Matangi Teka (Wind Shift)

Reading the Commission of Abram from Pasifika

Jione Havea

Jione Havea is a native Methodist minister from Tonga who is a researcher at the Public and Contextual Theology Research Center of Charles Sturt University (Australia) and a visiting scholar at Trinity Methodist Theological College in Auckland (Aotearoa/New Zealand).

Abstract

Matangi teka (when the wind shifts), in Pasifika, is an opportunity to rethink how to live and behave. When the wind shifts, island people (for the sake of survival) respond appropriately. Based upon such an awareness, this article invites matangi teka (wind shift) in the act of interpretation, in the consideration of traditional readings and theologies, and in the understanding and practices of discipleship. I do these by reading the commission of Abram, and the shifting of his mission, in Genesis 12. He was called on a mission of blessing for other families, and he shifted things so that he wins and controls the blessings for himself and his family. He did (in the text) a matangi teka on Yhwh and (beyond the text) on generations of readers; this article is an invitation to shift the wind from Abram in return.

Life on the shores of Pasifika1 circles on the wind and the tide, which interconnect and are both influenced by the roaming of the moon (above) and the rumbles in and of the deep (below). Movements and shifts are characteristics of island life, reflecting Pasifika’s fluid oceanic setting.2 When the wind shifts, the tide and island life are affected and, hoping to avoid catastrophe, transform and adapt appropriately. Island life is negotiable for the sake of survival, and survival was one of the earlier gusts on the sails of Pasifika theologies.3 Catastrophes nonetheless happen in

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1 I use “Pasifika” for the islands usually known as the Pacific Islands, the islands of Oceania, or the islands of the South Seas. Pasifika is our appropriation of “Pacific,” used here as symbol for refusing to give sovereignty to the English language.


Pasifika from time to time, for natural as well as for human-induced reasons. When islanders do not respect the power of wind shifts, bad things happen to good people as well.\textsuperscript{4} Whether good or bad, island people are in the same company with other island creatures. In the affairs of survival, being human does not privilege islanders over against other creatures. On the contrary, other creatures usually survive disasters better than human creatures do.

The shifting of the wind can bring rain or push the clouds away, as well as alter the migration of sea creatures and the yields of the land, so wind shift (Tongan: \textit{matangi teka})\textsuperscript{5} could be life-giving or despair ridden. Though hidden from the naked eye, the wind and the tide are forces that can be felt with one’s skin and seen through the movements of one’s surroundings. One therefore needs to listen to one’s body and be attentive to one’s surroundings to read the forces of the wind and the tide. In recent times, islanders use the modern gadgets of technology but abandon the wisdom of native civilizations. There is thus a \textit{matangi teka} (wind shift) with regard to the systems of knowledge that contemporary natives privilege. Foreign and European civilizations have taken the place of native civilizations, and many islanders are among those who discriminate against the ways of their ancestors. Those islanders are known as \textit{fie pālangi}, wanna-be-whites.

\textit{Matangi teka} could also be translated as “moving spirit,” which is the crux of the theme for the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) Arusha Conference, Moving in the Spirit: if the spirit (wind, \textit{matangi}) does not move and shift (\textit{teka}), then life finds it difficult to transform. Without moving and shifting, life becomes rigid and death-like. \textit{Matangi teka} is not about the winds of change,\textsuperscript{6} but the shifting of the wind (spirit or breath) and the impact of that shift on life (body and contexts). The wind does not shift without causes and effects. And even though the causes and effects are not easy to pinpoint, they are always multiple and multi-plying. According to Pasifika indigenous knowledge, \textit{matangi teka} is caused by events in the material and the spiritual worlds, above and under the world of earthly creatures. Moreover, \textit{matangi teka} can both enrich as well as devastate, depending on whose experience (or which effect) one favours.

