape the new Māori Bible translation of the future’ by reflecting on the test translation examined here.

2. The New Māori Translation of Genesis

The use of the names of atua Māori is evident in the first two verses:

I te tīmatanga, te hanganga a te Atua i a Rangi-nui rāua ko Papatūānuku, e takoto kau ana, kāore he āhua o Papatūānuku. Hōhonu ana te pōuri o runga i te mata o Tangaroa, ā, e topaki ana te wairua o te Atua i runga i te wai, pērā i a Tānerore.

In the beginning, God created Rangi-nui and Papatūānuku, which were empty, and Papatūānuku was formless. Deep was the darkness above the face of Tangaroa, and the Spirit of God was hovering above the waters, like Tānerore.⁴

Four names of atua appear in these verses: Rangi-nui, Papatūānuku, Tangaroa, and Tānerore. All four in traditional Māori thought are departmental deities⁵ and to some degree personifications: Rangi-nui of the sky, Papatūānuku of the land, Tangaroa of the sea, and Tānerore of shimmering heat. While Papatūānuku and Rangi-nui are used a number of times throughout the remainder of Genesis 1, Tangaroa only appears again in verse 10 in the naming of the sea, and Tānerore is not mentioned again.

The inclusion of Tānerore is of a different kind to the others, as Tānerore is used in a comparison rather than being identified with an aspect of the world—the spirit of God’s hovering over the waters is ‘like Tānerore’, that is, ‘like the god of shimmering heat’. The comparison to Tānerore does not represent any Hebrew text, and it is an addition to the text.

While these four atua are named, none of the names of the numerous other atua Māori are used in the text, even when an obvious option is available. For example, Tamanuiterā is a personification of the sun and could have been used in verses 14–19. Perhaps the reason for not using Tamanuiterā there is that in Genesis 1 God does not name the sun (indeed, the term שמש famously does not appear, which is a point I will return to later).⁶ But if so, this is not a consistent translation principle, because Tānerore is not used in reference to a named element in the Genesis narrative. I also note that the name of the atua Io is not used for אלהים (‘God’), although this point has been substantially debated in the past and is perhaps a settled issue [Kaa \(2020, pp. 168–73\)](#).⁷

Later, verse 14 is rendered:

Nā, ka mea anō te Atua, “Kia tīaho mai te māramatanga ki a Ranginui kia wehea te awatea i te pō; hei tohu ēnei mea i ngā wā o ngā rā, ngā tau, me te tīmatanga o ngā rā whakamaumahara i ngā atua;

The key phrase here is ‘te tīmatanga o ngā rā whakamaumahara i ngā atua’ (‘the beginning of the times of commemoration of the divine beings’). ‘Rā’ and ‘tau’ refer to ימים (‘days’) and שנים (‘years’) respectively, and so this phrase is presumably a prolix and out-of-order translation of מועדים (‘appointed times’). The semantic range of מועד does include religious festivals, but in biblical usage, it is never a positive reference to festivals to gods (plural) and can also refer to secular times and festivals. The placing of this addition to the text within God’s direct speech has the rhetorical effect of making the creator God of Genesis 1 establish the celebration of festivals for other gods.

3. Ancient Near Eastern Setting

For the sake of brevity in attending to the voluminous literature on this subject, I will refer primarily to David Carr’s recent survey of precursors to the early chapters of Genesis ([Carr 2020](#)).⁸ For a commentary on the text of Genesis 1 with reference to ancient Near Eastern parallels, Wenham’s commentary offers a helpful summary, ([Wenham 1987](#)) although the bibliography is now somewhat dated. Similar details and other bibliographies can be found in von Rad, Day, Walton, and Cotter, ([Day 2013](#); [Walton 2009](#); [Cotter 2003](#); [Von Rad 1972](#)) and what I present here is neither novel nor contentious.

