

In the Ant's School of Wisdom: A Holistic African-South African Reading of Proverbs 6:6-11*

MADIPOANE MASENYA (NGWAN'A MPHABLELE) (UNISA)

ABSTRACT

Committed to the ethic of industry, also, possibly persuaded by the precarious context of the production of the text of Prov 1-9, the wisdom teacher persuades his (male) students to watch and learn from the ways of the ant (nemālâ). The nemālâ can be regarded as one of the lowest members of the created species. Apart from the optimistic wisdom mentality embedded within Prov 6:6-11, noteworthy is also the inter-connectedness between human beings and nature. The latter reveals the holistic outlook which typified biblical Israel, including the members of the post-exilic community in Yehud. Research on the wisdom underlying both the HB proverbs and selected African (Northern Sotho/Pedi)¹ proverbs, has revealed apparent resemblances between Israelite and African world views. If Prov 6:6-11 is read from an African-South African holistic point of view, which insights might be gained from the text regarding the interconnectedness between human beings and Earth? How may the insights gained be received in an unequal context such as present day South Africa? The preceding questions will form the core of the contents of the present investigation.

Keywords: Nature, *nemālâ*, wise, sage, sluggard

- 24 Four things on earth are small,
yet they are exceedingly wise:
25 the ants are a people without
strength,
yet they provide their food in
the summer;
26 the badgers are a people without
power,
yet they make their homes in
the rocks;
27 the locusts have no king,
yet all of them march in rank;

* To cite: Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "In the Ant's School of Wisdom: A Holistic African-South African Reading of Proverbs 6:6-11," *OTE* 28, no. 2 (2015): 421-432. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n2a11>

¹ Northern Sotho/Sepedi is one of the Sotho languages alongside Tswana and Southern Sotho. They form part of the 11 official languages of South Africa, post-independence.

28 the lizard can be grasped in the
hand,
Yet it is found in kings’
palaces (Prov 30:24-28; NRSV).

“None preaches than an ant” “and he says nothing.”²

A INTRODUCTION

I saw. I noticed. I observed. I then concluded that they “speak.” Sometimes they speak with a loud unbearable voice, a voice which human beings cannot afford to ignore. Sometimes their voices are not so audible. At times, they speak but through what they do for themselves and not for human beings. In that way, they impose themselves on the human species, pushing us not to act according to human will and desire, but according to theirs. Yes nature speaks!³ As I grew up, the river Hlakaro, one of the tributaries of the Lepelle (Olifants) river, one which served as a pillow for my homestead on the Southern side of the village, and meandered its way slowly but surely into the Lepelle river, spoke at times. Depending on what the particular season had to offer to Hlakaro and to the human species (cf. the rainfall season for example), one would hear the harsh, rushed sounds of its flood. If it was during the course of the week, Hlakaro’s harsh voice could persuade a lazy pupil to borrow from some of the “potential” words of the sluggard addressed in Prov 6:10, “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest . . .” (NRSV). As children, (see even the adults), we all knew that it would be very risky to try and cross that river when it was at its peak. We would thus have to re-schedule our activities for the day according to the dictates of Hlakaro, even if for that specific moment. Many African proverbs and fables/folk stories borrow from nature and thus in one way or other, reveal the links which African people had and still have with nature. One such proverb comes to mind here: *molomo o tshela noka e tletše* (a mouth crosses a river which is full to the breams). The proverb is cited to show the danger which is associated with too much talking, a trait that is notable from people who do not have the capacity to stop talking. Such people are sarcastically warned to respect the “integrity” of overflowing rivers!

Also, through the experience gained from climbing different mountains in search of wood and wild fruits among others, I observed and came to know that trees and shrubs also “spoke.” Depending on the steepness of a specific mountain, one would have to align one’s body’s movements accordingly. One

² Richard Poor as quoted by Rolland W. Schloerb, “Book of Proverbs,” *IB* 4: 819.

