



# Matariki in Biblical Perspective

## Respectfully Navigating Indigenous Cosmology

*This is the transcript of an online presentation for A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand regarding the renaissance of the Māori New Year observance called "Matariki" by many (but not all) Māori tribes.*

*Presented via Zoom, 19 May 2025.*

*In this essay Jay Mātenga shares what he believes is a fair and biblically faithful Christian response to indigenous or traditional observances, festivals, celebrations, etc. The principles briefly discussed can be transferred to any given context where Christianity intersects with previously established cosmologies (world views). Especially since our post-modern and pluralistic national and global contexts are creating space for the revitalisation of traditional religious perspectives.*

**T** Īhei mauri ora! Ko Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, ko Ngāti Porou, ko Ngai Tahu ōku iwi. Ko Ngāti Rakaiwhakairi tōku hapu. Ko Jay Mātenga toku ingoa. Kei te noho au ki te rāwhiti o Tāmaki Makaurau. Ka tuku aku mihi ki a koutou. Tēnā koutou tēnā koutou tēnā toutou katoa.

If it isn't apparent, I just introduced myself by way of my tribal and family heritage as Jay Mātenga. I live at the moment in east Auckland. And I give my warmest greetings to you all.

It is my privilege to be able to open this kaupapa Matariki kōrero with a short biblical reflection to kick off our conversation. Let's begin by reading and expanding a little on Amos 5:8, our anchor verse if you will.

*Seek the creator of Pleiades and Orion (or in reo Māori: Rapua te kaihanganga o Matariki, o Tauroru). He turns the darkness into morning. He darkens the day into night. He calls upon the waters of the sea. And pours them out upon the face of the earth. His name is Jehovah (the LORD).*

To which I would add:

The One God, God alone, the uncreated Father, the beginning of all things, and the source of all things. Praise, worship, honour, and glory to God alone. Amen.

With respect to ko te kaupapa tātou i tenei wa (to our subject matter at this time), that is: Matariki, this verse and a handful like it (see below for more examples) establish the foundations of faith for the follower of Jesus when it comes to observing the cosmos—the created order, both the world around us, the earth and seas below us, and the celestial bodies above us..

The precedent is clear: seek the Creator not the created. Te Paipera Tapu (the Bible) is unequivocal in this. Whatever has been created by the Uncreated One is not to be worshipped. And those same scriptures provide us with a pathway through the pantheon to worship the only one worthy of such devotion—God alone: a singularity of three as Father, Son, and Spirit who exists outside of our dimensions but immanent within, holding it all together and sustaining the life that we experience.

I have heard an uncited quote from Reverend Māori Marsden saying something to the effect, that before the missionaries came and translated the holy scriptures, ngā tipuna Māori (Māori ancestors) saw the mountain of spiritual knowledge, but its peak was shrouded in cloud. When Māori received biblical revelation, the cloud lifted off the mountain, and they could see the entire maunga (mountain). It put everything they previously knew into new perspective... and around 90% of Māori adjusted to become followers of Jesus by the 1880s [1]. The fact that that was woefully interrupted is beyond the scope of our kaupapa (topic) today.

As biblically faithful Christians, we must never forget biblical principles and non-negotiables as we enter spiritually open spaces. And we must never compromise our commitment to Christ. But that need not mean we cannot participate in such spaces. It doesn't mean we



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shouldn't climb the maunga. We just need to be confident that we do so enveloped in the kākahu (cloak) of Christ, clothed in His righteousness, filled with the authority and power of the Creator by te Wairua Tapu (the Holy Spirit).

If we enter the spiritual or religious spaces of hosts who do not follow the ways of Jesus, we ought to remain respectful and curious, trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us as we seek to understand the world of the other and their spiritual concerns. Until we learn to do that, we will hinder the gospel from becoming indigenous to that context.

For the strong of faith, we need have nothing to fear, for the love of Christ in us expels all fear. We should remain secure in the judgement of Jesus; and nothing created, whether physical or spiritual, can negatively affect our position in Christ—unless we allow it by turning away from Him. Furthermore, our attitude towards the cosmology of others should not be combative. Rather, we remember that Christ is already the victor, and we are to be witnesses to that by the way we live and love.

That said, with the short time I have here, I want to emphasise one thing: a relationship need not constitute worship.

There is a line between the two, and we must not cross it as worshippers of the biblical God alone. But that line is probably not nearly as close as you might think. We can engage in relationships of all kinds before they become acts of worship—relationships with people, every physical thing, and (much more cautiously), spiritual entities even.

The key difference between relationship and worship may seem semantic but unless we lock this down, we will never be able to walk deeply in the world as our ancestors and the saints of old once did.

Industrialisation and secularisation have taken this from us such that we, for the most part, now walk superficially on creation rather than in it and with it—exploitatively even.

Worship requires a sense of submission to and dependence upon an entity for one's life and wellbeing. Submission to and dependence upon. This is usually expressed through regular ritualistic devotion. Idolatry often (but not always) directs that devotion towards a physical object that represents the entity you seek wellbeing from. Most idol worshippers would be quick to acknowledge that it's not the 'thing' they are worshipping, but what that 'thing' represents—the spiritual entity with power to act on one's behalf. Another word for the wellbeing worshippers seek is

“salvation”—rescue from the rigours of life in a hostile creation, which Christians would say is made so by sin.

Distinct from worship, a relationship is much more mutual and far less dependent, especially on supernatural power. In a relationship, you are not totally subordinate or submitted to the will and whims of the other. There is an interdependence and mutual responsibility for each other's wellbeing. It can and should be quite an intimate experience.

