

I Was Always Imago Dei

A companion paper to Religious Trauma as Wairua Assault: Dimensional Autophagy, the Whakapapa Dilemma, and the Path to Covenantal Identity

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Abstract

This paper extends *Religious Trauma as Wairua Assault: Dimensional Autophagy, the Whakapapa Dilemma, and the Path to Covenantal Identity*, which resolved the Whakapapa Dilemma — the experience of Indigenous Christians who feel excluded from a covenant narrative that does not trace to their own genealogy — through New Covenant theology's extension of belonging beyond genealogical boundary (Galatians 3:28–29). That resolution addressed exclusion along a single axis: Māori identity set against an Abrahamic covenant it does not descend from. This paper identifies and addresses a second, previously unexamined axis of the same dilemma: anxiety generated not by distance from the covenant people, but by purity within one's own whakapapa — severed lines, absent tūpuna, and non-Māori ancestry entering through marriage. Using a single composite family photograph as primary source material, read through a kaupapa Māori research lens (Smith, 2012; Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006), the paper argues that Imago Dei (Genesis 1:26–27) is a status intrinsic to the person rather than a status contingent on genealogical purity (Middleton, 2005), and that whakapapa — including its ruptures and its inherited mixtures — can itself function as theological source material rather than as an obstacle to be resolved before faith can proceed.

Keywords: Imago Dei, whakapapa, kaupapa Māori research, religious trauma, New Covenant theology, genealogical purity, decolonial theology, Te Poutama Ora

1. Introduction

Religious Trauma as Wairua Assault named the Whakapapa Dilemma as a distinct and compounding form of religious trauma experienced by Māori Christians: the felt impossibility of legitimate faith when one's genealogy does not trace to the Abrahamic covenant. That paper resolved the dilemma theologically, arguing that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, and that belonging is established through promise rather than descent (Galatians 3:28–29, KJV).

The resolution was sound as far as it went. It addressed the question of whether a Māori person, as Māori, could belong to Christ without belonging first to Israel.

What it did not yet address is a second question, quieter and in some ways more revealing, that surfaces once the first has been answered: what happens when the whakapapa in question is not even uniformly Māori? For many Indigenous Christians, genealogical anxiety does not resolve neatly once covenant-belonging is settled, because a further, unspoken standard remains in place — the assumption that legitimate Indigenous identity, and by extension legitimate access to an Indigenous reading of the divine image. This paper names that second standard and argues that it is a purity logic no less colonial in structure than the one *Wairua Assault* already dismantled, simply relocated from the boundary between peoples to the boundary within a single whakapapa.

The argument is developed through a single primary source: a composite photograph, generated at the author's request, depicting Christ set among three generations of her own whakapapa — including a severed paternal line, a grandmother through whom non-Māori ancestry entered the family, and a maternal line that closes, in the author's generation, as the last fully Māori descent within it. The photograph is treated here not as illustration but as data, consistent with kaupapa Māori research's recognition of whakapapa itself as a legitimate structure of knowledge (Smith, 2012; Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006; Durie, 1998).

2. Positionality and Method

I write this paper as both researcher and subject, a position kaupapa Māori research treats not as a methodological weakness to be controlled for but as a condition of legitimate knowledge production (Smith, 2012). The whakapapa examined in this paper is my own. The photograph analysed is one I commissioned, from a description of relationships I supplied, and the reading offered here is therefore reflexive in the fullest sense: I am reading my own ancestors, arranged by my own hand, against a theological question I have carried for over forty years.

This positioning matters methodologically because the paper's central claim depends on it. A photograph of someone else's whakapapa, analysed from outside, could support an argument about representation. Only a photograph of one's own whakapapa, analysed from inside the genealogical anxiety it depicts, can test whether a theological resolution actually holds under the weight of a real, particular, imperfect family line rather than a hypothetical or composite one — a distinction already established as methodologically significant in the companion case paper *Te*

Whitu Matenga, which departed from composite illustration toward a single verified life for the same reason.

3. Imago Dei and the Purity Question

The doctrine of Imago Dei — that humanity is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27) — has historically been read in ways that quietly attach conditions to a claim the text itself does not condition. Middleton (2005) traces how the image has been read variously as reason, as royal function, and as relational capacity, but argues that in each historical reading, the image remains a status conferred at creation rather than a status earned or demonstrated. Nothing in the text ties the image to ethnic purity, unbroken lineage, or the absence of intermarriage. The conditions attached to it — who counts as sufficiently within the image, who represents it most legitimately — are theological accretions, not textual claims.

