

# Being Human: Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) on Life, Love and Living in the Psalms

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## ABSTRACT

*In the context of life-denying forces that have deeply scarred (South) Africa, what does it mean to be human? In the book of Psalms, we see a keen acknowledgment of humanity as precious and powerful, created "a little lower than God and crowned... with glory and honor" (Ps 8:5). However, the Psalms of Lament, in particular, also attest time and again to where humanity has fallen short of the ideal of what a human can and should be. In conversation with Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s writings on the human condition in an African context, specifically as it pertains to her bosadi interpretation of a number of Psalms (6, 8, 12, 23, 127), this article seeks to think with Prof Madipoane on the meaning of life, love and living amidst the numerous challenges facing us today in our own country, but also globally. In the context of poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia, HIV-AIDS, and a looming environmental crisis, what does it mean for us to be living between death and life, courage and despair, victimhood and agency?*

**KEYWORDS:** Psalms, Being Human, African Biblical Interpretation, Madipoane Masenya

## A **MADIPOANE MASENYA; PSALM 6; PSALM 8; PSALM 12; PSALM 23; PSALM 127; AFRICAN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION INTRODUCTION**

From that first moment when two cells collide,  
When body, soul and spirit find their way to each other,  
When from more than a homeostatic collection of DNA, organs  
and systems we spring forth,  
When Humanity peers through its foggy, fragile veil of mortality

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We start our journey of Being Human.<sup>1</sup>

There is something profoundly universal about being human. We are born vulnerable, and we die vulnerable. As Glodina Gordon's poignant poem, "On Being Human," attests, we are utterly dependent on the care of others for the provision of food, water, shelter and protection:

Basic needs once satisfied are displaced by an equally gnawing need,  
Seeking acceptance, warmth of touch to feed the soul.<sup>2</sup>

Even then, there is something equally particular about being human. *My* life, *my* love, *my* living encompasses what it means to be human in a particular time and place. Within this particularity, being human finds unique expression that takes on the shape and contours of a given context.

In her article that offers an "African Woman's Meditation on Psalm 8," Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) reflects on both this "generic nature of humanity" as evident in Ps 8 that nonetheless does not emerge in a vacuum but stems "from a particular historical (liturgical) context" and denotes an experience of a particular God.<sup>3</sup> In her reading of this Psalm in her specific context, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) considers how her understanding of "what it means to be a human being" is shaped by her growing up specifically in a Northern Sotho/Pedi, African–South African context. As she contemplates:

I was born and nurtured in a complex context. Mine was a context which was and still is, characterised by inequities... I was born into and nurtured by a patriarchal African culture. The broader national *apartheid* culture was equally patriarchal, although I was kind of detached from it, particularly as I grew up.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of this context of dehumanisation, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) highlights that the Northern Sotho/Pedi word for a human being, *motho*, which transcends such factors as "ethnicity, gender, religion and social class," also is used to denote "kindness" in her culture.<sup>5</sup> It is ironic, but also inspiring, that in a context that was so marred by human rights violations, "being human" in Prof Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s "culture seems to be linked to kindness, goodness, one which has to happen within human

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<sup>1</sup> Glodina Gordon, "On Being Human," *PoetryPotion*, 23 March 2013. Online: <https://www.poetrypotion.com/on-being-human-by-glodina/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, "On Being Human,"

<sup>3</sup> Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Female and Royal Humanity? One African Woman's Meditation on Psalm 8," *OTE* 27/2 (2014): 491–492.

<sup>4</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Female and Royal Humanity?" 492.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 491.

relationships." "Humanness" or "humanity" thus is "linked to how positively one acts towards fellow human beings."<sup>6</sup>

For this special volume honouring the life and prolific works of Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), I have chosen to contemplate the question of what it means to be human in the book of Psalms as read in a (South) African context. The Psalms are particularly appropriate for contemplating the complex reality of what it means to be human. Thus, one finds a keen acknowledgment of humanity as precious and powerful, created "a little lower than God and crowned... with glory and honor" (Ps 8:5). However, the Psalms of Lament, in particular, also attest time and again to where humanity has fallen short of the ideal of what a human can and should be. Similarly, on the one hand, our most beautiful country/continent celebrates the incredible beauty of humans being connected to the land and one another. On the other hand, our humanity also has been seriously affected by the life-denying forces of colonialism, apartheid and inequality that deeply have scarred the people of (South) Africa in the past but also continue to inflict harm in the present and future.