³ Job’s poem brings this to light as well: “But ask the animals, and they will teach you; The birds of the air and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, and the fish of the sea will recount to you. Who among all these does not know, that the hand of the LORD has done this, in whose hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all human flesh?” (Job12:7-11)

would be careful to avoid certain shrubs while, depending on a particular season, one would befriend some. In our search for wood, we knew that as part of our connectedness with nature, only dead wood had to be fetched. We also knew which green trees to avoid if we dared to disrespect the fact that only dead wood was one which needed to be severed from the mother tree. Otherwise such trees could “speak” to us through their release of dangerous nectars!

B TAUGHT BY THE NEMALA?

As most if not all families basically thrived through agriculture (cf. also the setting depicted in Prov 6:6-11)⁴, one also came to realise that small creatures such as insects and bees among others, also “spoke” albeit in their own unique ways. The observation of the activities of the ant,⁵ the *nemālā*, the *Messor semirufus*, the harvester ant (*mohlwa*) by the sage in Prov 6:6-11, therefore did not come as a surprise. Also, the call by our primary school teachers to copy from *her*⁶ industrious example would have made sense to us then. Why?

⁴ See Crawford H. Toy, who locates the episode to traditional popular wisdom. Crawford H. Toy, *Proverbs* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1959), 124; R. Norman Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 50.

⁵ Ants are insects which belong to the *Formicidae* family. The harvester ant, that is the *Messor semirufus*, is one which fetches grain from the neighbourhood of the anthill and store it in the upper chambers. Such chambers serve as storehouses for food before the husking and cleaning processes could start. The threshed grain is then kept in the lower chambers. Next to the anthill, a chaff built-up will act as a protective barrier of some sort against the rain which might seep into the subterranean colony. In the view of Forti, due to the fact that the *Messor semirufus* basically works throughout the year, the sage might be having this particular ant in view in Prov 6:6-11. Tova L. Forti, *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 101.

Their social order comprises three classes: the fertile winged queen; winged males whose only function is to fertilise the queen as well as a great number of sterile wingless female workers who do lots of activities. The latter activities include foraging, carrying, threshing, sorting and storing. Forti, *Animal Imagery*, 102. (See also Toy, *Proverbs*, 123, who argues that recent writers note that ants have an elaborate social organisation, at times with king and queen and sometimes which have a class acquired through capture and forced to do community work).

Although the sage of Prov 6:6-11 does not go into the preceding categorisation (something which was probably unknown to him at the time), what appeals to an ecologically- conscious reader of the actions of the *nemālā* today, is her example of hard work and her connectedness to nature’s rhythms.

⁶ The feminine pronoun is used throughout the text of the present article in line with MT’s rendering of the word as well as the observation that within their social structure, the ant colony (cf. wingless female workers) were led by a winged female one (see Forti, *Animal Imagery*, 104). Van Leeuwen argues that the Hebrew word for “ant” is *nemālā*, a word which is grammatically feminine and singular. The preceding fact is not clear from the English translations which renders it as “it” instead of “she.” The

Through our links with nature, we had already observed that the *nemālā* /*mohlwa* was/is one of the busiest little creatures. Interestingly, the trace of the *nemālā*'s hard work would manifest quickly by the work of their "fingers" particularly in the fields which lay fallow. Could it be that the ants, and neither their chiefs nor officers nor rulers, were challenging the human "sluggard" to wake up from sleep and work on his/her fields lest they populate such fields with their anthills? While the latter, are the *nemālā*'s pride and her necessary source of storage, for a field owner, such a sight could only reveal a negative trait, that is, sloth!

