



**CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS
IN NEW ZEALAND: SOME
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL
ISSUES.**

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Understandings of early Christian mission to New Zealand and the subsequent Māori response are far from uncontested, both in popular Māori and Pākehā perceptions and in academic historical writing.

A few years ago I was upstairs in the Stone Store at the Kerikeri Mission, where there are historic displays about early missions and missionaries. I overheard a Pākehā child ask his parents: “What is a missionary?” There was a pause, as his parents seemed to struggle to find a suitably secular explanation. One of them answered: “Missionaries were people who helped other people”. In 2012, I was chairing the plenary sessions of a history conference on Christian beginnings in New Zealand. The first presentation was an excellent presentation by a well-known church historian on the background of early mission among Māori. The address was followed by applause. I called for questions. The first question, more of a challenge than a query, was along the lines of: “So you would agree, then, that the number one motivation of the missionaries in coming here was to gain ownership of our land?”

This article reviews three areas where there are varying interpretations of New Zealand’s very early Christian beginnings.

WHAT SORT OF A MAN WAS SAMUEL MARSDEN?

For many New Zealand Christians, the Revd. Samuel Marsden is the honoured “Apostle” of this country, the visionary and resolute leader who first brought the gospel to Māori.

Until about the 1960s, New Zealand history books generally took a positive view of Marsden, as part of their wider assumption that Christianity was a good and civilizing thing, and an essential part of New Zealand’s story. Some accounts of Marsden’s work have very useful narrative detail, but are not particularly strong on critical perspective.¹ Some Māori traditions about Marsden (Te Matenga) also appear to have been very affirming.² To this day, some Māori in the Bay of Islands consider Marsden one of their *tupuna* (ancestors).³

1 See, for instance A. H. Reed, *Marsden of Maoriland: Pioneer and Peacemaker* (Dunedin and Wellington: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1932); Patricia Bawden, *The Years before Waitangi* (Auckland: The Author, 1987).

2 See Te Pihopa Te Kitohi Pikaahu, “Prologue. Te Hari o Ng puhi – The Dance (of Joy) of Ng puhi,” in *Te Rongopai 1814 “Takoto te pai!”* eds., Allan Davidson, Stuart Lange, Peter Lineham and Adrienne Puckey (Auckland: General Synod Office of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2014), 23–30.

3 Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins, *He Kōrero – Words Between Us: First Māori-Pākehā Conversations on Paper* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2011), 87.

Late twentieth-century historians, however, have often adopted a less approving view of Marsden. In Australia, many historians uncritically picked up the criticisms leveled at Marsden by some of his contemporary adversaries,⁴ and have focused on his alleged failings: his harshness as a magistrate, greed as a landowner, distractedness from his chaplaincy duties, obstinacy, spitefulness, censoriousness, and hypocrisy. Marsden’s modern nickname as the “flogging parson” has been very widely recited. The principal Australian biographer of Marsden, Yarwood, argued that one reason for Marsden’s poor reputation is that nationalist historians saw Governor Macquarie as heroically humane and liberal; anyone who fell out with Macquarie (as Marsden did) must therefore have been evil. While quite critical of Marsden in some respects, Yarwood came to believe that the modern Australian chorus of contempt for Marsden amounted to a shameful disfiguring of his memory.⁵

Modern New Zealand historians, some appearing to reflect an underlying distaste for Christianity (and especially for evangelical Christianity) have tended to belittle Marsden and his missionaries. Keith Sinclair’s 1958 *History of New Zealand* devoted only two paragraphs to Marsden (in a book of over 300 pages), but Sinclair still managed to note Marsden’s wealth, to insinuate that there was something corrupt about his employing of “assigned” convict labour, to quote with disdain Marsden’s reference to Māori as “poor and benighted heathen”, to assert Marsden’s enthusiasm for the lash, and to suggest that Marsden lacked sympathy for “the heathen poor” of his own race.⁶ In 1957, from Hawaii, Harrison M. Wright described Marsden as “vindictive, contradictory, stubborn, vain, often intolerant”, “always right”, and “not very amiable”; nevertheless, Wright saw Marsden as “magnificent” in his courage, faith and strength of will.⁷

Judith Binney, in her 1968 biography of Thomas Kendall, was often scathing about the evangelical beliefs and values of the first missionaries. In relation to Marsden himself, Binney declared that he was incapable of forgiving those who challenged him, and was “inexorable” in his pursuit of self-

4 Especially J. T. Campbell, Lachlan Macquarie, W. C. Wentworth, and Rev. John Dunmore Lang.

5 A. T. Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden: The Great Survivor* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1977), xi–xii; A. T. Yarwood, *Marsden of Parramatta* (Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1986), 7.