\textsuperscript{4} Allusion to Harold S. Kushner, \textit{When Bad Things Happen to Good People} (New York: Schocken, 1981), is intentional.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Matangi teka} is different from \textit{matangi taka}, which is when the wind turns and twirls. \textit{Matangi taka} is more threatening to islanders.
\textsuperscript{6} Allusion to Manfred Ernst, \textit{Winds of Change: Rapidly Growing Religious Groups in the Pacific Islands} (Suva: Pacific Conference of Churches, 1994) is intentional.
In this article, I offer a reading of an event of *matangi teka* in the patriarchal narrative, the coming of Abram to the land of Canaan, and its impact on the land and on the indigenous people. This reading feels the text (as wind) for Abram and his family (as bodies), and also for their surroundings. Thus this reading is also an attempt to materialize the effects of *matangi teka* in the process of reading. There are three parts to this winding (pun intended) and shifting reading: I first revisit the commission (or call) of Abram in Genesis 12:1–5, explore the effect and transformation of the mission (read: discipleship) of Abram, and then close with suggestions and directions for doing *matangi teka* reading in the interest of transforming discipleship. Two ideological shifts emerge in the process of this reading: (1) it is critical of the patriarchal heritage that sees Canaan as the promised land reserved for only the descendants of Abram (as chosen people or as people of the promise, implying that other peoples are not chosen or have no place in God’s promise), thus inviting critical engagement with traditional theological positions; and (2) it intimates that critical engagement is necessary for transforming discipleship to occur. My concern here is not to read the text in the interest of the “diselected,”8 for which liberation critics are committed,9 but to identify opportunities for shifting the wind of interpretation.

### Abram’s commission

Yhwh said to Abram, “Go from your native land10 and from your father’s house, to the land that I shall show you. I will make you to a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse the one who curses you; and all the families of the ground shall bless themselves by you.”

Abram went as Yhwh spoke to him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years when he went out from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, Lot the son of his brother, all the collections that they had collected, and the lives they got in Haran – they went forth to go to the land of Canaan; and they entered into the land of Canaan. (Gen. 12:1–5; my translation)

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7 I use the lowercase “i” because I use the lowercase with “you,” “she,” “they,” “it,” and “others.” I do not see the point in capitalizing the first person when s/he is in relation to, and because of, everyone/everything else. My lowercase i is in a resistance similar to the Samoan character Alofa when her European teacher required her and her class to write about individual experiences: “You were always with someone … Nothing was witnessed alone. Nothing was witnessed in the ‘I’ form – nothing but penises and ghosts. ‘I’ does not exist, Miss Cunningham. ‘I’ is ‘we’ … always!” (Sia Figiel, *Where We Once Belonged* [New York: Kaya, 1999], 136, 137).


10 Literally, “from your land and from your relatives.”
Is this pericope only about the election of, and the allocation of the so-called promised land to, Abram? There are, of course, other ways of reading it, and because of the attention to discipleship in this issue of *International Review of Mission*, I propose to read it as the commission of Abram. This pericope is at the beginning of the so-called Abraham cycle (Gen. 12–25), which opens with what might be understood as Abram’s mission. This proposal breaks away from the traditional scholarly view, which takes Genesis 12:1-3 as the announcement of Yhwh’s promise to Abram. In reading the narrative as a commission narrative, I extend the pericope to include verse 4, in which the narrator situates Abram in both time (when Abram was 75 years old) and space (at Haran), and verse 5, which describes the company that went with Abram and their arrival to Canaan. It was at a specific time and place that Yhwh called Abram, and the narrative gives the impression that Haran was his “native land” where his “father’s house” (Gen. 12:1) was located.

“Go!” Yhwh commissioned Abram to go forth for multiplying incentives: in order to (1) arrive unto a land (which Yhwh did not name), (2) become a great nation, (3) receive Yhwh’s blessing, (4) become a great name, (5) become a blessing, (6) mete out Yhwh’s blessing (to those who bless him), (7) receive Yhwh’s protection (against his curser), and (8) become a source of blessing for all the families of the earth. It is easy to fuse these incentives, so that becoming a great nation (#2) and becoming a great name (#4) are taken to be the upshots of the same processes by which Abram receives (#3, #5, #7) and emits Yhwh’s blessing (#6, #8). Name (honour) and nationhood (control) are, however, two procedures that do not necessarily intersect. The repeated references to blessing make this passage sound like the urging of Abram to move to establish Yhwh’s welfare system in a land that Yhwh did not name.\(^\text{11}\) Yhwh comes across as an aunt or uncle who holds a lolly behind her or his back as a bribe for a child to first do a task. In this initial reading, Yhwh commissioned Abram to enable blessings for others, and also for himself. The site of his mission was not named, and Abram’s move could be read as a journey in faith (upon Yhwh) and want (for blessings).