Though small, the *nemālā* was huge in actions. Though insignificant in appearance, she was/is full of wisdom (cf. Prov 30:25).⁷ *Serokolo se sennyane, se ikoketša ka go nkgā*, literally, a *siphonochilus aethiopicus* plant (small herb) increases itself (its influence) through releasing a strong (offensive) odour is the proverb that comes to mind here as one reflects on the kind of impact made by a *nemālā* within the household of the Sacred Other. McKane argues that her habits are analogous with those of a disciplined, methodical and diligent man (*sic*).⁸

Contrasting her activities with that of the sluggard Hubbard argues:

The contrast is humiliating. A person over five feet tall and weighing 130 pounds or more is told to let an ant be teacher, an ant less than a quarter of an inch long, weighing a slight fraction of an ounce. A person with gifts of speech, with a brain, the size of a whole anthill, is told to bend over, peer down, and learn from the lowly ant. The irony is powerful.⁹

Biologists, Hölldobler and Wilson, made a study in which they compared human beings and ants. They concluded that the ecosystem would flourish and heal if humans were to disappear. On the other hand, if ants were to disappear, the opposite would hold. They reason:

If all ants somehow disappeared, the effect would be exactly the

Northern Sotho/Pedi translations would be all inclusive as the pronoun "o" is neither male nor female. Van Leeuwen opines that the word reveals yet another female symbol of wisdom. The sage's use of the singular noun serves to ignore the collective nature of the ant's behavior. Raymond Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs" *NIB* IV: 75. In my view though, that should not necessarily be the case precisely on account of the fact that in their daily activities, each *nemālā*, never acts as an individual, but within a colony.

⁷ Four things on earth are small,
Yet they are exceedingly wise.
The ants are a people without strength,
Yet they provide their food in summer (Prov 30:24-25).

⁸ William McKane, *Proverbs* (London: SCM, 1977), 324.

⁹ David Hubbard, *Proverbs* (ComC; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1979), 99.

opposite, and catastrophic. Species extinction would increase even more over the present rate, and the land extinction would shrivel more rapidly as the considerable services provided by these insects were pulled away . . . [L]et us not despise the lowly ants, but honor them. For a while longer at least, they will help to hold the world in balance to our liking, and they will serve as a reminder of what a wonderful place it was when we first arrived.¹⁰

It will thus not be an exaggeration to argue that the *nemālā* “spoke,” yet unlike the Hlakaro river, without a word. The words of Poor thus make sense: “None preaches than an ant” “and he says nothing.”¹¹ Drawing lessons from animal behaviour was a common feature of wisdom literature in the ANE.¹² It is on account of the sage’s observation that the *nemālā* could “speak” that he opens the episode with a command to a sluggard, a lazy son. He is instructed to visit the ant with a view to allowing himself this time not to be made wise by human wisdom. No! The son is to be enlightened by the ways¹³ of the *nemālā*:

- 6 Go to an ant, you lazybones;
consider its ways, and be wise.
7 Without having any chief
or officer or ruler,
8 it prepares its food in summer,
and gathers its sustenance in
harvest (Prov 6:6-8, NRSV)

In the view of the wisdom teacher, the *nemālā* knew what to do and when to do it. She was therefore in a position to perform the right actions at the right time. In the opinions of the sages, such a capacity to discern the kind of actions and the time in which they would be performed was one of the characteristics of a wise person. One is made wise by imitating the ant’s ways because she acted in harmony with the cosmic rhythms of the seasons (cf. 6:8).¹⁴ She was able to heed the call from nature’s seasons.¹⁵ Hubbard could

¹⁰ Bert Hölldobler and Edward Wilson, *Journey to the Ants: A Story of Scientific Exploration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1997).

¹¹ Richard Poor, as quoted by Schloerb, “Proverbs,” 819.

¹² See other examples from Prov 30:24-31 cited at the beginning of the present article; cf. also R. Norman Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

¹³ According to Forti, the “ways” of the ant, can be taken literally as the trail blazed by the harvest ants as they carry their burdens. The word can also “. . . be taken metaphorically to refer to a path of moral rectitude . . . ‘Ways’ and related words, *’ōrah*, *nātib*, *ma’āgāl*, *mēšārîm* refer to a moral road which provides a choice between different ways of life: (righteousness, justice and equity: Prov. 2:8) and the crooked and devious ways (Prov 2:15). In the present textual context, the word could then refer to an ant’s ordered and upright life, one to be copied by the sluggard.” Forti, *Animal Imagery*, 103.