6 Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 36.

7 Harrison M. Wright, *New Zealand, 1769–1840: Early Years of Western Contact* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 39–40.

vindication.⁸ James Belich, in his 1996 *Making Peoples*, was ambivalent about Marsden. Having felt it necessary to note that some moderns find Evangelicals “hard to like” (because Evangelicals were “joyless, humourless and sometimes hypocritical”, and they seemed to give more emphasis to sin than the love of God), Belich wrote that Marsden ordered too many whippings, was very wealthy, was accused of corruption, and showed some lack of human sympathy. But Belich also found it hard not to admire Marsden and his missionaries for their altruism, devotion to their beliefs, and willingness to endure great hardship.⁹ Michael King’s 2003 *Penguin History of New Zealand* wheeled out the “flogging parson” label; he was otherwise positive, but very brief.¹⁰ Anne Salmond’s monumental 1997 work, *Between Worlds*, had much about Marsden, but appeared to make no negative judgment; she let the documentary records speak for themselves.¹¹ On the other hand, some modern works virtually ignored Marsden; a 1990 illustrated history of New Zealand (edited by Sinclair) mentioned Marsden on one page only, and did not list him in the index.¹²

In 2008, in reaction to Marsden’s low standing in Australia and his honoured memory in New Zealand, a book was published which feverishly attempted to destroy Marsden’s reputation in New Zealand as well.¹³ The result was somewhat scurrilous, and less than convincing. Among other things, Quinn implied that Marsden was a psychopath.¹⁴ However, negative writing about Marsden in New Zealand is not new. The late nineteenth century Catholic writer Dom Felice Vaggoli, who bitterly raged against all Protestants, declared that Marsden’s missionary activities were all motivated by greed for wealth.¹⁵

8 Judith Binney, *The Legacy of Guilt: A Life of Thomas Kendall* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1968), 48–49.

9 James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland: Penguin, 1996), 135.

10 Michael King, *Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin, 2003), 135–37, 140–41.

11 Anne Salmond, *Between Worlds: Early Exchanges Between Māori and Europeans, 1773–1815* (Auckland: Viking, 1997).

12 Claudia Orange, ‘The Māori People and the British Crown (1769–1840)’, in *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, ed., Keith Sinclair (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1990), 29.

13 Richard Quinn, *Samuel Marsden: Alter Ego* (Wellington: Dunmore, 2008).

14 *Ibid.*, 171–74.

15 Dom Felice Vaggioli, *History of New Zealand and Its Inhabitants, 1896*, translated by John Crockett (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2000), 30.

So what sort of man was Marsden, really? He was clearly a capable, energetic, and purposeful man, and full of ideas. He came from an area of Yorkshire which had been strongly influenced by Wesleyan revival. His family was fairly poor, but as a young man he attracted the attention of the evangelical Elland Clerical Society, which paid for him to study at Hull Grammar School and then Cambridge University.¹⁶ Marsden came to know such evangelical heavyweights as Joseph and Isaac Milner, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce.¹⁷ It was Wilberforce who later secured Marsden’s appointment to New South Wales, with the backing of John Newton.¹⁸ Marsden was thus extremely well-connected to some of the leading lights of the English evangelical community. As he departed for Australia, he may already have carried a sense of apostolic calling about taking the gospel to the South Seas.¹⁹ Before leaving, he had been ordained, and wed Elizabeth Fristan (to whom he

was happily married and had eight children).

In Australia, Marsden was not only a prison chaplain, and the Principal Chaplain from 1800, but also the minister of St.

John’s Church in Parramatta. He was granted some land at Parramatta, but his hard work and practical flair in farming made him highly successful, enabling him eventually to own many thousands of acres. An innovator, Marsden experimented in pasture improvement and was the first person to export wool commercially from Australia to Britain. A lot of his wealth was put into missionary work, including his purchase of the brig *Active* as a mission supply ship. He helped defray the cost of the ship and its crew by having the *Active* engage in trade, both in New Zealand and the Pacific. In New Zealand, Marsden was the first to introduce many western crops and animals, and was thus a farming pioneer on both sides of the Tasman.

Marsden’s supporters included Wilberforce and Newton, and there are numerous indications of Marsden’s own evangelical humanitarian mindset. On both humane and moral grounds he was troubled that there was no overnight accommodation provided for female convicts, who were consequently almost universally exploited. Similarly, he helped

16 Marsden was later eager to pay the Elland Society back, financially, and became a subscribing member: J. R. Elder, *The Letters and Journals of Samuel Marsden, 1765–1838* (Dunedin: A. H. Reed, 1932).

