

***On Being 'Ādām in Africa:  
Psalm 8 Within an African Epistemology***

*Sobre Ser 'Ādām en África:  
Salmo 8 dentro de una Epistemología Africana*

*Sobre Ser 'Ādām na África:  
Salmo 8 Dentro de uma Epistemologia Africana*

**Abstract**

In this song praise, that is, Psalm 8, a hymn that sets great store by Yahweh's creative power and the marvel thereof, the psalmist ruminates or rather marvels, on what 'ādām is, both in the context of 'enoš' relationship with Yahweh and also in the context of his/her relationship with other members of the created order. If the preceding meditation and/or enquiry, is situated within African epistemological frameworks and approached accordingly, which insights especially on African notions of humanity and/or human beingness, may be gained from such a reading? Which contribution if any, may the preceding reading make to the field of African Biblical hermeneutics?

**Keywords:** Psalm 8; 'Ādām; African epistemology; African biblical hermeneutics; Creation; Humanity.

**Resumen**

En este canto de alabanza, es decir, el Salmo 8, un himno que valora enormemente el poder creador de Yahveh y su maravilla, el salmista reflexiona o más bien se maravilla sobre lo que es el 'ādām, tanto en el contexto de la relación de 'enoš con Yahveh como en el contexto de su relación con otros miembros del orden creado. Si la meditación y/o investigación precedente se sitúa dentro de marcos epistemológicos africanos y se aborda en consecuencia, ¿qué percepciones, especialmente sobre las nociones africanas de humanidad y/o del ser humano, pueden obtenerse de tal lectura? ¿Qué contribución, si alguna, puede hacer la lectura precedente al campo de la hermenéutica bíblica africana?

**Palabras clave:** Salmo 8; 'Ādām; Epistemología africana; Hermenéutica bíblica africana; Creación; Humanidad.

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## Resumo

Neste cântico de louvor, isto é, o Salmo 8, um hino que valoriza enormemente o poder criador de Yahweh e a sua maravilha, o salmista reflete ou melhor, maravilha-se sobre o que é o ‘ādām, tanto no contexto da relação de ‘enoš com Yahweh como no contexto da sua relação com outros membros da ordem criada. Se a meditação e/ou investigação precedente for situada dentro de marcos epistemológicos africanos e abordada em conformidade, que percepções, especialmente sobre as noções africanas de humanidade e/ou do ser humano, podem ser obtidas a partir dessa leitura? Que contribuição, se houver, pode a leitura precedente dar ao campo da hermenêutica bíblica africana?

**Palavras-chave:** Salmo 8; ‘Ādām; Epistemologia africana; hermenêutica bíblica africana; Criação; Humanidade.

## Introduction: Choosing to Drink from Own Epistemic Wells

Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) is one of the African-South African indigenous languages which has been historically marginalized in South African history. Instead, two foreign languages, that is, English and Afrikaans, were prioritised and imposed on people of African descent in South Africa.

Yet as Ngubane and Makua rightly argue,

Multilingual practices such as translanguaging enable multilingual teachers and students to draw from different linguistic repertoires for meaningful and purposeful learning. This type of learning can be transformative. However, successful multilingual practices such as translanguaging require that teachers accept and recognise all languages spoken by students as equal (Ngubane and Makua 2021, p. 7)

The preceding deliberate marginalization of indigenous languages, cultures, and epistemologies among others, reminds one of the notions of “epistemic violence” deployed by some of the decolonial scholars. In his book, *Indigenous research methodologies* (2016), Bagele Chilisa responds to the notion of “epistemic violence” by making a call for “epistemic freedom” to replace epistemic violence. For her, epistemic freedom is a process that entails the enactment of decolonising research and pedagogical methodologies as a way of achieving “epistemic freedom” by the formerly colonised people, women as well as indigenous people whose epistemologies and/ or knowledge systems, remain rejected thus perpetually located on the margins (2012). This so-called “epistemic freedom” is indeed a process. It is not an easy one as one tries to navigate a basically foreign terrain in which Black scholars and their epistemologies, continue to remain on the margins of American- and Eurocentric scholarship (2021, p. 113)

For Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “epistemic freedom” differs from academic freedom because it is much broader and deeper. He continues:

It speaks to cognitive justice; it draws our attention to the content of what it is that we are free to express and on whose terms. Epistemic freedom is about democratising ‘knowledge’ from its current rendition in the singular into its plural known as ‘knowledges’. It is also ranged against overrepresentation of Eurocentric thought in knowledge, social theory, and education. Epistemic freedom is foundational in the broader decolonisation struggle.

The preceding brief introduction was meant to locate historically suppressed ways and modes of knowing, like those rooted in the rich cultures, ideologies and knowledges of Africa, within the core engagement of this essay, that is, reading the notion of being ‘ādām in Africa within an African (read: Sesotho sa Leboa) epistemology.

In her attempt to foreground African epistemologies/ knowledges and philosophies in her interaction with the biblical text, African-South African Hebrew Bible scholar, Masenya (Ngwaná Mphahlele), has deliberately invoked the wisdom of African people as embedded in the African folklore (cf. the proverbs and storytelling as cases (2012, pp. 283-297; 2017, pp. 534-547; 2019, pp. 221-222; 2020, pp. 464-478). A path that has neither been easy nor smooth to navigate especially in a field like Biblical Studies<sup>2</sup> that basically remains white and male. It is no wonder that Holter reminds us about the “stubborn” persistence of the serious challenge of integrating African biblical scholarship into the mainline Western scholarship without giving it the labels of being fetish, barbaric and primitive (Holter 2014, 430-431).

The preceding and many a time, alienating hostile scholarly environment, is captured succinctly in the words of the Jewish woman scholar, Adele Reinhartz who was the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) President during the year 2020, with its herstoric/historic # Black Scholars Matter Seminar:

And as a long-time participant in the Society of Biblical Literature, I was also conscious of the multiple ways in which Black scholars are marginalized at our meetings and in our guild more generally. But it was one thing to know that Africana scholars face challenges that I as a white person do not, and another to listen to them describe those experiences. I was deeply moved by the willingness of these colleagues to talk about such matters and also immediately convinced of the importance of making the symposium available in forms that could not only be heard but also read and cited by others, now and into the future. (2022: xi).

With the preceding brief overview of locating African epistemologies in an alienating context, especially within the field of biblical studies, we now locate the notion of being human (*go ba motho*) within a specific African epis-

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<sup>2</sup> David Tuesday Adamo has also revealed the challenges of navigating Eurocentric scholarship while deliberately decolonising conventional biblical scholarship. He reminds us that: ... it (colonisation) includes the colonisation of thought and the entirety of one’s life. ...it means the domination of interpretation of biblical studies by Western scholars. It means the sacralisation of the Western way of interpreting the Bible as the universal one and the only legitimate way (2020).

temology as a way of opening a window into an African-conscious reading of Psalm 8.

### **On *Being Motho* (Human Being) in the Sesotho sa Leboa (Northern Sotho) Epistemology**

Sesotho sa Leboa sets great store by intonation, as in the following two examples: On the one hand, the expression: *Ke motho*, depending on the intonation of the speaker and/or listening context, can literally be translated as: She/he is a human being<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, what can be implied from the preceding intonation, *Ke motho*, also points to the kindness/humanness *botho/ubuntu/hesed* of such a human being.

Elsewhere Masenya (Ngwaná Mphahlele has thus argued as follows:

So, one's humanness/humanity seems to be linked with how positively one acts towards fellow human beings. The counterpart of *ke motho* is *selo se ga se motho*. The literal meaning of the latter phrase is "this thing is not a human being." The preceding phrase is said when the object of scorn, who is also a human being, behaves in an unkind way towards another/ other human beings. In the latter textual context, the prefix *se*, which depicts the noun class for objects, replaces the personal noun class *mo/o*. Noteworthy is the observation that a human being depicted in the latter sense, is "demoted" to the level of non-living things such as objects or things. (2014: 489-501).