¹⁴ See van Leeuwen, “Proverbs,” 75.

thus rightly argue, “She understands the seasons. The cycles of life – harvest season and dormant periods – are coded into her instincts. She works while food is plentiful and stores it against the season of want.”¹⁶ The *nemālâ*, unlike the lazy bones, could not sleep during the season for ploughing and sowing; neither could she sleep during the season for harvesting. In fact in the view of Forti, harvest ants appear to work incessantly: She reasons:

Harvest ants are active during the daytime in winter and spring; in summer, they work during the night as well, storing up food during the harvest season to prepare for the winter.¹⁷

The *nemālâ* seems to have been aware that in order for her to be successful within the order set down by her Creator/Creatrix and/or the ancestors, she had to fit in accordingly. In that way, she would of necessity reap good rewards. With regard to the preceding order, Perdue argues:

The sages looked to patterns of order in creation from which they could draw important lessons for human living. This included the behavior of creatures . . . The example of an ant is a major case of an extended saying that points to this insect as an example of industry and preparation.¹⁸

Viewed from the portrait presented by the sage in the present episode, he was of the view that poverty could not be attracted to such active, wise creatures, ones which needed no overseer to do their work. The *nemālâ* had no authority figure such as a *qāsîn* (arbitrator), nor *šōṭēr* (officer) nor *mōšēl* (ruler).¹⁹ Argues Parsons: “Proverbs assumes that the physical and moral universe operates by cause and effect. Therefore good behavior is rewarded and bad deeds are punished (e.g. 10:30).”²⁰ Hence Longman could also argue with reference to a related verse such as Prov 10:4:

this is a typical antithetical proverb with an observation on the

¹⁵ Toy argues that the word “summer” sometimes refers to the warm season in a general sense, as opposed to winter. Summer apparently extended through harvest time (Gen 8:22; Jer 8:20) sometimes for the latter part of the fruit season. Harvest time was temporarily indefinite. It varied with a particular crop, for example, barley was harvested in March to September (2 Sam 21:9), grapes (Isa 18:5). Verse 9 gives a description of agricultural life (Toy, *Proverbs*, 124). The reference made to Prov 24:30 fits in perfectly. Within the context of such a life, early rising was a necessity (cf. the Northern Sotho/Pedi versions of the expressions used for the early rising hours for men and for women later in this article).

¹⁶ Hubbart, *Proverbs*, 99.

¹⁷ Forti, *Animal Imagery*, 104

¹⁸ Leo Perdue, *Proverbs* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 125.

¹⁹ Forti, *Animal Imagery*, 104.

²⁰ Greg Parsons, “Proverbs,” in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs* (ed. Roy B. Zuck; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995), 158.

consequences of laziness followed by an observation on the consequences of hard work. The former leads to poverty and the latter to wealth. This is a consistent message throughout the book of Proverbs.²¹

One needs to add though, that despite the fact that the optimism of the sages is more pronounced in the book of Proverbs, they seem to have been aware of the exceptions to the norm. The following proverb can be cited as a case in point:

The field of the poor may yield
much food,
but it is swept away through
injustice. (Prov 13:23; NRSV)

Applied to our present day contexts, the *nemālā* might work very hard to store their food in due season and only to have humans with their advanced technology, destroy their storage places (read: anthills) within seconds! In present day South Africa, other human beings may work hard towards the accumulation of their wealth, only to have others, including the sluggards of our day, plunder their possessions. Miners and domestic workers in our context may work very hard, only to be remunerated much less compared to the energies which they invested into their labours.