The actual blessing for Abram is not identified. Because his wife Sarai was barren (Gen. 11:30), it is tempting to expect his blessing to include having children. As the narrative unfolds, this appears to be one of Abram’s expectations (see Gen. 15). But we cannot confirm this to be the case where Genesis 12 is concerned. And so

\(^{11}\) Abram came to Canaan in verse 5, but the text does not confirm that this is the land that Yhwh had in mind in verse 1. For the purpose of this reading, I entertain the possibility that they could be different so Yhwh was pushed to accept Canaan (Abram’s choice) as the destination to which he was called. See discussion in next section.
in this reading I watch out for places in the narrative where Abram shifts the things that Yhwh offered him. In referring to “land,” “great name,” and “great nation,” Yhwh leaves room for Abram to do a “wind shift” (matangi teka). And how many readers have fallen for Abram’s move?

The unnamed land was to be his destination, rather than his possession, and it is expected to be peopled. Yhwh commissioned Abram to move and live among peoples who, as expected, will not all welcome him. Many will bless him but a few would curse him, and this is how life is for all migrants and refugees: their welcome does not last, and hospitality towards them is often short and superficial. In this second reading, Yhwh did not call Abram to “own” his unnamed destination, but to establish a mission of blessings. The land of blessings was not terra nullius, the doctrine that justified the occupation of native lands, including Australia. The desire to possess and own the land came later in the Abraham cycle, but not at this early opening stage of the narrative.

Any reading which claims that the narrative awards sovereignty over the land to Abram misreads Genesis 12:1 and makes the blessing of becoming a great nation and a great name as the materializing of nationalism (qua ideology). The problem with this ideology is the assumption that sovereignty (over lands and waters) belongs exclusively to one body (like a monarchy), instead of being shared between collectives (inter-nationalism). Reading Genesis 12:1-5 as a call to a mission of blessings allows for the latter, because Abram was not told to rob native families of their wealth and blessings but to be a medium through whom all families of the world could find blessings for themselves. The reflexive tone of Genesis 12:3b shows that the families of the land will not rely on Yhwh for their blessings; rather, they will find their own blessings through Abram. Abram is commissioned to be a platform, or a bed, upon which blessings arrive. In this reading, the greatness of the name and of the nation of Abram will be in his becoming a platform/bed among other peoples and nations, rather than in the exercise of power and control over those peoples and their lands.

Blessing, however, is tricky business. The blessing of one person could be felt as a curse by others, especially when the blessing involves taking or withholding privileges or goods from those others. I have heard several complaints in Australia, for instance, that the opportunities the Pasifika communities receive reduce the...

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opportunities for indigenous and other minority communities. Affirmative actions on behalf of a targeted group are felt as disfavour to others. It is along this line that the blessing of Jacob endorsed the cheating of Esau (Gen. 27:33-35), that the blessing of Ephraim robbed Manasseh of his rightful blessing (Gen. 48:17-20), and that the homecoming for the prodigal son was painful for his brother, from whom “even a young goat” was withheld (Luke 15:11-32). Whether a blessing enriches or impoverishes depends on the subject upon whom one assesses the situation, and I wish to simply register here that a blessing may not be delightful for others.