On the other hand, the phrase, *le nna ke motho* which can literally be translated as: "I, also, am a human being", is uttered in a context of protest and resistance where for example, an aggrieved powerless human being could be reminding a more powerful one that he/she is equally human. For example, an aggrieved wife who is employed elsewhere in the public sphere of work, being inundated with household chores after a hard day at work while her husband is watching television, could by way of protesting, rant: *le nna ke motho*.

I have published work on Psalm 8 before. For example, in the article titled, *Female and Royal Humanity? One African Woman's Meditation on Psalm 8*, (Masenya (Ngwaná Mphahlele 2014: 489-501) I have used the case in point of a female royal, that is, Hosi Nwamita' assumption of the royal throne within the Vhatsonga ethnic group of South Africa. Nwamita's assumption of the throne had to be contested in the courts of the land as a counter to the patriarchal norms in which females can never assume a royal throne precisely because of their non-normative gender. The ancestors (*bagologolo* - see the sacred endorsement that usually precedes the utterance of these proverbs) have proclaimed that

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<sup>3</sup> See the non-gendered and/or inclusive nature of this language, perhaps a pointer to the communal mentality embedded in the African worldviews.

*tša etwa ke ye tshadi pele, di wela ka leope* (if they (cattle) are led by a female one, they will fall into a donga!<sup>4</sup>(2016)

Another published work on Psalm 8 is titled, *Black (Humanity) is Beautiful! Reading Biko and Meditating on Psalm 8*, (2014)). In this article, the slogan of Steven Bantu Biko's slogan, "Black is beautiful" is deployed to argue that the 'ādām who is being celebrated by the psalmist in Psalm 8 as "...a little lower than the angels/ God"(8: 5 MEV) is a human being irrespective of his/her ethnicity and/ or race. Also, that precisely due to the marginalization based on our skin pigmentation as black people, it is fitting to read the meditation contained in Psalm 8, through the lens of black beauty, hence the proverb, *botse re llera boswana, bošwanyana bo a lahletša*, literally, beauty we cry (yearn?) for blackness, whiteness is misleading (2014).

With the preceding brief context on African Biblical scholarship within mainstream Eurocentric biblical studies as well as some insights on the definition of a human being in the context of the world of Psalm 8's production and in African contexts, we now turn to the main question asked in the present essay: If the meditation of Psalm 8 is situated within African epistemological frameworks, which insights especially on African notions of humanity and/or human beingness, may be gained from such a reading?

### **Reading Psalm 8 through African Epistemology as an Optic**

Psalm 8, which is a hymn, is a creation psalm that sets great store by Yahweh's creative power and the marvel of God's creation. Understandably, Yahweh occupies centre stage in this psalm. It is no wonder that the psalmist cannot but celebrate the excellence of I am who I am, this One who causes to be, what comes into existence (see the expressions: the work of his fingers: 8 : 3; as well as the work of his hands). Thus, when *ha 'ādām*, daughter or son of humanity interacts with the works of God's creation; s/he needs to first appreciate that as one made lower than 'elohim, and also crowned with honour and glory, who as the representation of God on earth privileged to rule (marshal) over the works of God's creation, he/she needs to carry out this huge responsibility with awe.

Brown (2002: 157) as referred to by Bosman, along with other scholars note the link between Ps 8: 6-8 and Gen 1:26-28. In this creation narrative, humankind is portrayed as being made in God's image. He/she has been, blessed by the creator God and then given the task of ruling over all the animals and other creatures of the earth. The word used in the Genesis narrative is *radah* (that is, to rule) is synonymous to the verb, *mashal* as used in Ps 8: 6. Brown can thus argue,

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<sup>4</sup> The tenor underlying this proverb is: women cannot lead as they will necessarily lead the people (read: subjects) astray.