3.1. Egyptian

As Carr shows, Genesis 1 seems to draw significantly from Egyptian origin stories, in particular with the motif of the chaotic primeval sea. Two deities, Nu and Naunet, were identified with the chaos waters and are named as divine beings in stories. One story, from Memphis, involves the god Ptah speaking to bring the world into being. While all are polytheistic, that Memphite theological strand emphasizes the supremacy of Ptah Carr (2020, chap. 7).

3.2. Mesopotamian

The most important comparative literary text for Genesis 1 from Mesopotamia is Enuma Elish (Foster 2005),⁹ although the Adapa epic is also of importance as a comparative work for Genesis 2 and 3. Here are some fragments from Tablet II and IV, which are particularly relevant to the present discussion:

When Tiamat had thus lent import to her handiwork,
She prepared for battle against the gods, her offspring. (Tablet II lines 1–2)

...

Then joined issue Tiamat and Marduk, wisest of gods.
They strove in single combat, locked in battle.

...

He released the arrow, it tore her belly,
It cut through her insides, splitting the heart.
Having thus subdued her, he extinguished her life.
He cast down her carcass to stand upon it.

...

When he had vanquished and subdued his adversaries,
... valiant Marduk
Strengthened his hold on the vanquished gods,
And turned back to Tiamat whom he had bound.

...

He split her like a shellfish into two parts:
Half of her he set up and ceiled it as sky,
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.
He bade them to allow not her waters to escape.
He crossed the heavens and surveyed the regions.

...

The Great Abode, its likeness, he fixed as Esharra,
The Great Abode, Esharra, which he made as the firmament. (Tablet IV lines 93–145)¹⁰

In Enuma Elish, there are multiple gods, of whom Marduk battles 'against Tiamat, a female dragon representing the primeval ocean' Carr (2020, chap. 9). Tiamat is also the mother of many of the other gods mentioned in the epic. Marduk, whose supremacy the epic asserts through the narrative, was a Babylonian national god. Later in the narrative, Marduk splits 'Tiamat's carcass in two, with one half of the carcass becoming a heavenly barrier to keep the upper ocean from merging with the lower one' Carr (2020, chap. 10). Notably, when considered in comparison with traditional Māori divine beings, the gods in Enuma Elish descend from and are related to each other, as is common in ancient Near East polytheism.¹¹

3.3. The Hebrew Text of Genesis 1

Certain features of the Hebrew text of Genesis 1 need to be placed in comparison with ancient Near Eastern origin texts. First of all, the ancient Near Eastern texts typically use the personal name of a god, such as Marduk or Ashur. By contrast, Genesis 1 avoids the personal name of יהוה ('Yahweh'), preferring instead the more impersonal אלהים ('God'). When read in conversation with the ancient Near Eastern texts, Genesis 1 avoids any risk of being understood as portraying Yahweh as similar to other ancient Near Eastern gods. Genesis 1 does not portray God in the origin narrative as a national god, but as the unnamed God of the cosmos. Genesis 1 resists cooption into a world of competing pantheons and asserts a supremacy of a different kind altogether. As Carr puts it:

the entire polytheistic scenery of the Enuma Elish, so central to its theme of Marduk's supremacy and recognition as king by other gods, is completely absent in the resolutely monotheistic Genesis 1 creation account Carr (2020, chap. 12).

Second, the Hebrew text also displays a reticence about using the names of identifiable divine beings in relation to the aspects of the material world they describe. The monotheistic end of the trajectory of development of the biblical texts makes it difficult to know with any certainty specific Hebrew names of other divine beings, but there is good reason to believe that the names of other Canaanite, Babylonian, and other deities were well known, and they are notable for their absence from the text. One example is the absence of שמש ('sun' or 'sun-god/goddess') in Gen 1.14–18. While the term is widely used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, if placed within the story of Genesis 1, it would have had the potential to be read as a reference to a divine being. This was not just the consequence of its widespread use to conflate the sun and the sun god/goddess in Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Canaanite literature, but it was because even within the Hebrew Bible, sun worship among Israelites is attested to in 2 Kings 32.5, 11.