In conversation with Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s writings on the human condition in an African context, specifically, as it pertains to her *bosadi* interpretation of a number of Psalms (6, 8, 23, 127), this article seeks to think with Prof Madipoane on the meaning of life, love and living amidst the numerous challenges facing us today in our own country as well as globally. In the context of poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia, HIV-AIDS and a looming environmental crisis, what does it mean for us to be living between death and life, courage and despair, victimhood and agency?

## **B ON LIFE**

The Psalms are profoundly aware of the fragility of human life. In Ps 144:3-4, when the psalmist asks the question at the heart of this article, "What does it mean to be human?" the answer is that people "are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow" (Ps 144:3).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in Ps 90:4-5, humans are said to be "like a dream, like grass" – flourishing in the morning only to, in the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>7</sup> This reference to everything being "breath" or "vapour" (*hebel*) recurs as a refrain throughout the book of Ecclesiastes to denote the fleetingness of life and everything in it. As Choon-Leong Seow's definition of *hebel* says so well: "It (*hebel*) refers to anything that is superficial, ephemeral, insubstantial, incomprehensible, enigmatic, inconsistent, or contradictory. Something that is *hebel* cannot be grasped or controlled. It may refer to something that one encounters or experiences for only a moment, but it cannot be grasped neither physically nor intellectually," *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 18C; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 47.

evening, wither and fade.<sup>8</sup> In Ps 39:6, the speaker addresses the Creator God head-on regarding the profound brevity of her life:

You have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight. Surely everyone stands as a mere breath (Ps 39:6).

A mere breath, a whiff of vapor on a cold window, a passing shadow, grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, the psalmists were very much aware of the fragility and the transitory nature of the human condition due to a range of threats, stemming from human and non-human enemies alike. From enemies that circle the complainant like wild animals or wild animals who launch an attack on the individual/community much like enemy empires would have done (Pss 22:12-13, 16; 35:17; 59:6, 14; 68:30), human beings are exceedingly vulnerable due to the violence of war as well as the numerous calamities from the natural world including disease, drought, locusts, famine and earthquakes.

Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) taps into this understanding of the human condition prevalent in the Psalms as she interprets Ps 6 in the context of HIV-AIDS that, in particular, has ravaged the sub-Saharan African continent, causing some members of the human family to be more vulnerable than others.<sup>9</sup> Her interpretation of Ps 6 is informed by the experiences of (South) African women who have been particularly hard hit by the HIV-AIDS pandemic, so much so that the pandemic is described as a gendered pandemic. Scholars like Beverly

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<sup>8</sup> This notion of the transitoriness of human life is found also elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Isa 40:6-7 in which humans are likened to grass, here today and gone tomorrow. See also Stuart Lasine's reflection on the biblical and contemporary conceptions of the human condition in his monograph on *Jonah and the Human Condition: Life and Death in Yahweh's World* (LHBOTS 688; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Dangling between Death and Hope: An HIV and AIDS Gender-Sensitive Re-reading of Psalm 6," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37/2 (2016): 1-8.