17 Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden: The Great Survivor*, 12–15.

18 *Ibid.*, 19.

19 *Ibid.*

persuade the British Government to allow convicts' wives to emigrate to New South Wales at public expense. With Governor King, Marsden co-founded the Female Orphanage. Marsden could be kindly and pastoral. He often befriended convicts, treated well those who were assigned to worked on his land, and sometimes helped emancipists to re-start their lives. According to Parsonson, Marsden was "open-handed, almost prodigal with his time and his money".²⁰ Certainly Marsden was very hospitable towards Māori who turned up in Port Jackson. Many of them stayed at Parramatta with him and his family for several months. In the latter part of 1814, prior to his first trip to New Zealand, he had no fewer than twelve Māori living with him.²¹ Surprising everyone, he made a point of paying Māori crew members on the *Active* the same wages as the European sailors. In 1815, Marsden established his Paramatta "Seminary", which at its height was giving training to up to twenty-five young Māori.

Marsden was very indignant about European captains' exploitation and mistreatment of Māori crew members. He carefully collected evidence of such abuse. He was able to establish that the Boyd incident had been provoked by just such conduct, through the captain's humiliation and whipping of Te Āra. Marsden was also disturbed by reports of unscrupulous or aggressive behaviour against Māori in New Zealand itself. Marsden pressured Governor Macquarie to issue proclamations against harming or kidnapping Māori, and to appoint Kendall as the resident magistrate in the Bay of Islands. Marsden also established the "Philanthropic Society" (officially "The New South Wales Society, for affording Protection to the Natives of the South Sea Islands, and Promoting their Civilisation"). In the 1830s, he lobbied against the trade in shrunken heads, protested against Captain John Stewart's involvement in war (and atrocities) against Ngāi Tahu, and pressed for the appointment of a British Resident who could restrain lawless behaviour by Europeans.

Marsden was clearly a strong visionary, and a strategic thinker. He was also seriously over-committed, with far too many responsibilities and interests; Kendall rightly observed that Marsden had

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"too much business upon his hands".²² Marsden was unquestionably courageous: to begin a mission in New Zealand, in the aftermath of the Boyd incident, was a very bold move; it was the general expectation in Port Jackson that everyone in the mission to New Zealand would end up killed at the hands of Māori. Marsden was outspoken, and intensely opposed to any moral compromise or vice. He objected, for instance, to the "almost universal" pattern of civil and military officers cohabiting with convict women.²³ He became involved in numerous disputes with various New South Wales authorities.²⁴ He was a dominant personality, and did not back down easily. But when various complaints against him were published in the *Sydney Gazette*, he successfully brought a case of libel. Marsden was himself sometimes badly treated, in Yarwood's view, Macquarie's treatment of Marsden amounted to an "abuse of power that staggers the imagination".²⁵ But Yarwood also argued that Marsden's sustained

attempts to discredit the reputation of a younger political revival, H. G. Douglass, were malicious, unethical, and legally indefensible; he noted that, back in England, Wilberforce's confidence in Marsden was shaken.²⁶ The

dispute illustrated the highly toxic and corrupting nature of politics in the New South Wales colony, and how Marsden was much too embroiled in public affairs for his own good. Almost inevitably, his reputation was sullied.

However, Parsonson believed that Marsden was "extraordinarily generous towards those who disappointed him, or even those who hated him", and was "much misunderstood". He believed that "if he [Marsden] had a serious fault, it was his predisposition to take offence".²⁷ Marsden's relationships with the earlier New Zealand missionaries were often fraught. But the aggravations definitely went both ways. For everyone, much was at stake: for the missionaries, the basic welfare of their families, and for Marsden,

²² Kendall to Woodd, 25 March 1814, ms. 54/35, cit. Binney, *Legacy*, 19.

²³ Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden*, 280.

²⁴ Issues included his opposition to ex-convicts who were cohabiting with women being appointed to public office, his refusal to read out in church an edict about grain, his opposition to aspects of the trade in liquor, accusations that he had been dishonest about gifts to a lending library, and criticisms of his conspicuous interest in Māori but not in Aborigines.

²⁵ Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden*: xii; *Marsden of Parramatta*, 59.

²⁶ Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden*, xii, 229–30, 231–33, 245–50, 253–56.

²⁷ G. S. Parsonson, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, 271–73.

²⁰ G. S. Parsonson, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Vol. 1 (Wellington: Department of Internal Affairs, 1990), 271–73.

²¹ Salmond, *Between Worlds*, 442.

the integrity of the whole mission. Marsden's anger with Kendall over the latter's adultery and musket trading was entirely understandable.