A blessing could also be a burden upon the blessed one(s). No blessing is free of obligation, and it is not surprising that some biblical characters (like Moses, Jeremiah, and Isaiah) were not eager to accept, and even wanted to flee (like Jonah) from their commissioning. The Hebrew root word translated as “bless(ing)” in Genesis 12 is בָּרָכָה (barak), which could also be translated as “curse(ing).” In deciding to render it only as bless(ing) and not as curse(ing) as well, translators reduce the richness of בָּרָכָה (barak). In this reading, the overlap and interflow of bless(ing) and curse(ing) are important to uphold. Accordingly, the mission to which Yhwh called Abram could both be a bless(ing) and a curse(ing) for himself, for his family, for the land, and for the people among whom he was commissioned. This reading thus affirms the wisdom of Job that we should not accept the good from God and not the bad as well. This does not necessarily make God bad. Some good characters do bad things and/or do things that have bad effects. This reading affirms that God could be one of those characters. This is not to say that God is good some or all of the time. Some bad characters do good things as well, and it makes no difference to this reading whether God is good and/or bad. What matters here is that God/Yhwh commissioned Abram, and it appears to be for a noble cause—in a mission of barak (ברך).

Without uttering a word, Abram went (Gen. 12:3a). The text is open to speculation. Abram could have been a man of faith who trusted in Yhwh. He could have been a man of righteous character who believed in the mission of barak. He went because Yhwh was trustworthy and because barak was worth disseminating. He could have been a man in want who could not resist the incentives. He could have been a man


14 Job 2:10; see Melanchthon, “Accompanying the Suffering.”
in heat who craved to control lands, people, and their blessings. All those are speculative readings, and no matter what reading one proposes, the narrator will not confirm because Abram quietly went out from Haran. And with him went Lot and Sarai, taking with them the lives (servants, slaves) and wealth they had collected at Haran (Gen. 12:5). This was not a poor family. They had a home that they were not forced to abandon, and they owned substances and lives to serve their needs and their biddings. They were not desperate. They were not refugees. They would have known what it means to be blessed, and so when Abram quietly and quickly led his household out in Genesis 12:4, i suspect he was going in order to collect more blessings.

The matangi teka characteristics of this multi-plying reading are in (1) shifting the premise for reading Genesis 12:1-5 from promise to blessing, (2) undermining claims of sovereignty over the land for Abram on the basis of Genesis 12:1-5, (3) problematizing what one expects a blessing to be and taste like, and (4) querying Abram’s silent and quick acceptance of his commission. These shifts invite rethinking the Abram narrative. In the next section, i look at the immediate surroundings and first impacts of Abram’s execution of his mission.

Did Abram operate as someone who was committed to a mission of barak? Did he do a “wind shift” on Yhwh? How have readers bought into Abram’s agenda, and at what cost? Those are some of the questions that “wind” this reading.

**Abram’s [trans]mission**

Before Yhwh called, Abram was in transit (at Haran) with his father, Terah from Ur of Chaldea, to Canaan (Gen. 11:31). The narrative is firm that Haran was not their native land. On the contrary, Ur was their native land (Gen. 11:28). And Canaan was already on Abram’s heart when Yhwh spoke up in Genesis 12:1. This helps me make sense of Abram’s eagerness to get up and move from Haran. Abram did a matangi teka on Yhwh, causing Yhwh to accept Canaan as the land that was not named in Genesis 12:1. This does not necessarily mean that Yhwh had a different land in mind. Rather, i argue that Yhwh had not decided which land was to be Abram’s destination, and before Yhwh could make up his mind, Abram entered Canaan and so Canaan became it! In this reading, Yhwh’s call and the mission designed for Abram are used to justify a journey that was already in progress. Yhwh said, “Go!” Abram entered Canaan and made it the land that Yhwh had in mind. Yhwh’s call did not divert or distract Abram, but spirited him
in his journey. And the mission for which Yhwh called Abram is not the only reason why he came to Canaan.

Upon arrival, Abram and his party found that Canaanites (people of the land) were already there (Gen. 12:6). Canaan was already peopled. Nonetheless, Yhwh declared the land of Canaan for Abram’s seed/descendant, and Abram built an altar in response and to mark his consent (Gen. 12:7). This later action of Abram raises questions about his silent departure from Haran, without acknowledging or responding to Yhwh’s call. Did Abram accept Yhwh’s call? Did he move to carry out the mission of barak? Was his silent departure evidence of accession or of flight?