Hopefully, you can see how this might apply to our relationship with the environment as creation pulsing with the life force of the Creator, who is presented to us in Jesus, the one who holds all things together, as Paul notes in Colossians 1.

The visible heavens are a case in point as it relates to the end of the seasonal year for Māori. The disappearance of the Matariki stars for a lunar month mark the end of an annual lunar cycle and the start of another when the Matariki cluster (also known as Pleiades or Seven Sisters, etc) reappears in the northeastern sky just prior to dawn.

Just like the European celebrations of winter solstice in the northern hemisphere, the Matariki celebration at the beginning of winter is an opportunity for both commemoration of the past, celebration of the present, and vision/hopes/commitment for the new year ahead.

It is right to lovingly remember those who have passed away during the previous annual cycle. It is right to celebrate our lives here and now with feasting. It is right to imagine and commit ourselves to improving our lives in the year ahead. It is right to acknowledge the stars that mark this change of annual cycle, with gratitude for the way the stars help us mark the seasons, and with thanks for the environment around us that sustains us as God ordered it to be.

However, as God has said in Deuteronomy 7:3, it is not right to “serve other gods or worship the sun, the moon, or any of the stars—the forces of heaven—which I have strictly forbidden.” It is not right to serve or worship the physical heavens or their forces, the spiritual entities that they may represent. In other words, it is not right to submit ourselves to their power. For they are created as God's servants just like us — as the angel said to John in Revelation 19:10.

However, I believe we can acknowledge the heavens as part of our lived experience. While we have long since lost the art, I think it is also biblically permissible to look to the stars for prophetic insight (the Revelation of John does this very thing). Furthermore, I hold that we can accept and even acknowledge the progenitor entities that

Māori recognise as ngā atua (the gods), immortalised in our whakapapa, and named association for the physical environment: the weather, the oceans, the forests, the land, and the nourishment we get from our environments; and unseen realms, care for the dead, responsibility to carry out other functions as determined by Te Atua (the supreme God, we learn about in the Bible).

To mihi (acknowledge verbally) ngā atua is to give them something akin to a nod of the head, or a tip of the hat. A recognition of their existence in the service of the Creator, whether in the past or still. This is not necessarily problematic for the follower of Jesus. But we go that far and no further. Acknowledgement is an act of due respect, not worship.

It is right to be respectful of the cosmovision of others, but it is not right for us to enter into a dependent relationship with anything that is worshipped other than the Creator, the supreme Deity. It is not for us to say where or not those spiritual/ancient personalities do not or did not exist. But if we do acknowledge them, we do so only to consider them as part of the created order. We reserve our worship for God alone, the Creator, as revealed in the Bible.

In this way, it is very easy for the follower of Jesus to embrace every aspect of the Matariki celebration with

our own karakia/inoi (chants/prayers) to Ihowa (Jehovah). We can respectfully remember our dead who rest in the loving hands of God. We can give God thanks for the food bearing land, treating the steam from our food as a reminder of the prayers of the saints, like the Revelation 8:4 incense that goes up to God.

We can thank God for creating the flocking birds of the air and appreciate life in fresh water as well as salt. We can acknowledge the value of rain, and the seed spreading and atmosphere cleansing winds.

We can take this opportunity to look to the future and work to mana-fest (manifest, with a Māori spin) our desires. In this regard, the blessing of Joseph by Jacob in Genesis 49:25 is very similar to karakia Māori,

*May the God of your father help you;  
may the Almighty bless you  
with the blessings of the heavens above,  
and blessings of the watery depths below,  
and blessings of the breasts and womb.*

This is similar to the Māori concept that binds us in between the above, below, within, and without—tuia i rangi, tuia i raro, tuia i roto, tuia i waho. We are woven into a relationship with all creation. To which we can confidently agree with Māori, using the phrase that means "together, in unison, we are one": haumi e, hui e... tāiki e. An indigenous "Amen".

## Conclusion

Obviously much more can be said, but remember these four encouragements:

1. Worship God, the Creator in three persons, alone
2. Respect the lived reality of others and acknowledge what they acknowledge without worshipping if they worship anything other than the Creator in three persons.
3. Remember, relationship (even an appropriately intimate one) within the physical world does not necessarily constitute worship.
4. Lastly, by all means, adopt Matariki as a season of remembrance in your own contexts, but don't coopt tikanga Māori for your own ends without Māori leading the way. For that is cultural appropriation and potentially exploitation.

Ngā manaakitanga ki a koutou katoa (every blessing to you all).

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[1] Recent research by Dr Malcom Falloon further confirms this. See Falloon, M. 2020. *The Māori Conversion and Four Early Converts*. University of Otago, PhD Dissertation.



## A SELECTION OF OTHER RELEVANT SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Psalm 19:14

*The heavens proclaim the glory of God.  
The skies display his craftsmanship.  
Day after day they continue to speak;  
night after night they make him known.  
They speak without a sound or word;  
their voice is never heard.  
Yet their message has gone throughout the earth,  
and their words to all the world.*

Psalm 148:1-6

*Praise the LORD from the heavens!  
Praise him from the skies!  
Praise him, all his angels!  
Praise him, all the armies of heaven!  
Praise him, sun and moon!  
Praise him, all you twinkling stars!  
Praise him, skies above!  
Praise him, vapours high above the clouds!  
Let every created thing give praise to the LORD,  
for he issued his command, and they came into being.  
He set them in place forever and ever.  
His decree will never be revoked.*

James 1: 16-18

*So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens (stars). He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.*

Philippians 2:15:16a

*Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights (stars) in a world full of crooked and perverse people. Hold firmly to the word of life; then, on the day of Christ's return.*