The most serious accusation against Marsden is that as a magistrate he was excessively harsh. Because of the inevitable tensions between a pastoral and a punitive role, Marsden was ill-advised to accept appointment as a magistrate. For that reason, he initially hesitated. However, in New South Wales, where so many people were former criminals, there were not a vast number of people suitable to be magistrates, and Marsden felt he was doing his civic duty.²⁸ In a prison colony, where so many of the populace were either convicts or ex-convicts, a magistrate was bound to be resented and unpopular. Marsden was criticised for being too harsh in his sentences, particularly in relation to the prolonged flogging – in an effort to gain information – of an Irish convict who was suspected of insurrection. Additional factors in that particular case were Marsden's antipathy towards Catholicism and his deep distrust of the Irish, whom he regarded as "ignorant and savage".²⁹ Yarwood felt that incident showed that Marsden

"had been corrupted by the practices of the penal colony".³⁰ The "flogging parson" label, he wrote, is "an unhappy legend", but "not without some basis in fact".³¹ It has been argued, however, that Marsden gave severe sentences only occasionally, rather than normally.³² It has also been claimed that Marsden's nickname was not coined until 1958, when Russel Ward wrote about "flogging parsons".³³ Ward was referring to several such clerical magistrates. But the scornful epithet has firmly adhered to Marsden alone. Their offence against sensitivities, both then and now, was not that they ordered floggings (any magistrate at that time ordered floggings, and early New South Wales was an especially tough context), but presumably that they were also parsons.

In appraising Marsden, Stephen Niell may have achieved something like the right balance: "his

28 Yarwood, *Marsden of Parramatta*, 24.

29 Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden*, 98.

30 Yarwood, *Marsden of Parramatta*, 29.

31 *Ibid.*, 28.

32 See Michael Gladwin, "Flogging Parsons? Australian Anglican Clergymen, the Magistracy, and Convicts, 1788–1850," *Journal of Religious History* 36 (September 2012): 390.

33 Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958), 84; Janice Kay White, "A Master and His Men: A Different Perspective on the Reverend Samuel Marsden in New South Wales from 1794 to 1851," Master of Letters thesis, University of New England, Armidale, 1993, 11. My thanks to Malcolm Falloon for drawing my attention to this reference.

faults, which were many, are outweighed by his merits, which were great".³⁴

WAS MARSDEN PROMOTING CONVERSION OR CIVILIZATION?

As an evangelical missionary, Marsden was motivated by the desire to see Māori redeemed by the grace of God, through faith in Christ. There can be no question that that the spiritual salvation of Māori was his paramount aim.

But aspects of what Marsden said and did raise questions about how he saw the relationship of Christian conversion to the benefits of western civilization. For one thing, Marsden often referred to Christian truth and western civilization in almost the same breath. For instance, in 1808 he wrote to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) expressing the longing that Māori might "enjoy the Sweets of Civilization and the more inestimable Blessings of divine Revelation".³⁵ While Marsden privileged

the blessings brought by divine revelation, he clearly saw them as closely linked with the blessings of "civilization". On the morning of Christmas Day 1814, he saw Ruatara's

hoisted British flag as a signal of "the dawn of civilization, liberty and religion"; later that day, after the church service, he wrote that "In this manner the Gospel has been introduced into New Zealand..."³⁶ The next month, he reflected on the promising prospects of "civilizing this part of the globe".³⁷

So what was Marsden thinking in the way he almost conflated Christianity and civilization? One of the problems is that Marsden appears to have meant more than one thing when he used the words "civilize" or "civilization".

In part, Marsden understood civilization in relationship to the moral and spiritual values of western society, which were derived from Christianity. He believed that "civilized" societies, despite the unregenerate state and evil behaviour of many westerners, reflected the redeeming light of Christian truth and reason – and that "heathen"

34 Cited by Timothy Yates, *The Conversion of the Māori: Years of Religious Change, 1814–1842* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 13.

35 Marsden to Josiah Pratt, 24 March 1808, in P. Harvard-Williams (ed), *Marsden and the New Zealand Mission* (Dunedin: A. H. and A. W. Reed/University of Otago Press, 1961), 11–14.

36 *Missionary Register*, November 1816: 470–71, cited by Allan K. Davidson and Peter J. Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity: Documents Illustrating Aspects of New Zealand Church History*, 2nd edn. (Palmerston North: Dunmore, 1989), 28; Elder, *Letters and Journals*, 94.