The *nemālā*’s hard work, particularly within an agricultural setting, reminds one of the Northern Sotho saying, *lehumo le tšwa tšhemong* whose tenor is, wealth comes from a field. However, the land/field on its own could not produce food during harvesting time. Hard work is thus entailed in the preceding proverb. All people, irrespective of their gender, were expected to work hard not only for their survival during harvesting time, but also to keep poverty at bay, through acquiring wealth. Hence the wisdom saying, *kodumela moepathuse, ga go lehumo le le tšwago kgaufsi*, literally, “persevere you digger of *thuse*²², there is no wealth which comes by so easily.” From some of the expressions, one can safely conclude that just like the audience (sons and /or communities) of the sage in Prov 6:6-11, sleep was not supposed to control human beings. As the movements of the sun, moon, certain stars (cf. also seasons) were traditional markers of events within many an African context, based on how far the sun was from rising, the communities knew about *mahwibi a basadi* (early hours of the morning for women) and *mahwibi a banna* (early hours of the morning for men). The reference to “early hours” in the preceding expressions, depicts that room was not given for a sleep-controlled cow (*ga go na kgomo ya boroko* literally, no sleepy cow can be accommodated). Human beings were expected to rise early in the morning to

²¹ Trembler Longman III, ed., *Wisdom and Psalms* (BCOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 231.

²² A very small medicinal herb which is very difficult to find.

engage in various chores, including agricultural ones. Depending on specific seasons, people were expected to line their activities up in accord with the rhythms of nature to avoid potential regrets of failing to respect Mother Earth.

Like the *nemālâ*, with its apparent links to seasons, the connectedness of African-South African people (cf. the Northern Sotho people in the present context) with the rhythms of nature, is also revealed in how the seasons were/are named. In that way, a human being was called upon to cooperate with the rhythms of nature in order to avoid the undesirable consequences which could arise if cooperation was not secured (cf. the earnest call of the wisdom teacher to a lazy son in 6:6-11; and also Prov 10:5; 20:14; 24:30; 29:18). A closer look at the following indigenous names of the seasons will hopefully reveal how the seasons "spoke" to people in terms of their possible/potential socio-economic status. The month, February is called *se mphe ke khotšhe* literally "do not give me [food] for I am full." It falls within the season called *Lehlabula*, the latter might be comparable to the Hebrew word, *qatsir*, translated as "grain harvest,"²³ in terms of the abundance of food during that particular time. In the Northern Sotho context, that will be a season just before winter. Following this season, would then be harvest time (April and June). The latter is a season in which those who chose to cooperate with the rhythm of nature in the previous months, when the weather (cf. enough rainfall and sunshine among others), was also favourable; those human beings who would have worked harder in the fields, would then be harvesting the fruits of their labour, also being thankful to the Sacred Other and/or the ancestors for the provisions from the fields/land. The truth embedded in the proverbial wealth from the fields would be celebrated by those who chose to follow the ways of *mohlwa* (*nemālâ*). From the optimistic worldviews of both the Israelite and African people, it should be implied that wealth (and not poverty) would be the reward of those who worked hard in their fields. Such would have heeded the "speech" of the times and seasons and carried themselves accordingly.

From the information in the preceding paragraphs, it can be argued that all creatures, both great and small were expected to submit to the existing order and thus be wise and also reap accordingly. Aligning one's actions with the seasons by hard work for example, would entail positive rewards (cf. good harvest) during dry and unfruitful seasons such as winter. Parsons argues that the many references to God's acts of creation in Prov 8:22-31, reveal that creation is viewed as the foundation for the order of the universe. That implies that through wisdom, God placed "order" in the very fabric of the cosmos. In his view, the preceding verses set the stage for the whole book (of Proverbs), which is designed to exhibit the order that holds together all of life.²⁴ Within

²³ Palestine has basically two seasons, the cool rainy one (October through May) and the warm dry one (three or four months of no rain at all) with each harvest happening during the dry season. See Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," 75.