Hadad,<sup>10</sup> Isabel Phiri,<sup>11</sup> Musa Dube,<sup>12</sup> Denise Ackerman<sup>13</sup> and Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) herself have shown how HIV-AIDS intersects with gender-based violence making especially young women between the ages of 18-35 most vulnerable to not only contracting the disease, due to biological and cultural factors but also by falling victim to gender-based violence.<sup>14</sup> Women furthermore are shown to be adversely affected by the HIV-AIDS pandemic given that the burden of care has been falling upon grandmothers called upon to care for AIDS orphans or in the absence of adequate healthcare for the sufferers of this dreaded disease.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Beverly Haddad, "Gender, Violence, and HIV and AIDS: A Deadly Silence in the Church," *JTSA* 114 (2001): 93–106; eadem., "Living It out: Faith Resources and Sites as Critical to Participatory Learning with Rural South African Women," *JFSR* 22(1) (2006): 135–154; "Surviving the HIV and AIDS Epidemic in South Africa: Women Living and Dying, Theologising and Being Theologised," *JTSA* 131 (2008): 47–57.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Isabel Apawo Phiri, "'Why Does God Allow Our Husbands to Hurt Us?' Overcoming Violence against Women," *JTSA* 114 (2002): 19–30; Sarojini Nadar and Isabel Phiri, "Charting the Paradigm Shifts in HIV Research: The Contribution of Gender and Religion Studies," *JFSR* 28/ 2 (2012): 121–129.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Musa W. Dube, *Grant Me Justice!: HIV/AIDS & Gender Readings of the Bible*. (Vol. 2; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004); eadem, *The HIV & AIDS Bible: Selected Essays* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Denise M. Ackermann, "'Take up a Taunt Song': Women, Lament and Healing in South Africa," in *Reconstruction: The WCC Assembly Harare 1998 and the Churches in Southern Africa* (ed. Leny Lagerwerf; Meinema: Zoetermeer, 1998), 133–150; eadem, "Lamenting Tragedy from 'the Other Side,'" in *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society* (ed. James. R. Cochrane and Bastienne Klein; Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2000), 213–242; eadem, "Tamar's Cry: Rereading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic," in *Grant Me Justice! HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible* (ed. Musa Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro; Maryknol: Orbis Books, 2005), 27–59.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to her re-reading of Ps 6 in a context of HIV-AIDS featured in this article, cf. also Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "'Limping, Yet Made to Climb a Mountain!' Re-reading the Vashti Character in the HIV and AIDS South African Context," in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field* (ed. Yvonne Sherwood; Oxford, 2017; Online edition, Oxford Academic, 2018). Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198722618.003.0030>. Cited 4 April 2024; Madipoane Masenya, "The Bible, HIV/AIDS and African-South African Women: A Bosadi (Womanhood) Perspective," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXI/1 (2005): 187–201; cf. eadem, "Between Unjust Suffering and the 'Silent' God: Job and HIV/AIDS Sufferers in South Africa," *Missionalia* 29/ 2 (2001):186–199; eadem, "Killed by AIDS and Buried by Religion: African Female Bodies in Crisis," *OTE* 19/2 (2006): 486–499.

<sup>15</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Dangling between Death and Hope," 2.

For Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), a lament psalm, such as Ps 6 with its vivid description of the suffering of literal or metaphorical sickness, offers readers who are keenly aware of the devastating effects of HIV-AIDS on their own bodies or on that of the community the opportunity to grieve individually and communally. Illness, both in the biblical traditions and in our contemporary context(s) leaves people helpless, as they feel profoundly out of control because of the disease that ravages their bodies and minds.<sup>16</sup> However, in her reinterpretation of Ps 6 in the context of HIV-AIDS, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) acknowledges that a range of factors is responsible for already vulnerable individuals becoming even more susceptible to the effects of this disease as HIV-AIDS intersects with gender, race, class and colonialism.<sup>17</sup> She outlines this precarity experienced especially by women in her context of South Africa when she gives shape to the enemies referenced in Ps 6:7 in a way that shows how the calamity of HIV-AIDS cannot be separated from the violence of inequality, racism and sexism. She writes, "My eyes waste away because of grief; they grow weak because of all my foes. (My enemies, stigma, poverty, patriarchy, Empire, detached political and religious leaders, overwhelm my body with grief)."<sup>18</sup>

Through this creative reinterpretation of Ps 6, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) helps us to see that even "though HIV-AIDS that has caused so much suffering around the world and especially in countries where poverty is rampant, "All of humanity is either infected or affected."<sup>19</sup> This sentiment has also been shared by Denise Ackermann who famously argued that, "The Body of Christ has AIDS." If one suffers, we all suffer.<sup>20</sup>

Despite this despair experienced by the sufferer of HIV-AIDS, or the community who has learned how to lament, Ps 6 calls upon ancient and contemporary readers alike to cry out to God. As Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) contextualises Ps 6:8 in the context of HIV-AIDS:

Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping. (In your loving kindness oh Lord, you have

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 6. Cf. also Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s exposition of inequality in Ps 12, which offers a keen critique of the political and religious leaders of the day whose propensity for power and greed occurs at the expense of the poor and needy and is particularly relevant in the (South) African context, "Amidst Tongues Tearing Apart and Lying Lips, God of and for the Oppressed: Casting an African Gaze at Psalm 12," *STJ* 2/ 2 (2016b): 372–373.