37 Marsden in ML A1997:70, cited by Salmond, *Between Worlds*, 489.

societies were lost in barbarism precisely because they lacked that enlightening and restraining influence of divine revelation. By contrast with those blessed to live in societies leavened by Christianity, heathens lived not just in primitive conditions but in profound spiritual ignorance. They were given over to superstition and its “abominations”, were in bondage to demonic powers, were slaves to uncontrollable behaviours, and were degraded by such vile habits as cannibalism and sorcery.

So, for Marsden, civilization was a natural adjunct of the gospel, and barbarism was an inevitable effect of the spiritual darkness of heathenism. It was a view which owed nothing to Rousseau, to the concept of the moral innocence of those untouched by civilization. Marsden’s evangelical (and Calvinist) theology would never have led him to believe in the innocence of any human race, civilized or otherwise. Marsden had much affection for Māori, and was impressed by their “noble” bearing and intelligence, but he never doubted “that they were a savage race, full of superstition, and wholly under the power and influence of the Prince of Darkness – and that there was only one remedy which could effectively free them from their cruel spiritual bondage and misery, and that was the Gospel of a crucified Saviour.”³⁸

Ironically, the civilization which Marsden desired for Māori was an idealised, much more moral form of European civilization than actually existed: when Marsden dreamed of Māori being “civilized”, he was not in any way endorsing the moral corruptions present within all western societies, or the vices of Britain’s convict colony, or the exploitation of Māori by Europeans trading and whaling on the New Zealand coast.

At a more practical level – and Samuel Marsden was a very practical man – Marsden seemed to equate civilization with the use of western goods, technology and agricultural techniques. Like everyone else, he believed European goods and technology were vastly superior to those accessible to primitive savage societies. Marsden also appeared to imply (without explaining) that there was a link between the lack of civilized goods and methods and the spiritual darkness of heathen society; because Māori had not yet enjoyed the benefits of “commerce or the arts of civilization”, he declared, they “must,

38 Samuel Marsden, “Observations on the introduction of the Gospel into the South Sea Islands: Being my first visit to New Zealand in December 1814”, *First New Zealand Journal*, in Elder, *Letters and Journals*, 60.

therefore, be in heathen darkness and ignorance”.³⁹ In an early report to the CMS, Marsden almost equated the availability of iron with “civilization”: he expressed the hope that Māori “will soon be ranked among civilized nations, and especially if their wants in iron are supplied”.⁴⁰ While Marsden admired the resourcefulness and skill of Māori in using what they had to hand, he was in no doubt that Māori would immensely benefit from the material riches and the manifold “arts” and capabilities of the civilized world; these included iron tools and implements, wheat, ploughs, cows, horses, carpentry, houses, shoes, clothes, “commerce”, and literacy. Most Māori seemed to agree with him. They were dazzled by western goods, and extremely eager to acquire more. Those Māori who visited Port Jackson and stayed with Marsden in Parramatta were enthusiastic about the advantages of western agriculture and technologies.

In view of the strong Māori fascination with western goods and technologies, Marsden sought to base his missionary strategy upon that, and to sell to Māori the idea of a mission settlement in New Zealand on exactly that basis. He was well aware that, thus far, the Māori interest in European goods completely outweighed any Māori interest in Christian spiritual teachings. Marsden also knew that a similar strategy had more latterly been adopted by the London Missionary Society in its Polynesian mission. The emphasis on the plough as a complement to preaching had antecedents in early Europe, where monasteries had helped consolidate a Christian presence through taming large tracts of what had previously been wilderness. For Marsden, his pragmatic, utilitarian emphasis on agriculture and “civilizing arts” was a methodology that seemed realistic and sensible. It was perhaps a natural choice of strategy for someone so passionate and practical about farming. His approach was readily accepted by the Church Missionary Society, though it was later questioned and eventually abandoned. Marsden made it clear that “civilizing” was not the ultimate goal: his “grand final object” remained the introduction of Christianity.⁴¹ Accordingly, one

39 “Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East, London, 1806–1809”, 961–63, cited by Davidson and Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity*, 27; Harvard-Williams, *Marsden and the New Zealand Mission*, 14.

40 *Missionary Register*, December 1816: 522–23, cited by Davidson and Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity*, 28.