the language in Gen “lacks all sense of exploitation” there is no indication in the Genesis text that points to a competition of resources. He continues, “To the contrary, “humanity’s ‘regime’ over the world in Gen 1 is constructive, even salutary, consonant with God’s life-sustaining creation (2010, p. 47)

In Psalm 8, the psalmist marvels, on what *‘ādām* is, both in the context of *‘enoš*’ relationship with Yahweh and in the context of his/her relationship with other members of the created order. The psalmist’s view of humanity is two-pronged: On the one hand humanity/ a human being as one of the most elevated creatures within God’s other created works and on the other hand, humanity as a lowly creature when compared to God and/or the realm of the supernatural (Elohim: angels/ gods)

A holistic outlook in which the whole is religious, such as the African worldview, would not see a demarcation between the sacred (God<sup>5</sup> divinities, spirits and so forth), vis-à-vis human beings, animals, the sky, the moon and the stars.

And so, David Tuesday Adamo reminds us that “...the African definition of good health includes the total physical and social wellbeing. It entails a good relationship which includes harmony with nature, divinities, spirits and fellow human beings.” The religious whole integrates various aspects of human life, including the environment.

Resonating with Adamo’s (2020:12), Emifie Ikenga-Methu can also argue, the main objective of an African is to live a life in harmony with humanity and with nature. He feels himself in intimate rapport and tries to maintain harmonious relationship with the animal, vegetable, and other elements and phenomena in the universe (1987: 78).

In a context where the whole is religious, the marvel of an African on-looker into the starry heavens, would be heightened by an African epistemology/ astronomy as evident from the names of certain stars and what the stars meant and/or communicated to people in their daily lives. Such is a relational encounter between humans and nature, the works of God’s fingers. The anthropomorphism displayed in the preceding phrase, that is, the work of God’s fingers, may be a pointer to the psalmist’s close relationship with the Creator as he/she meditates on the wonders of God’s works.

Apart from the beauty/ marvel of the starry heavens, an African admirer would also identify certain stars by their names and what they signified in her/ his specific cultural setting:

For example, the star called *mphatlalatšane* was/is understood to mark the dawn of a new day. The dawn of a new day would be captured in the follow-

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<sup>5</sup> Adamo gives a helpful description of the importance of names in the African cultures. The fact that the name of God, Yahweh, is used by the psalmist both to introduce and close the psalm will not be without importance in African cultures in which names do not arise out of a vacuum. Like in ancient Israelite contexts, a human being’s name was/is linked with his/her identity in one way or other. (2020:9-26)

ing gendered expressions: *mahwibi a basadi* (early morning hours for women) and *mahwibi a banna* (early morning hours for men).

The verb, *patlalatša*, means to scatter. The star, *mphatlalatšane* (the preceding noun literally means, one who scatters or diffuses), can thus be translated to mean a star that diffuses the darkness of the night. Chronologically, *mphatlalatšane* would appear before *mahwibi a banna* (early morning hours for men). What could one regard as *mphatlalatšane*'s counterpart on the other end of the spectrum, would be a star that ushers in the night, that is *sekgopetšane*. *Sekgopetšane* would appear/ appears around dinner time. The name is derived from the Northern Sotho word, *kgopela*, which means, to ask. *Sekgopetšane* was/is viewed as appearing to request food that was served for dinner, as though after "eating" what would have been offered to it by a generous African person (read: admirer), *sekgopetšane* would have been prepared fully to embark on its journey throughout the darkness of the night.

The African admirer (cf especially those in the category of traditional healers of medicine men/women) of the starry heavens portrayed in Psalm 8, could also, depending on the season in question, be fascinated and even excited, to be the very first one to see a star called *naka*. Why so? There was a belief that the one to have the first sight of *naka* would be empowered with more healing powers. *Naka* was /is believed to mark the very heart of the Winter season, when it would be very cold (cf. the links between the stars, human beings and seasons as well).