Shortly after arrival, Abram moved and built another altar, between Beth’el and ‘Ai (Gen. 12:8). Then he moved again, like an inspired explorer seeking more lands to claim for the crown, and this time he ended up in the desert-like south (Gen. 12:9). There is no mention of whether his name became great or whether his movements opened the gates of blessing, but his movements suggest someone who was caught up in matangi teka. In the reporting of his movements in quick succession, the narrative makes him restless. He did not stay long enough in a place to become a platform/bed for blessing. The mission of barak, which was in the interests of others (families of the land or ground) was not Abram’s commitment.

The land also experienced matangi teka. A severe famine struck the land and caused Abram to move again, this time to Egypt, where he made his wife say that she was his sister (Gen. 12:10-16). It went well for Abram as a consequence. He was blessed. The Pharaoh “dealt well with Abram for her sake; and he had sheep, and oxen, and he-asses, and men-servants, and maid-servants, and she-asses, and camels” (Gen. 12:16). Abram became wealthier, and this is one of the signs of someone who is blessed. And even though the Pharaoh blessed Abram, Yhwh plagued (cursed) the Pharaoh because of Sarai. Instead of channelling blessings for this head of a nation, Abram deceived the Pharaoh and his nation. But that did not make Abram a “great nation” or a “great name.” Later realizing that he had been tricked, the Pharaoh did not ask Abram to return his gifts. Rather, he confronted Abram, then charged his men to make sure that Abram left with his wife and all that he had (Gen. 12:18-20).

The plaguing of the Pharaoh and his house was against the commitment Yhwh made in Genesis 12:3, so there was matangi teka in the doings of Yhwh also. Yhwh appeared to be trapped by the welfare of Abram. Blessings were still given out, but they all were in Abram’s favour. When Abram entered Canaan, the mission of barak
was revised. The wind of blessing shifted its bearing, funnelling its strength solely on the face of Abram.

This reading calls attention to the dissonances between the call of Abram, the *mission of barak*, and the deeds of Abram. The dissonances expose the imperialist drives behind Abram’s maneuvers in Canaan, where he marked his land with the erection of flag-like altars, and into neighbouring nations. Abram’s exploit in Egypt accentuates his dexterousness. If he could fool the Pharaoh of Egypt, one of the wise and powerful leaders of the ancient world, then who could stand up against him? So by the end of Genesis 12, Abram’s call and mission have morphed into a crusade. This reading flows against views that favour Abram and the Abrahamic traditions, and it finds resonances with Musa Dube’s reading of the so-called great commission (Matt. 28:16-20):

> The command not only instructs Christian readers to travel to all nations but also contains a “pedagogical imperative” — “to make disciples of all nations.” Does such an imperative consider the consequences of trespassing? Does it make room for Christian travelers to be disciplined by all nations, or is the disciplining in question conceived solely in terms of a one-way traffic? . . . The answer to this second question is not directly provided by the gospel. Nevertheless the text clearly implies that Christian disciples have a duty to teach all nations, without any suggestion that they must also in turn learn from all nations.15

In light of Dube’s reading, Abram appeared to have transformed his mission and expected Yhwh to endorse it, come on board, and enable it. There was no pedagogical imperative in Abram’s commission, but one of lauding — be blessed, be a blessing, and be a platform/bed for blessing. The transformation (or trans-mission) Abram made was to bring all the blessings upon himself, and he showed imperialistic ideology in his maneuvers, which have grasped the minds of readers, scholars, devotees, and disciples.

Imperialism is characterized above all by its structural *imposition* of a few standards on a universal scale. This imposition does not meet “the other” as an equal subject, with dialogue and free exchange as a result. On the contrary, this imposition rests on a view of “the other” as a blank slate to be filled, whereby the rights of “the other” are structurally derogated and “the other” are rendered dependent. As Ngungi wa Thiong’o [1994, 20] has put it, imperialism is a “cultural bomb” whose aim is to “annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their . . .

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environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”

The imperialist feat of Abram spills over from the text onto the defence that his advocates and admirers, progenies and converts, faithful and otherwise, put up. Who would doubt Abram’s right to Yhwh’s blessings? Do they who would not doubt Abram see how he transformed his commission? Abram in the end controlled his own destiny, together with the corroboration of Yhwh and the sympathies of many generations of readers.