41 *Ibid.*

recent writer has described Marsden's policy of "civilising" Māori as "merely a means to the larger end of... evangelisation".⁴²

In pitching his case to the CMS, however, Marsden arguably overstated the importance of "civilizing arts" and went too far in arguing that the civilization of Māori needed to *precede* their conversion. He argued that "commerce and the arts" (i.e. trade and western technical skills) are able to "inculcate industrious and moral habits", and thus "open a way for the introduction of the Gospel, and lay the foundation for its continuance once received"; he further declared that "nothing, in my opinion, can pave the way for the introduction of the Gospel, but civilization", which could "only be accomplished among the heathen by the [practical] arts", and that "to preach the Gospel without the aid of the Arts will never succeed amongst the heathen for any time". Marsden did concede that informal religious instruction could accompany practical instruction, but insisted that "the attention of the heathen can be gained and their vagrant habits corrected, only by the Arts..." and that "till their attention is gained, and moral and industrious habits are induced, no progress can be made in teaching them the Gospel".⁴³

From the viewpoint of the twentieth-century, this all seems a bit odd. In the course of promoting an idea for a strategy for mission in New Zealand, Marsden was arguing a theory which was somewhat condescending of native peoples, and which seemed to bestow on practical trades a power of moral transformation which one would normally expect to be attributed to the gospel itself. It also postponed evangelism to second priority. Such theorising on Marsden's part was before he went to New Zealand, and may have reflected his frustrations in trying to engage with Aboriginal people. In practice, agriculture and the arts constituted a feature of early CMS mission in New Zealand, but later CMS missionaries including Henry Williams did not subscribe to Marsden's methodology and instead increasingly concentrated on literacy and direct evangelisation. As early as 1815, a CMS document noted the viewpoint that "first civilizing and then

42 Vincent O'Malley, *The Meeting Place: Māori and Pākehā Encounters, 1642–1840* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2012), 162.

43 *Missionary Register*, December 1816, 522–23, cited by Davidson and Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity*, 26.

Christianising the natives" was "wholly a mistake".⁴⁴ In 1822, James Shepherd (an agriculturalist with the New Zealand mission), wrote to CMS arguing that "the gospel will be the only means of civilising the heathen", and that "Evangelisation goes before Civilization".⁴⁵

On the morning of 25 December 1814, Marsden looked up from the deck of the *Active* and saw the British flag flying from Ruatara's flagpole. He wrote, "I never viewed the British Colours with more gratification; and flattered myself they would never be removed, till the Natives of that island enjoyed all the happiness of British Subjects".⁴⁶ This raises the issue of Marsden's attitudes to British rule over New Zealand, and to British colonial settlement. Several comments may be made. Marsden was a loyal British subject, who seemed to have assumed that British power was benign, or at least should be so. He worked alongside, often uneasily, successive British governors of New South Wales. He wanted

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the governors of New South Wales to restrain British subjects from mistreating Māori, and to extend the rule of law to New Zealand as much as possible. He probably assumed that such

an outcome could only be fully realised if New Zealand were to come under British sovereignty and if Māori were to become British subjects. Marsden's musings on the flag should not be misconstrued as revealing an agenda of British colonialism, but rather as reflecting his evangelical humanitarianism. As for colonial settlement, Marsden was not opposed to some "good" settlers, to counter-balance the other type, but his focus was on the salvation and betterment of Māori, not on large-scale British colonial settlement.

DID ANYONE UNDERSTAND MARSDEN'S MESSAGE ON 25 DECEMBER 1814, AND DID HE PREACH IN ENGLISH OR IN MĀORI?

There are two main written eye-witness accounts of the first church service and preaching of the gospel on New Zealand soil: from Marsden, and

44 J. Drummond, *The Life and Work of Samuel Marsden* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1913), 42, cited by Paul Moon, *A Savage Country* (Auckland: Penguin, 2012), 53.

45 Shepherd to Pratt, 2 December 1822, C N/O 76, cited by Yates, *Conversion*, 21.

46 *Missionary Register*, December 1816: 470–71, cited by Davidson and Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity*, 28. Marsden referred to "the English flag" and then to "the British Colours", and probably meant the latter i.e. the Union Jack.

from Nicholas (his friend from Australia).⁴⁷ The service attracted a large crowd of about four hundred Māori.⁴⁸ Some of them were local Ngāti Torehina people from the adjacent Rangihoua pā, some were Korokoro's people on the southern side of the Bay of Islands, and some were Hongi Hika's people from Kerikeri. Māori appear to have regarded it as an auspicious event, another way of showing – through participating in this Pākehā spiritual ceremony – that Marsden and the new missionary settlement were being received and made welcome by the people and their chiefs. Hongi, Korokoro, and especially Ruatara were familiar with church services, from all the time they had spent with Marsden at Parramatta. They knew how important church and Christian spiritual teachings were to Te Matenga (Marsden). In Māori terms, Te Matenga was regarded as both a *tohunga* (priest) and a *rangatira* (chief).⁴⁹