... Gen 1–3 takes up ideas current in the ancient world and comments on them. Gen 1 again affirms the unity of God over against the polytheisms current everywhere else in the ancient Near East. In particular it insists that the sun, moon, stars, and sea monsters—powerful deities according to pagan mythology—are merely creatures (Wenham 1987).

This assertion of a creaturely rather than divine status for even the sun, moon, and stars is, as far as we know, a unique and novel idea contributed by Genesis. This suggests that a translation of Genesis 1, which is sensitive to its source text, might be able to convey something of Genesis 1's style by similarly avoiding the names of divine beings, even when those names are also the common name of the aspect of the world being identified.

Last, as E. A. Speiser has noted, while aspects of the order of creation are identical between Enuma Elish and Genesis 1, there are some important conceptual differences: for example, in Enuma Elish, the 'divine spirit and cosmic matter are coexistent and coeternal'; in Genesis 1, the 'divine spirit creates cosmic matter and exists independently of it' (Speiser 1974, p. 129; Hamilton 1990, pp. 105–8).¹² That distinction between in Genesis 1 between the creator God and the created world is maintained throughout the remainder of the chapter.

3.4. Synthesis

Genesis 1 is widely recognized as a polemical work, which is intended to draw on the kinds of stories told in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia while presenting a radically different theological account of the origin of the world and the status of Israel's God in relation to that origin. God and the world are sharply distinguished: 'Nature is not deified; God is not naturalized' Hamilton (1990, p.59).

An essential feature of the communicative intent of Genesis 1 is, as David Carr puts it, that 'Genesis 1 develops its resolute focus on the sole existence of one god by describing the creation of a human-oriented cosmos by a god referred to not by a name but by the simple designation "God"' Carr (2020, chap. 8).

What is more, the place of humanity is reversed in Genesis 1 when compared to ancient Near Eastern texts. 'In contrast with these traditions, Genesis 1 presents a bold picture of human beings as semi-godlike rulers over all other living beings' Carr (2020, chap. 9). The very place in ancient Near Eastern thought, which is typically held by departmental deities or other divine beings—including those personifying aspects of nature—is in Genesis 1 portrayed as being a place held by human beings instead.

4. Te ao Māori (the Māori World)

In this section, I outline aspects of Māori divine beings that are relevant to the proposed translation of Genesis 1, aspects of Māori origin stories, and some comments on the tapu ('sacred' or 'restricted') status of these features of the Māori world.

4.1. Ngā Atua (Divine Beings)

I cannot attempt here to provide a comprehensive outline of the status and relation of atua Māori. Even mentioning this, we all ought to acknowledge that such a task is probably either impossible or inappropriate due to the fact that at least some such information is esoteric lore that even today is held by only a few. In the introduction to Makereti Papakura's book, both T. K. Pennington and Ngahua Te Awekotuku refer to the necessary omission of certain aspects of knowledge from wider use, Pennington noted that the night before Makareti died, she required him to remove certain 'karakia (incantations)' from her notes before publishing them, Makereti (1986, p. 25) and Te Awekotuku in her more recent introduction notes that this was because 'certain knowledge was considered dangerous' and hence restricted (Makereti 1986).

Indeed, what is widely known was sometimes mediated by Pākehā interpreters (Best 1922, 1952) whose testimony ought to be treated with some caution. Any attempt to encode in written form the kind of origin story that Kenehi 1 represents, but with a Māori lens, is going to present a quite inadequate scope.

But in brief, while contested, Io likely stands at the pinnacle of the whakapapa (or lineage) of atua Māori, although not appearing within the widely known creation story. For the purpose of the popularly known creation story, the relevant atua are Ranginui and Papatūānuku, which are atua whose names are known in Polynesia and not just in the Māori world. Their children included the notable atua Tūmataunga (war and humanity), Tāwhirimātea (wind), Tāne Mahuta (forests and birds), Tangaroa (sea), Rongo-mā-Tāne (cultivated food plants), and Haumia-tiketike (uncultivated food plants). The origin of the universe itself is not attributed to an atua per se but to a precursor stage (a movement from a void to light).