²⁴ Parsons, "Proverbs," 157

the preceding context, there is a "solidarity" between all parts of God's creation, over which he is Ruler, from the universe itself down to a colony of ants (6:6). What one observes in the natural cosmos has implications for understanding the social and moral order.²⁵

Noteworthy is the observation that apart from the model of hard work, the *nemālā* also provides an example of a creature with foresight.²⁶ As previously noted, the *nemālā* acts harmoniously with reality as evidenced by the rhythm of the seasons. Her actions are not based on present conditions, bounty or blight, rather, the ant uses the present, harvest each bounty, to make provisions for the future (rainy season), present abundance does not beguile her. She thus lived in the faith that the good order of the old would continue.²⁷

Her connectedness with the rhythms of nature enabled her to think ahead and plan for the dry and tough seasons. In modern day industrialised societies, particularly ones in which opportunities for hard work are plenty, the call to hard work might appear obvious. However, argues Davis, in countries such as the United States with a culture of indebtedness and the very high rate of credit card possession even by College students, the call to read the seasons with a view to foresight might be pertinent. In his view, the trait that the sage is challenging his student against, that is, "sloth" is more than laziness. It is an aversion to work.²⁸ The latter could also include a human beings' refusal to be open to the new opportunities which God might be opening in their lives.²⁹

D WHAT NOW OF THE SLUGGARD?

Even a cursory reading of Prov 6:6-11 will reveal that at face value, at least in terms of the space provided for a particular discourse, the concern of the wisdom teacher appears to have been more on the behaviour of the sluggard (*'āsēl*) than on the activities of the *nemālā*. Defined in relation to the *nemālā*'s identity, a sluggard is one who lacks industry (cf. his connectedness with the passive rhythms of his body, that is, sleep and/or rest. One who, according to McKane lives "in a no-man's land between sleep and waking life, his intelligence drugged by somnolence."³⁰ A sluggard *has* no foresight. On account of his lack of foresight, the sluggard could not read the signs of the times, and could thus not attune his behaviour according to the rhythms of

²⁵ Parsons, "Proverbs," 158.

²⁶ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster Jon Knox Press, 2000), 55.; Kenneth T. Aitken, "Proverbs," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. John Barton and John Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 405-422; Forti, *Animal Imagery*, 109.

²⁷ Van Leeuwen, "Proverbs," 75.

²⁸ Davis, *Proverbs*, 55.

²⁹ Davis, *Proverbs*, 55-56.

³⁰ McKane, *Proverbs*, 234 as quoted by Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 236.

nature. In the view of Schloerb, a lazy man forgets that harvest does not last forever.³¹ Such unhelpful forgetfulness could not only impact negatively on the individual sluggard, but also on the community as such. Hence the sage's use of hyperbole and satire to encourage the lazy to work. Why? The activity during harvest was critical for the community's survival, as well as that of the individual. Proverbs is concerned with laziness pertaining to the gathering of food during harvest. In particular, and in line with the concerns of the sages, the sluggard lacked wisdom. The sluggard thus represents laziness/sloth, lack of foresight and folly. According to Longman III, lazy people are the epitome of folly in the book of Proverbs.³² Elsewhere, Qoheleth also links the phrase of "folding the arms" with stupid activity (Eccl 4:5).³³ On account of such an identity, and also in line with the grain of the book of Proverbs, a sluggard could only reap poverty, poverty which would have come in fast and in a harsh way! The fact that the envisaged poverty would come in so suddenly and unexpectedly buttresses the folly of the sluggard as he could not even anticipate it. Once again, we notice the sluggard's failure to be attuned to the rhythms of nature and his incapacity to listen to the voice of nature. In my view though, irrespective of the small space offered to the ant's discourse, hers, is in actual fact the core of Prov 6:6-8. Why? The wisdom teacher was concerned that his sons would learn from among others, nature, in order to be *wise*. Apparently, wisdom was not only the prerogative of powerful species such as human beings. It was not only the prerogative of those in authority, the chiefs, the officers or the rulers. The *nemālâ* did not even need the preceding sources of authority to do her business. No! Even the weakest of the members of the created species, such as the *nemālâ* could not only be wise, she could, if her "voice" would be heard by human beings, teach them wisdom. The students of the wise, particularly those with a potential to be lazy and avert work, are instructed to go to such small, "weak," powerless and yet wise creatures, in order to be wise. Their refusal to learn from such simple, but wise creatures, could only be disastrous.³⁴