<sup>19</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Dangling between Death and Hope," 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ackermann, "Tamar's Cry," 58.

heard my prayer, you evil systems, you violators of female bodies,  
you, even you can never have a hold over me! Go away!) <sup>21</sup>

These words of the original Psalm as well as its creative appropriation in the context of HIV-AIDS have helped generations of believers from the earliest times to voice their suffering in the face of life-threatening disease as it intersects with poverty, patriarchy, racism, and homophobia. For Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "to engage in an active act of lamentation" constitutes an essential part of the unceasing struggle for justice in which she writes, "we continue to dangle between faith and doubt, courage and despair, death and hope" – in the hope and belief in "the God of life has the power to right the wrong."<sup>22</sup>

## C ON LOVE

### 1 The Self (Ps 8)

Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) is not only writing on the fragilities of life. In several of her writings on the Psalms, she also considers the human capacity to love, deemed important in her South African context, which has seen more than its share of loathing and aversion. This call to love the self is evident in her reflection (together with Hulisani Ramantswana) on Ps 8. The powerful statement in Ps 8 that God has made the human a little less than the divine serves as a powerful means of (re)claiming human dignity in a context in which too many black and female members in the (South) African context have suffered from the dehumanising reality of racism and sexism. In this regard, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Ramantswana highlight the importance of Steve Biko's insistence that "Black is beautiful" as an affirmation of the humanity of black people in South Africa to counter the inhumanity they suffered during the eras of apartheid and colonialism.<sup>23</sup>

In their reading of Ps 8:4-6, in which human beings are affirmed as wonderfully made, "a little lower than God," "crowned... with honour and glory," Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Ramantswana propose that Biko's notion of black beauty could be a helpful hermeneutical lens to interpret the reference to "all humanity [being] endowed with royal status" in this psalm that holds transformative potential for many people in South Africa where the humanity of black individuals have been and, in many cases, continue to be

<sup>21</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Dangling between Death and Hope," 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Hulisani Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun of African Biblical Hermeneutics in South African Old Testament Scholarship? Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of the Word in Africa," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36/1 (2015): 1–12 (8). Cf. also Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Female and Royal Humanity?" 494.

contested.<sup>24</sup> As they argue: "Irrespective of their skin pigmentation, one which has been contested through the years, African persons are not only human. They are also royal!"<sup>25</sup>

Love and affirmation of the self are paramount to maintaining one's humanity despite life-denying circumstances. Important for Biko was also that people would love themselves for who they are and not succumb to the temptation of looking down on themselves due to the colour of their skin or social location.<sup>26</sup>

Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) further reflects on the question of what it means to be human in Ps 8 in an essay entitled "Female and Royal Humanity?"<sup>27</sup> She argues that in the patriarchal context in which the biblical traditions emerged, a male child would have been more highly regarded than a girl child – a reality that is the norm in some other African communities as well. This gendered identity furthermore is predominantly heteronormative, with girls expecting to marry and have children.

For Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), the assertion that female bodies are also created in the image of God, imbued with the ability to rule is a powerful counterclaim to the wide-spread devaluation of women across the African continent.<sup>28</sup> Being a descendent of royalty herself, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) proposes that a re-reading Ps 8 as an affirmation not of only female humanity but also of female royal humanity, may affect how many (South) African communities like her own Northern Sotho/Pedi community think about female leadership – an important insight in a context where the full humanity of women and girls are not always recognised.<sup>29</sup>

## 2 The Other (Ps 127)

Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s reflections on love also extend to others, as she, in her re-reading of the Psalms, emphasises the importance of relationality – an essential aspect of what it means to be human in the South (African) context for individuals to be intrinsically connected to those around them. For instance, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), in her (*eco*)*bosadi* interpretation of Ps 127, critically reflects on the importance of motherhood and the call to build a house

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<sup>24</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) and Ramantswana, "Anything New under the Sun," 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>27</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Female and Royal Humanity?" 493.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>29</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) divulges that her "grandfather was a *kgoši* (traditional leader) of the Mphahlele clan." As she notes: "In a sense, royal blood runs through my veins," "Female and Royal Humanity?" 491.