Methodologically, it seems to me incomplete to incorporate only widely known knowledge of atua Māori into a text that originally presented an erasure of an important distinction in many ancient and modern cultures (including, I suggest, the traditional world of the tohunga) (Berman 2011).¹³ In other words, the test translation presents only a very partial integration of Māori lore into the text of Genesis 1 and one that is methodologically in tension with the polemical effect of Genesis 1 in its ancient Near Eastern context.

But if we simply deal with those atua who are well known, a few salient points can be made. Io-matua-kore, for example, is particularly associated with having no origin in descent, as the name indicates, and the relation of Io-matua-kore to other atua is not one of radical otherness (Irwin 1984, pp. 33–35; Thornton 1989, p. 49). The atua who appear in the creation story, by contrast, are understood to have a whakapapa or descent, and there is also a whakapapa from humanity to ngā atua, although there is an aspect in the stories of distinctive creation of humans from the earth. Ngā atua Māori are not radically other from the world. And lastly, there is a multiplicity of atua—ngā atua, not te atua kotahi.

Take Tangaroa, for example, identified with the moana (sea). Tangaroa has agency and identity, an identity which is not reducible to the sea (otherwise the term moana would be sufficient). Tangaroa is an atua, while the moana is not. Tangaroa is neither distinct from the material world nor reducible to a component of it. As a kuia came and recounted to

me, when she prayed to Tangaroa while in the sea, she was injured, an action she at least in part ascribed to the capricious behavior of an atua. There is moral consequence associated with Tangaroa (human injury for example), but there is no sense of moral universals in relation to an atua.

It should be immediately obvious that, in some respects, atua Māori share similarities to the divine beings of many ancient Near Eastern literary works, including origin stories. While I am careful to avoid the English term ‘god’ for ‘atua’,¹⁴ it is necessary to note that if the idea of ‘god’ is that of ancient Near Eastern or even Greek gods, then atua and god have substantial semantic overlap. This is why I have used the more neutral term (than god) for atua in English of ‘divine being’.

4.2. *Ngā Pūrakau Tīmatanga (Origin Stories)*

Māori origin stories do not purport to recount the ordered formation of the material universe by a supreme deity. In their content, they are not dissimilar in kind to some types of ancient Near Eastern origin stories in that they involve a diversity of divine beings and describe events relating to the interaction of those beings and the material world over a span of time and events. This ought to alert us to the possibility that the same kind of polemic intent of Genesis 1 in relation to contemporaneous stories is a translation option for Kenehi 1.

For example, and of direct relevance to some of the translation choices in He Tīmatanga, the Māori narrative of the two atua Papatūānuku and Ranginui ascribes the separation of earth and the heavens to the actions of their children. One of their children, the atua Tāne, is successful in forcing the two to separate from each other, with numerous consequences recounted in the foundational narratives of many of the other atua (Papatūānuku and Ranginui are said to have had at least 70 children, many of whom functional as departmental deities: for example, as the atua of the sea—Tangaroa—or the wind—Tāwhirimātea) Irwin (1984, pp. 35–37).

Papatūānuku and Ranginui are well known, the narrative is central to traditional Māori understandings of the world, and their names are frequently used in formal and informal speech. Because Papatūānuku is in one sense the departmental deity of the earth, and Ranginui is the departmental deity of the sky, it is also possible for Papatūānuku to be used neutrally as a metonym for whenua (‘earth’). Ranginui is also frequently referred to simply as Rangi, and in speech, it is often not possible to determine with certainty whether the atua Rangi is being referred to or rangi (‘the sky’).

In fact, it is not obvious that Rangi and rangi can or ought to be conceptually differentiated other than that in modern Māori usage, there is arguably a post-Christian setting where that distinction is at least capable of being understood, and in modern written Māori, the convention of capitalization certainly can convey that semantic distinction. Knowing this semantic ambiguity invites a translator producing a Māori language text to consider carefully the way in which use of these two names could be construed as a reference to atua or to material aspects of the world.