**matangi teka reading**

This reading dares to alter the flow of the “wind of interpretation” and to problematize views on a character who is hallowed as a father of righteousness (James 2:21; Rom. 4). Even though the canon has closed, so the wording of the scriptures will not change, perceptions and interpretations could *teka* (shift, change, alter). In this regard, I offer this reading with an invitation for readers to get into the spirit of *matangi teka*.

At the tail end of *matangi* is the word *tangi* (alternative spellings: *tagi, cagi*), which means “cry” in several Pasifika languages. *Tangi* can be out of joy as well as in pain, grief, solidarity, or relief; *tangi* (as in the *marae* of Maoris) could be used to welcome or farewell people (dead and alive). Whatever the reason, *tangi* could both cause as well as be the upshot of change. *Tangi* is the effect of being moved, and it is also moving, often accompanied with *tears*. *Tangi* is at no time silent, and it often *tears*. In spelling it as *maTangi*, I highlight the critical place of *tangi* in *matangi*. In light of the foregoing reflection, *maTangi teka* reading is transforming and liberating. It moves and tears, like the wind.

*MaTangi teka* reading is not about leading out or adding meanings to texts, but about *moving texts into tears*. I attempted *maTangi teka* reading in this article by not defending Yhwh and Abram, as biblical characters, and by making sense of the discrepancies in the narrative. *MaTangi teka* reading does not settle for extracting original or true meanings (as in exegesis), for assigning or endowing (as in eisegesis) comfortable meanings, but about enabling the wind (in both texts and interpretations) to shift (*teka*), mindful of the causes and effects (read: tears) of doing so.

16 Ibid., 233.
In other words, *maTangi teka* reading is an appropriate wind for the sails of any *mission of barak*.

How might the opportunities in *maTangi teka* reading be used in transforming discipleship? First, this requires openness for transformation to take place with one’s understanding and practice of discipleship. Discipleship is not problem-free. The foregoing reading of Genesis 12 shows that transformation could be done even to a mission (read: discipleship) designed by God. However, not all forms of transformation are healthy. The problem with the transformation (shift, *teka*) that Abram did was that the *mission of barak* became a crusade for his own wellbeing and that of his immediate family; the welfare of other families and other nations drowned in Abram’s imperialist hunger for land, for wealth, for descendants, and for control. A *maTangi teka* reading exposes those kinds of unhealthy transformations in scripture, in their interpretations, and in the practices that arise as a consequence, and it works towards recovering the platform/bed for the blessings of others.

Second, *maTangi teka* reading affirms that discipleship is about following and serving others for the sake of their transformation. In other words, discipleship contains a service imperative. The danger with this imperative, following Musa Dube’s line of critique, is that it has potentials for becoming a conversion imperative whereby the disciples seek to transform peoples, cultures, languages, and lands without their permission. When disciple(ships) and mission(aries) fall into such traps, *maTangi teka* reading is necessary.

The invitation for *maTangi teka* reading that I offer in this article is not just for islanders in Pasifika but, at the risk of coming across as being another imperialist, for all readers and disciples. *Caveat emptor*: this is an invitation. No matter what the imperative is to which one commits, whether it involves a mission of blessing, a mission of charity, a mission of mercy, or a mission of service, *maTangi teka* reading is one way of seeing the gutters around which one (like the wind and the tide) moves and blows.

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17 There are two connotations of transforming discipleship that I hold in tension in this question: (1) it indicates a desire to transform discipleship practices, and (2) it affirms discipleship as fundamentally transformative. The first seeks to change discipleship, while the second is satisfied with the way discipleship is. Both connotations are problematic.

18 The *maTangi teka* reading proposed herein will most likely be offensive to traditionalists and gatekeepers in the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – that trace their roots back to Abram. Whether Abram was a historical or legendary person, one can’t be sure. But Abram exists in biblical memory, and this reading turns back to the text and draws attention to discrepancies between the text and its interpretations. In this way, *maTangi teka* reading serves a corrective role.