(family). Both in the post-exilic Yehud that forms the setting for the book of Psalms and in her (South) African, specifically Northern-Sotho context, having an abundance of children is celebrated as a virtue.<sup>30</sup>

Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) critically interrogates the high value placed upon motherhood in both her (South) African context and the biblical period of restoration that informs Ps 127. Drawing on the work of Claudia Camp, she shows how in post-exilic Yehud, rebuilding families and having numerous children were considered vital to rebuilding a disseminated people and a matter of survival to rebuilding war-torn Judah.<sup>31</sup> It is also essential for Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) to show how, for instance, in Prov 31, the woman's role as house builder extended beyond her role as wife and mother in serving. Being household manager entailed manufacturing, trading and real estate opportunities beyond the private sphere of the home.<sup>32</sup>

In terms of her South (African) context, Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) highlights how "children... are valued as a continuity of the line and for their capacity to take care of their parents when they grow old."<sup>33</sup> In addition, the view that children will remember their parents after they have passed on further explains why children as well as women as mothers are so greatly valued in this context.<sup>34</sup>

However, concerning both contexts, Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) is critical of the male-centred ideological underpinnings of this "optimistic" or "simplistic" view of the world in which gendered roles are fixed in terms of being married and having children. Such deep-seated ideology has been responsible for significant harm, particularly to women who cannot have children or who, for whatever reasons, may decide not to become mothers.<sup>35</sup>

Notwithstanding the androcentric, heteronormative bias associated with mothering in both biblical and contemporary contexts, Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s writings on being human in the Psalms also incorporate a keen realisation of the importance of love for others and

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<sup>30</sup> Madipoane Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "An *Ecobosadi* Reading of Psalm 127," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets* (ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst; Earth Bible 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001a), 112–113.

<sup>31</sup> Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "An *Ecobosadi* Reading of Psalm 127," 117. Cf. Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature Series 11; Sheffield: Almond/ JSOT Press, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "An *Ecobosadi* Reading of Psalm 127," 122. Cf. also L. Juliana Claassens, "The Woman of Substance and Human Flourishing: Proverbs 31:10-31 and Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach." *JFSR* 32/ 1 (2016): 5–19.

<sup>33</sup> Masenyā (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "An *Ecobosadi* Reading of Psalm 127," 112.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 113

perhaps especially also for children. She reminds us that in Ps 127, children are considered to be a gift of God and that at the heart of the parent-child relationship, one finds critical human values of relationality, interdependence and care.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, Mercy Oduyoye, despite having no children of her own, poignantly has written about the African task of mothering that extends to both women and men and to God, formulating one of the central tenants of an African Women's Theology "thus: "Mothering is an obligation of all in the community whether they are women or men. It is doing to others what God does to, with and for us out of God's compassion."<sup>37</sup>

Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)'s reflection on motherhood is particularly poignant given the exceedingly painful reality of having lost two sons. She specifically reflects on this experience in her interpretation of Job 3 and captures the inevitable part of being human that to love is also to open oneself to loss.<sup>38</sup>

### 3 Mother Earth (Ps 23)

Finally, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) also demonstrates in her writings the importance of love for Mother Earth in which she taps into the close connection of humans with the land, with nature and with animals, which is such a central aspect of what it means to be human in the (South) African context. In her essay on "Ecological Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism," Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) cites former president, Thabo Mbeki, who poetically captures this close connection between the earth and the (South) African people:<sup>39</sup>

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 frost 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 has been as pleasant to us as the sight of the wild blooms of the citizens of the veld... At times, and in fear, I wondered whether I

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>37</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Pilgrim Press 2001), 38.

<sup>38</sup> Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Her Appropriation of Job's Lament? Her-Lament of Job 3, from an African Story-telling Perspective," in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi and Dora Mbuwayesango; Society of Biblical Literature Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 13; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 283–297.