Within African epistemologies, a moon would also have a story to tell as the different shapes and/or colours of the moon would denote different things. For example, a specific "slanting" position of the moon, would be linked with a prediction of a season of illness. The moon's red colour would depict an impending danger. The expressions, *ke ya kgweding* (I am going to the moon)/ *ke bone kgwedi* (I saw the moon)/ (I am on the moon) *ke kgweding* (/ke mabakeng (I am in seasons) reveal the link between the moon and an African female human being's monthly cycles. The latter expressions as expressed in the Sesotho sa Leboa word *ke*, (I) means that the subject with a link to the moon can *only* denote a female human being.

The connectedness between African people and animals is not only revealed in the many proverbs which embed lessons to be learned by humans from animals.<sup>6</sup> The following proverb can be cited as a case in point: *Sebatana se bohlale ke motho*, whose literal meaning is a small wild animal that is wise, is a human being. Interestingly, a human being in the preceding proverb is compared with a small wild animal. It may be argued that the way the proverb is constructed deconstructs the anthropomorphism that may be detected in Psalm 8:6-7 about the dominion given to human beings over animals (both domestic

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<sup>6</sup> Also, the link between human beings and animals can be gleaned from a study of the poetry linked with certain clans. (footnote CHECK RECENT ARTICLE)???

and wild) as in the following. Why? The subject of the proverb is not a human being, but a small wild beast. Also, a human being is not compared with a big beast (*sebata*), but with a small one (*sebatana*). Hence, in this setting, the words of Tate and his understanding of the notion of human beings having dominion over nature (read: animals) in biblical contexts would make sense:

He argues:

...the biblical contexts do not indicate a human role of trampling down animals and the world in a domineering and exploitative way. The paradise picture of God's intended world fades somewhat after the early chapters of Genesis, but a residue remains and the vision persists (as in Isa 11: 1-10; 25: 6-9; 30: 11-26; 65: 17-25; Jer 17: 7-8; Ezek 47: 1-12; Rev 22: 1-5). The dominion-having of humanity is a stewardship of God's earth and the responsibility to work to make it a dwelling place of humans, animals, and God. The ability to alter nature through technology should have as its purpose the development of the world in such a way as "to resemble heaven, in order that the earth may become the dwelling place of God." (358-359)

### **Humanity's Dominion over God's Creation? Totemism In Context**

As we revisit the notion of an African human being's connectedness with nature (in the context of Psalm 8, the animals, both domestic (sheep and oxen) and wild (even the beasts of the field), the birds of the air, the fish of the sea that travels the paths of the seas (6-8), the notion of totemism in our African cultures can assist us in bringing to bear on the notion of dominion within the African epistemological discourse. For the purposes of the present investigation, the category of animals will be cited as a case in point.<sup>7</sup>

Ghanian Hebrew Bible scholar Abotchie Ntrel reminds us that,

The system of totems enabled African people to have a special connection with specific animals. Consistent with the notion of the preservation of animal life on earth, is the idea of taboo and totem: "Long before modern science began to talk about preservation of plant and animal species, Africans have been preserving both through the notion of totems. Some African peoples regard certain animals as sacred and therefore do not eat these animals" (Ntrel 2001, p. 104).

The following example can serve as a case in point: The clan into which I was born is called the Bakgaga clan. My totemic name is Mokgaga. All the members of the clan identified by the totemic animal *kgaga* were not expected to eat the meat of their totemic animal, a move that in my view, problematises the notion of dominion as the subjugation of animals (both wild and domestic) in the meditation of the psalmist.

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<sup>7</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis that would include the other species, see Madipoane Masenya (Ngwaná Mphahlele), *Ecological Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism* (2022).

What one found interesting about a study conducted by Mokgale Makgopa (2019) regarding totems in the Northern Sotho culture is that the animal category was/is predominant. He offers the following reasons thereof:

- There is readiness on an individual's part to learn something from animals,
- The ability to share willingness and power that is embedded in the totems, an observation that reveals creativity and skill as well as the fact that,
- Both the individual and the animal are part of the physical environment, as such, they both occupy the preceding space (159-164).