Colonial Christianity in Aotearoa nonetheless transmitted the image of God with a face already attached to it: European, and by visual convention, fair-skinned and light-eyed. That transmission did two things simultaneously. It excluded Māori from picturing themselves in the divine image at all, and it established, without ever stating it directly, that closeness to that image was a matter of resemblance and, by extension, of purity — the less a person's whakapapa had been 'diluted,' the more legitimately Indigenous, and paradoxically the more legible against a decolonial reading of Christ, that person could claim to be. The dilemma this paper addresses is what happens when a Māori Christian, having already rejected the first exclusion, finds themselves unintentionally enforcing the second — measuring their own whakapapa against a standard of purity no more textually grounded than the white Christ they had already set aside.

4. The Photograph as Primary Source

The image analysed in this paper sets Christ above and among three generations of the author's whakapapa. In the upper register sit the author's maternal grandmother and grandfather — both fully Māori, the grandfather an Anglican Minister, the grandmother a carrier of the Rangīūia healing lineage whose transmission the Tohunga Suppression Act forced underground for a generation. Beside them sit the author's paternal grandparents, known to the author only through absence and inheritance rather than direct relationship: a grandfather who died the January before his son was born, and a grandmother remembered as a revered Kuia and community stalwart, and identified by the author as the specific point through which non-Māori, English ancestry entered the whakapapa.

At the photograph's centre stand the author's parents on her wedding day. The author's mother is identified as the last of her direct line to be fully Māori; the unbroken descent that reached her does not continue in the same form beyond her. It continues instead through the author, at a stated ninety-two percent Māori eight percent European ancestry, carrying both grandmothers' lines forward together. Framing the composition are Whāngārā, the author's maternal marae and the setting of the Paikea narrative — the ancestor whose survival through water *Whale Rider* dramatizes — and Poutu Pā, the author's paternal marae, together with the small church that has stood on it.

Read as data rather than illustration, the photograph presents a whakapapa that contains a severed paternal line, an English ancestor entering through marriage through choice, and a maternal thread that ends rather than continues. It is also, without exception, a whakapapa the author identifies as intact — nothing in it erased, nothing hidden, every figure named and placed. The photograph does not resolve the tension between purity and intactness. It simply refuses to treat them as the same question.

5. Extending the Whakapapa Dilemma: A Second Axis

Wairua Assault resolved genealogical anxiety along one axis: Māori descent measured against an Abrahamic covenant it does not trace to. Galatians' New Covenant reading answered that axis by relocating belonging from descent to promise. But the photograph analysed here surfaces a second axis that the same theological move must also answer and had not yet been asked to: Māori descent measured against an idealised, unmixed Māori whakapapa that most actual whakapapa, on inspection, do not fully satisfy either.

If belonging to Christ is established through promise rather than genealogical descent (Galatians 3:28–29), the same logic cannot be selectively withheld at the level of Indigenous identity itself. A whakapapa dilemma resolved for the boundary between peoples but left standing at the boundary within one's own family has not been fully resolved — it has been relocated. The New Covenant argument, followed through consistently, requires that the English ancestry entering through the author's paternal grandmother, the severed paternal line, and the closing of the mother's fully Māori descent be read the same way the Abrahamic exclusion was read: as historically real, and as theologically non-disqualifying. Imago Dei does not attach to purity of line on either side of that equation.

6. Discussion: Faithfulness Rather Than Purity

The theological claim this paper argues for is that what continues through a whakapapa like the one photographed is not purity but faithfulness — to whakapapa itself, to the tūpuna carried within it regardless of which side of a colonial or genealogical boundary they sit on, and to a divine image that was never contingent on the line staying clean. This reframes the whakapapa dilemma's resolution from an external one (Māori belonging to Christ despite not descending from Israel) to an internal one (a specific, mixed, interrupted whakapapa belonging to the image of God without needing to first resolve its own impurities). Both are the same argument, applied consistently rather than selectively.

This has a direct clinical corollary within Te Poutama Ora. Where dimensional autophagy addresses the metabolisation of imposed shame across the Wairua and Whakapapa dimensions, the finding here suggests that genealogical purity anxiety — the felt need to be Indigenous 'enough' before an Indigenous theological identity can be claimed — warrants explicit naming as its own presenting pattern, distinct from but related to the double exile and colonisation exile already documented. A whakapapa map or family photograph, used reflexively as this paper has used one, may function clinically as well as theologically: not as an object to be resolved into purity before it can be trusted, but as primary evidence that the image of God was already present across it.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Whakapapa Dilemma, as resolved in *Wairua Assault*, requires one further extension: the same New Covenant logic that answers exclusion from the Abrahamic covenant must also answer exclusion generated from within one's own whakapapa, by a standard of genealogical purity the doctrine of Imago Dei was never built to require. Read through a single-family photograph — severed lines, inherited mixtures, and a closing generation included — the image of God does not appear as a status to be earned once the whakapapa has been sufficiently purified or explained. It appears, on the evidence of the whakapapa itself, to have been there the entire time.

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The Holy Bible, King James Version. Genesis 1:26–27; Galatians 3:28–29.