4.3. *Te Tapu o Te Ao Māori (the Sacredness of the Māori World)*

One of the points that has been made to me in discussing these questions with kaumātua Māori (Māori elders) is that the lore about atua and pūrakau tīmatanga (origin stories) have their own tapu (sacred or restricted status). The methodological questions that He Tīmatanga presents are not confined only to the issue of the sacredness of the Bible as scripture, at least in its religious uses. There is a corresponding and perhaps even more substantial question to be addressed around the tapu nature of these aspects of te ao Māori (the Māori world).

For example, given that the Māori story of Papatūānuku and Ranginui has its own coherence and integrity, as well as its own status in the Māori world, is it in fact an appropriate use of that story to adopt it into the foreign context of the Hebrew scriptures? Even more so, is it appropriate to *alter* the story of Papa and Rangi for these purposes? (I note

here that there is a possible correspondence in the forced parting of Papa and Rangi, but it is to the splitting of Tiamat's corpse in Enuma Elish mentioned earlier, not to the merely material separation of earth and sky in Genesis 1).

The lack of an explicit exploration of these questions makes it seem doubtful that the methodological issue has been adequately addressed. The ideal forum for such a question is a discussion within the Māori world among people with the status to give an answer. Still, in an academic forum, there is no evidence offered that such a discussion has taken place, and providing that would arguably be useful.

5. Proposals

In the following sections, I outline three proposals in response to the analysis above. First, I suggest that Māori divine names are not appropriate to a new translation of Genesis 1 and propose an alternative; second, I address the rhetorical effect of Genesis 1; and last, I discuss the function of a translation, including a possible use of a translation along the lines of He Tīmatanga.

5.1. *Ngā Ingoa Atua (Divine Names)*

The atua named in He Tīmatanga are not appropriate to the story in a translation, as the Hebrew words used for various aspects of the material world are ones which have no specifically divine status. In other words, where ארץ ('earth') is found, the appropriate Māori term is 'whenua', which is a term without any connotations of personification as a divine being, rather than the personal name 'Papatūānuku'. ים ('sea') is more complex, because in Ugaritic and Canaanite it can refer to the name of a god,¹⁵ so an argument could specifically and uniquely be made for Tangaroa; but in my view, the appropriate Māori term is 'moana', a term which means 'sea' but without any personification as a divine being, because Genesis 1 is not an example where Hebrew ים appears to connote a deity.

5.2. *Rhetorical Effect*

At the level of the semantics of units of text, rather than single words, the rhetorical intention of Genesis 1 as a Hebrew text is polemically against origin stories, which include the agency of divine beings other than the one God. Genesis 1 denies them a named existence, ascribes the place they usually hold in stories instead to humans, and holds out instead the absolute supremacy of existence and power to one God. As a consequence, it is rhetorically inappropriate to include the names of atua Māori in the story at all, as to do so inverts the rhetorical effect entirely, either coopting atua Māori into a different culture's origin story or corrupting the Hebrew origin story with anachronistic versions of the very ancient stories Genesis 1 was designed to contest. This point extends to the reference to commemorations of multiple gods that the He Tīmatanga introduces in verse 14, which should be replaced by a neutral word such as 'wa' ('times').

5.3. *Function of a Translation*

Of course, a decision on either or both of these points depends entirely on what the intent of a 'translation' is. This is an especially important question with a translation of a text that functions as scripture, especially within a religion or religions that are currently practiced, as it depends to some degree on what one thinks the purpose of scripture is. But let us put the issue of scripture to one side for a moment.

In general, the reason to undertake a translation is so that a person capable of reading in the receptor language has the capacity to encounter something of the effect a text might have on those able to read the original language. By this, I mean that a reader of the translation is likely to achieve some comprehension of the ideas which are plausible to attribute to an ideal reader of the text in its original language.