The previous day, Ruatara and some of his men had expended considerable effort in preparing the site and arranging some makeshift church furniture. On 25 December, before the service began there was a respectful, “becoming silence”.⁵⁰ This was at the instruction of chiefs, and indicative of the “the peculiar solemnity of the occasion”.⁵¹ Similarly, Marsden recorded that “a very solemn silence prevailed”, and “the sight was truly impressive”.⁵²

Marsden began by singing the Old Hundredth (Psalm 100), then read “the service”,⁵³ no doubt from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. He then preached from the text Luke 2:10, “Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy, &c.”⁵⁴ The “&c” (*et cetera*) may just refer to the remainder of the verse, or may mean he went on to the next verse too, to give the content of the “glad tidings”, i.e. “For to you is born this day... a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord”.

Nicholas noted that Marsden spoke “through the medium of Duaterra [Ruatara], explaining to them the great importance of what they had heard, which was the doctrine of the only true God, whom they should be all anxious to know and worship; and

should therefore take all the pains in their power to understand the religion that was to be introduced to them”. The phrase “what they had heard” implies that Ruatara explained what Marsden had said *after* the sermon finished, rather than in any running translation; likewise Marsden wrote that “when I had done preaching, he informed them what I had been talking about”.

Nicholas recalls that during Ruatara's explanation, “several importunate questions” were asked, ‘regarding the minute particulars of the subject’, which he declined to answer but referred to “a future time”. Ruatara's reluctance to answer questions about detail suggests Ruatara was faithfully attempting to summarise and explain Marsden's message as well as he could, but that he felt at a loss to address issues or objections that were being raised about these new spiritual teachings being introduced by Marsden. Ruatara had spent much time with Marsden, who had often talked with him about Christian beliefs, but there is no evidence that Ruatara ever converted to Christianity. His understanding of Marsden's message may not have been strong, and his explanation may have accommodated itself to existing Māori beliefs.

Straight after the service, several hundred Māori surrounded Marsden and Nicholas and burst into an exuberant “war dance”, which the latter took as a “furious demonstration of their joy”, and as “the most grateful return they could make us for the solemn spectacle they had witnessed”.⁵⁵ Māori tradition recalls it as *Te Hari o Ngāpuhi*, a dance of joy expressing welcome.⁵⁶ The song referred to the the *Pipi Wharauoa*, the shining cuckoo. Though migrating from afar, the shining cuckoo finds its place in the new setting. According to Ngāti Hine tribal elder Hoterene Keretene, the performance of *Te Hari O Ngāpuhi* was a heartfelt Māori expression of welcome and affirmation to the spiritual message which Marsden was bringing.⁵⁷

It has usually been assumed that Marsden preached entirely in English (because he did not speak Māori), and that he relied on the ability of Ruatara to transmit his meaning. That may be so. There were Pākehā present, and Ruatara was fluent in English and Marsden trusted him to convey his meaning. It has recently been suggested, however, that Marsden may have preached at least partly in Māori.⁵⁸ For several years, Marsden had been learning

47 Samuel Marsden, in *Missionary Register*, November 1816: 470–71, cited by Davidson and Lineham, *Transplanted Christianity*, 27–28; John Liddiard Nicholas, *Narrative of a Voyage to New Zealand, Performed in the Years 1814 and 1815 in the Company with the Rev. Samuel Marsden, Principal Chaplain of New South Wales* (London, James Black, 1817), 203–206.

48 Jones and Jenkins comment that there were many interesting things that day to help draw a crowd, including many fascinating new animals, and Pākehā women and children, *He Kōrero*, 79–80.

49 Jones and Jenkins, *He Kōrero*, 60, 62.

50 Nicholas, *Narrative*.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Marsden, *Missionary Register*.

53 Nicholas, *Narrative*.

54 Marsden, *Missionary Register*.

55 Nicholas, *Narrative*.

56 Te Pihopa Te Kitohi Pikaahu, “Prologue”.

57 *Ibid.*, 26–27.