<sup>39</sup> Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Ecological Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology* (ed. Mark Harris and Hillary Marlow; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 49–62.

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.<sup>40</sup>

Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) continues to show how many African proverbs from her Northern Sotho culture illustrate this deeply entrenched connectedness between (South) African people and the land.<sup>41</sup> Regarding her *ecobosadi* approach that she uses to interpret Ps 127, she argues that South African (African) woman's existence is intrinsically connected to the Earth: "She is a woman who has through the years been taught to listen and hear Earth's voice(s)."<sup>42</sup>

Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) uses this deeply ingrained love for the earth in her re-reading of Ps 23 through a (South) African ecological lens. For instance, she argues that the image of greener pastures suggests that "the grass, the plants and other trees, which serves as food for consumption by other members of the ecosystem, had been sufficiently nurtured."<sup>43</sup> In addition, she points out that it is interesting to note how Ps 23 instead focuses on the sheep instead of the shepherd when she argues that, "[t]he sheep is thus not viewed as first and foremost an animal to serve humans through what its body can offer to him/her but as that element of nature that ought to receive provisions from the human being (...shepherd)."<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) also warns that in Ps 23, various aspects of nature are not for nature's own sake but are nature in its service to human beings. Thus, the green pastures and the still waters symbolise adequate nourishment and shelter, the rod and staff cut from wood from the trees of the field are signs of protection and the anointing with oil and its ritualistic elements are utilised to benefit human beings.<sup>45</sup> It is for this reason that Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) calls upon the people of her South (African) context as well as members of the global community to recover their love for the earth that

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<sup>40</sup> Thabo Mbeki, "I Am an African," *News24*, 8 May 1996. Online: <https://www.news24.com/news24/i-am-an-african-by-thabo-mbeki-20110525> Cited 7 April 2024. Cited in Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Ecological Hermeneutics," 50.

<sup>41</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Ecological Hermeneutics," 50.

<sup>42</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "An *Ecobosadi* Reading of Psalm 127," 111.

<sup>43</sup> Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Ecological Hermeneutics," 58.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

maintains "the harmony between humans and other members of the ecosystem."<sup>46</sup>

## D CONCLUSION: ON LIVING

In the poem "On Being Human," with which this article began, Glodina Gordon maintains that the central to being human is to seek to understand and contemplate the essence of humanity amidst the complexities and frailties of the context which Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) so poignantly invokes in her respective writings on the Psalms. According to Gordon, being human is to "strive[s] to be something better and higher than ourselves."<sup>47</sup> Echoing one of the central principles of an African (specifically Zulu) understanding of humanity, "that a person is a person through other people,"<sup>48</sup> Gordon's poem suggests that to be human implies embracing "A sense of Interconnectedness," i.e., "holding oneself accountable to be more humane."<sup>49</sup> Indeed, to be truly human implies that there will be others who will remember us; that "... the lives that we touched are richer by the love we had shown." As Gordon reminds us:

Our fragile capacity to live and bring joy can be matched by our capability to inflict pain and destroy...  
But being human boils down to the choices we make  
The choice to love or to hate – the choice to forgive and inspire the same in others.<sup>50</sup>

This article is dedicated to Prof Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele), whose life and work encapsulates something of this art of living in a way that does justice to what it means to be human; to act in kindness, to do good to others—to students, to colleagues at UNISA and elsewhere in South Africa and abroad—to be a true *motho*.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 60. Specifically in the South African context, this understanding of ecological hermeneutics as it intersects with postcolonial criticism implies resisting "foreign systems of colonialism and apartheid that were imposed on the indigenous people" that resulted in "both the people and nature [being] colonized."

<sup>47</sup> Gordon, "On Being Human."

<sup>48</sup> *Ubuntu*, popularly translated as, "I am, because you are," is derived from the Zulu phrase, "*Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu*." Cf. the popular article by Nkem Ifejika, "What Does Ubuntu Really Mean?" *The Guardian*, 29 September 2006. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2006/sep/29/features11.g2>

<sup>49</sup> Gordon, "On Being Human."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

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