There are, of course, a range of translation strategies that hew closely to the original language text in certain ways, or which are more paraphrastic, and a wooden attempt at a close verbal correspondence can even make the text's original-language meaning less

comprehensible than a more flexible approach. Modern approaches to translation are in many ways preferable to the sometimes turgid prose of earlier years, which was sometimes coded language to identify a text as a translation or intended to function at least partly as an aide to reading the original-language text. An example of a modern approach is Emily Wilson's recent translation of the Iliad (Homer 2023), which achieves a style of English prose that avoids rigidity and conveys a striking sense of the beauty of the original.

But it seems to me that Genesis 1 in He Tīmatanga has the opposite effect in its use of the names of atua Māori. Rather than bringing the Hebrew text to vivid life in Māori, it conveys a meaning that is the precise opposite of the polemical intent of the Hebrew source text. Rather than bring to life, He Tīmatanga's translation kills the original text and substitutes another ideological world—one, ironically enough, which is closer to that of the ancient Near Eastern texts that Genesis 1 opposes.

Turning to its scriptural status, translations of scripture have a range of uses: in addition to opening the possibility of scholarly study of a text in a receptor language, they are used in popular religious practices by religious adherents, in liturgy in private and communal settings, and as an instrument of the formation of religious belief.

In the form found in He Tīmatanga, Kenehi 1 is of little use for formal study of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, as it confounds the ancient text by retrojecting a corruption of much later Māori ideas into the world of Genesis' P source. The ideas found in Genesis 1 are no longer available to a student of Kenehi 1.

In popular religious practices, it is worth recognizing that many readers of the Māori Bible are likely to also read an English Bible. They will then encounter a dissonance between the two texts. If that dissonance was essential to translating, it would have some utility, but in this case, the dissonance seems unnecessary. Similarly, in liturgical use, the text would offer a sharp contrast with the text, which is widely used liturgically now. And in use as a text in religious formation, it would be a barrier to forming the beliefs found in the Christian scriptures, as the text is not coherent with monotheism.

One place where a translation of this kind might well find a use is in its syncretism, which Byron Rangiwai has construed positively in his doctoral thesis (Rangiwai 2019). He Tīmatanga's Genesis one is coherent neither as a translation nor as a representation of traditional Māori ideas, but it is an example of an attempt to construct a syncretism of the two different worlds.

Seen in this light, He Tīmatanga is an attempt to create a new religious text, for a new religion. That religion is not Christianity, but it is of course a valid endeavor to construct new religions, and the provision of novel religious texts would be a materially useful contribution to that endeavor. Given the Bible Society's confessional stance,¹⁶ it would be unexpected to see this work proceed under their umbrella, but as Rangiwai's thesis shows, there is an audience for such a work. The audience is arguably small, given that there is much more emphasis in the Māori world on a total rejection of Christian belief and return to traditional Māori beliefs than a syncretism of the two, but perhaps it can find an audience. Whether that audience is sufficient to devote the necessary resources to produce a full translation of the Bible along these lines is another question.

6. Conclusions

The final question is whether, if such an attempt is to be made, Genesis 1 offers fertile soil for this kind of seed. In my view, other texts of the Hebrew Bible would be more amenable to a creative translation approach of this kind.

Numerous texts of the Hebrew Bible offer varying views on the ontology of divine beings. They are not univocal. Those texts that engage with the idea of other gods would offer more scope for the approach He Tīmatanga offers in Genesis 1.

Jer 10, for example, makes a comparison between the God of Israel and 'other' gods. As Phillip Lasater points out,

Instead of denying more than one אלהים, it presupposes the possibility of other אלהים as (poorly chosen) objects of worship through the very act of comparing them with Yhwh in order to affirm Yhwh's *qualitative*, not *numerical*, singularity as אלהים אמת (v. 10). Not an explicated ontological status, but rather the abilities to do "harm, evil" (רעע) and "good" (יטב); the attribute of "greatness" (גדול); and the status of creator are the factors that make Yhwh supreme and worthy of יראה. The claim for Jer 10:1–16 is that "there is none like you" (v. 6; מאין כמוך יהוה), which is not the equivalent of saying "there is none with the exception of you" (adapted from Is 45:5; זולתי אין אלהים) Lasater (2019, p. 108).