In light of the above connectedness between human beings with specific animals, the notion of a human being having dominion over the animals as featured in Ps 8 may need to be nuanced some. The sacredness of the relationships between humans and animals would also be revealed in the praise names of specific clans<sup>8</sup>.

What one also found interesting as one engaged Psalm 8 through an African epistemological optic are the apparent reversals between the Sacred Other, '*ādām* and/ or '*enoš*' as well as the other items of creation to which humanity has been given dominion. For example, Yahweh seems to be brought to the level of humans as the psalmist describes the works of God's creation through embodiment (cf. the works of your *fingers* (8:3) and (cf. over the works of your *hands* 8:6). The deity portrayed in here, as well as an easy communication between a human being (read: psalmist) and the deity reveals a close connectedness between humans and God. Such a close link is also revealed in another reversal, that is, of a human being as being a little lower than God. The preceding connectedness between human beings and God appear to resonate with of the Priestly editor's notion of a human being who is created in God's image (cf. Gn 1: 26). The following analysis by Musa of the contributions made by J Wentzel van Huyssteen on the meaning of a human being ( '*ādām*) being created in God's image is helpful:

The fact that human beings are the image of God has the following implications:

No human being should oppress or dehumanise another.

All humans have human dignity and freedom to life and to love the lives of others

Human beings are representatives (stewards) of God's creation

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<sup>8</sup> An interesting example of the religious link is the dynamic of the members of one of the largest African Independent churches on the continent, the Zion Christian Church. The totemic animal of his Grace, Bishop EJ Lekganyane is kgomo (cow). The members, irrespective of the different totemic animals to which they are attached, are called, *bana ba kgomo*, literally children of the cow, by virtue of their religious leader's connectedness with a cow as totemic animal. The preceding observation will further be complicated by those members who deify their religious leaders.

All human beings are expected to reflect the ethics of God's nature of Justice, love and righteousness in the world (Jer 9:24; (2022: 291).

Hence Tate will rightfully argue that the call to “dominate over” is directed to human beings who know as well as acknowledge humanity's humble place of significance and finitude in creation (not over it). Humans also know their God-given calling and thus to rule with care and servitude, not through exploitation (2022). If we bring the notion of totemism to bear with the preceding argument, the notion of humans ruling over animals and other members of the created order, such creatures with which they identify, become problematized.

## Conclusion

One of the beautiful pieces that reveals an African human being's connectedness with nature has been captured in the poem written by the former President of the Republic of South Africa, His Excellency, President Thabo Mbeki:

I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers, the deserts, the trees, the flowers, the seas and the ever-changing seasons that define the face of our native land. My body has frozen in our frosts and in our latter-day snows. It has thawed in the warmth of our sunshine. The crack and the rumble of the summer thunders, lashed by startling lightning, have been a cause both of trembling and of hope. The fragrances of nature have been as pleasant to us as the sight of the wild blooms of the citizens of the veld.... At times, and in ear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito. (Mbeki 1996).

Reading Psalm 8 within an African epistemological framework, enables us to confirm that in the African worldview, the whole is religious. In the religious whole, African insights on astronomy, enable the reader of the starry heavens as portrayed in Psalm 8 to understand that human beings have a seamless connection with the stars. Some stars have names that spoke and/or have meaning and lessons for humanity. Ignoring such lessons could lead to a chaos that would disturb the harmonious existing order that entailed among others, God, human beings and other members of creation (especially those mentioned in Psalm 8) exist. Likewise, his/her gaze at the moon, would not only remind the African admirer about the links between the moon and the body cycles of a (female) human being, it would also remind him/her of the significance of the lessons conveyed by the moon's different positions and its colours. When read through the optic of African totemic cultures, the command to humans to have dominion over other animals that are also members of the created order would yield refreshing results that may problematize anthropomorphic and androcentric

tric readings of Psalm 8. A human being, this creature who is a little lower than God, an integral part of all of creation, one willing to be taught by creation in its varied manifestations.

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