58 See David Pettett, “Samuel Marsden – Christmas Day 1814. What did he say? The Content of New Zealand's Christian Sermon,” in Davidson, Lange, Lineham and Puckey, *Te Rongopai*, 73–85.

the Māori language from Ruatara and others. On the long journey back to Australia from England in 1809–10, Marsden had spent a much time talking with Ruatara, drew up a Māori vocabulary, and made extensive notes about Māori language, customs and religion.⁵⁹ Marsden encouraged King and Hall to begin conversing with Ruatara in Māori⁶⁰ – which strongly suggests that he likewise did so. From London, impressed with Marsden’s very careful reports on Māori language and culture, Dr. Good wrote that “I feel confident that by this time you have become proficient in the New Zealand tongue”.⁶¹ Marsden had plenty more opportunity to improve his Māori. Once they had reached Australia, Ruatara stayed with Marsden in Parramatta from March 1810 to October 1810, and then in 1811 (from August, for some months), and again in 1814 (from August to November). It also needs to be remembered that, after all, Marsden was a missionary, and missionaries usually try hard to communicate in the language of the people they are attempting to reach. So it is not unrealistic to suppose that Marsden – especially with some prior preparation and some assistance from Ruatara on the voyage over the Tasman – might have used some Māori language in his sermon, however imperfectly. The documentary record does not say that he did – but it does not preclude it. In his own account of the service, Marsden noted that some Māori told Ruatara that “they could not understand what I meant”. While that has usually been assumed to mean that they could not understand him because he was speaking in English, Pettett has suggested that it could also mean that, even though Marsden was speaking in Māori, some were struggling to understand him – because of such factors as Marsden’s accent, the limitations of his facility with Māori language, and the unfamiliarity of his subject matter.

Regardless of what language(s) Marsden may have spoken in (and whether or not he was entirely dependent on Ruatara’s explanations), the content of his sermon would have seemed difficult to most of his Māori hearers. Māori had their own spiritual beliefs, including a strong sense of the sacred

(*tapu*) and beliefs in various *atua* (gods or spirits). The pre-Christian Māori religious world-view did not include monotheism, an authoritative book of divine revelation, a belief in sin and redemption, or any assurance of individual relationship with God. So while his listeners may have picked up something of what Marsden was announcing, through Ruatara’s explanation if not through Marsden himself, both their understanding and acceptance would have been limited. However, the fact that some kept asking questions suggests that enough was understood to spark curiosity. Also, Christian believers cannot preclude the work of the Holy Spirit, or that many Māori who were present that day sensed that something sacred, new, and important was now entering the Māori world.

A radically revisionist claim about Marsden’s sermon has been proposed by Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins, who built on an earlier suggestion (by Belich) that it was Ruatara’s words, not Marsden’s,

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which were understood that day.⁶² Presupposing that Marsden preached only in English, Jones and Jenkins wrote that so far as Māori were concerned, “there was no sermon” preached that day.⁶³ They declared that

Ruatara would have ignored the theological content of Marsden’s sermon, and instead made a purely “political” speech in which he extolled the material opportunities that would be generated through the Pākehā settlers, and urging everyone to treat them well so they would not leave for somewhere else.⁶⁴ But such a re-interpretation does not give nearly enough weight to the long-established relationship of trust and respect between Ruatara and Marsden – a relationship they acknowledged. It leaves Ruatara looking deceptive, and Marsden looking gullible. The theory implies that Ruatara’s careful preparations of the site for a church service were less than sincere. It assumes that Marsden understood nothing of Ruatara’s words, despite that fact that he had been learning Māori language for several years. Also, while it is very reasonable to suppose that Ruatara was urging the people to treat the newcomers well, it seems unnecessary to allege that Ruatara did so precisely at the point when he was meant to be explaining Marsden’s sermon. Without doubt, there were would have been many

59 Salmond, *Between Worlds*, 411–15.

60 Marsden to Pratt, 28 August [1809], in Harvard-Williams, *Marsden and the New Zealand Mission*, 24.

61 Good to Marsden, 29 April 1810, in ML A1992/89, 82–100, cited by Salmond, *Between Worlds*, 45. Dr. Good was very learned about ethnography, language and culture, and had a good understanding of Polynesian origins (Salmond, *Between Worlds*, 415–16.).

62 Jones and Jenkins, *He Kōrero*, 79–88; James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Auckland: Penguin, 2007), 143.

63 Jones and Jenkins, *He Kōrero*, 87.

64 *Ibid.*

other opportunities for oratory around that time, including the previous day. Three important chiefs had returned after several months overseas, their people were mingling at Rangihoua, and there was all the excitement of welcoming a Pākehā settlement, so it is hard to imagine that there would not have been much speech-making.

In conclusion, an understanding of very early Christian beginnings in New Zealand needs to acknowledge some of the complexities of Samuel Marsden's character and the ways in which he related the gospel to "civilization", and the questions and nuances around the context in which the first sermon was preached on New Zealand soil. Nevertheless, on 25 December 1814 the gospel was proclaimed, and something very important was brought into Aotearoa. As Marsden himself expressed it, "In this manner the Gospel has been introduced into New Zealand, and I fervently pray that the glory of it may never depart from its inhabitants until time shall be no more".

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