By contrast, Second Isaiah would be less suitable, because it contains assertions such as the following:

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god. (Isa 44.6)

Saul Olyon rightly notes that in Second Isaiah, while other divine beings exist, 'whatever these heavenly beings are, they are not gods' (Lasater 2019, note 262).¹⁷

Because of this diversity within the Hebrew Bible of ideas of the existence and status of other gods, if the names of atua Māori are to be used in a Māori language translation, the contrasts in describing gods even within the Hebrew Bible should, if possible, be maintained rather than eroded. Genesis 1 is an example of a monotheistic text, where introducing the names of atua Māori obscures rather than illuminates the text within the Hebrew Bible.

Offering a test translation was an excellent choice, as it has given the opportunity for review and feedback at an early stage of the work. In this case, the test has demonstrated the unsuitability of the inclusion of the names of Māori divine beings, unless it is intended to be a new text for a novel textual syncretism of traditional Māori stories and the Hebrew Bible aimed a new religious syncretism of traditional Māori religion and Christianity.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Abbreviations

ANET Pritchard (1969), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*

COS Hallo and Younger (2003), *The Context of Scripture*

HALOT Koehler et al. (2000), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*

Notes

¹ Genesis 1–11, Ruth, 1 Samuel, Amos, Jonah, Acts 1–11, Philippians, and 1–3 John.

² <https://biblesociety.org.nz/he-timatanga/> retrieved 30 June 2024.

³ I should note here that I was occasionally involved in the translation committee, but I have no direct insight on the points raised in this article as I was not sufficiently involved in the work on Genesis 1.

⁴ 'Te Atua' could theoretically be referring to a divine being or a class of beings, but idiomatically it almost always refers to the God of the Christian Bible and tradition in modern spoken and written Māori language. The phrase beginning 'te hanganga a Te Atua' could

⁵ That is, divine beings with responsibility for or association with some part of the natural world.

⁶ HALOT, 4:1589–1592, שמש.

- ⁷ See, for example, (Kaa 2020, pp. 168–73). In brief, the status of Io as an ancestor and the very imperfect comparison of attributes between Io and the Christian God led to a rejection by Māori in the late 20th Century of the use of Io in Anglican liturgy, reinforcing the much earlier decision by the translators of the Bible in the 19th Century to prefer Atua for God, and Ihowa for Yahweh.
- ⁸ For more on Memphite theology see the section, ‘Creation Myths’ in Vincent Ariehe Tobin, ‘Myths’ in (Redford 2005).
- ⁹ (Foster 2005); COS, ‘Epic of Creation’ (1.111); ANET, ‘The Creation Epic’ (60).
- ¹⁰ ANET, ‘The Creation Epic’ (60).
- ¹¹ For an exhaustive account, see (Frayne 2021).
- ¹² (Speiser 1974, p. 129). Note that the attribution of creation go God might not extend to the formless waters in verses 1–2; see, for example, the discussion in (Hamilton 1990, pp. 105–8).
- ¹³ By way of contrast, see the argument that the Hebrew Bible presents an ideal of equality of person (including knowledge of the spiritual world) in (Berman 2011).
- ¹⁴ My reticence stems from the objection many Māori have had to a correspondence being drawn between atua Māori and the Christian rejection of ‘other gods’. This phenomenon seems to stem from two sources: Māori who reject Christianity in an attempt to decolonise, and who are seeking to avoid importing ‘colonial’ ideas about ‘gods’ into Māori thought; and Māori Christians who wish to maintain some interaction with atua Māori. My observation is that as Christian influence fades, there is more appetite among decolonising Māori to use the English term ‘gods’ without it being seen as problematic.
- ¹⁵ HALOT 2:414, אֱלֹהִים (see sense 7).
- ¹⁶ <https://biblesociety.org.nz/about-us/> retrieved 30 June 2024.
- ¹⁷ Lasater, *Facets of Fear*, 108 note 262.

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