E CONCLUSION

In order to come up with a more balanced reading of the text of Prov 6:6-11, the following observations are noteworthy. The sage presents the readers with two extreme forms of behaviour, namely, that of a very hard working *nemālâ*

³¹ Schloerb, *Interpreters Bible*, , 818.

³² Longman III, "Proverbs," 561.

³³ See Toy, *Proverbs*, 125, See also Carole R. Fontaine, "Proverbs," in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (ed. James L. Mayttts; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 495, who refers to "folded hands" as a familiar image for sloth.

³⁴ As according to the sage: "The lazy person does not plow in season; Harvest comes, and there is nothing to be found" (Prov 20:4) and "Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty; open your eyes, and you will have plenty of bread" (Prov 20:13).

and that of a sluggard who is wedded to his bed. The latter takes comfort in sleep, thus unconscious or deliberately ignoring the rhythms of the seasons. In real life though, such an extreme life of hard work may not yield productive and nature-conserving benefits on the part of humans. Particularly in an agricultural context, if the land is to be worked upon all the time, when would the land get to rest? In my view, the Jubilee provisions of a rest after fifty years were probably exerting a taxing impact on the agricultural land. Even today, the greed of those whose economic muscle contribute to the large carbon print which poses a challenge to the ecosystem, push them, and many a time at the expense of the hard work of the powerless "Others," to work on the land continuously. Just as there is a human need to sleep and rest the body, the land, needs to be rested. In my view, sleep, if it is not exaggerated, is a healthy and necessary exercise.

Second, the possibility to work hard on the land, both in precolonial Africa, where one family could possess two or more fields, as well as in the context of the wise in Prov 6:6-11, presupposes the existence of a land which could be worked on. Such an assumption of easy access to land needs to be problematised particularly in the context of the production of the episode in question if we consider with Camp that land allocation was a contested matter in Yehud. Argues Camp: "Land and identity were so inextricably tied in Israelite life and thought, however, that one can hardly speak of one without the other."³⁵ The fact that land and identity, that is, the identity of who the true Jew was and the land he was to occupy were connected to each other, needs to remind present day readers of Prov 6:6-11, that access to land was not that easy. Perhaps that is why the sage exhorted his sons to make sure that once they had access to such an asset, it was pertinent that they made real good use of it. Also, in contexts like South Africa, with colonial and *apartheid* histories, a context in which the process of land restitution is proceeding at a hopelessly slow pace even twenty one years after independence, it will be pertinent to note that, particularly for the historically marginalised, access to agricultural land is not one of the givens. Also, in a context like South Africa, where unemployment (read: lack of work opportunities) particularly among the youth, remains a real challenge, the lesson from the *nemālâ* might be a reminder that there is a need to work harder in the area of thought and innovation. There is an urgent need to think harder and rigorously about other ways of providing employment for the millions of (young) job-seekers.

With all what has been noted in the preceding paragraphs notwithstanding, humans have a responsibility to listen to the "speaking" nature. Davis's cautioning words about the responsibility we all have towards making a contribution to resolving the ecological crisis comes to mind here:

³⁵ Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Decatur: JSOT [Almond], 1985), 242-243.

. . . probably the most challenging form of sloth ever practiced by human beings is our current “folding of the hands” as the earth and future generations are increasingly impoverished (v.11) and each passing year shrinks the hope of reversing the harm already done. It is past time to “go to the ant.”³⁶

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aitken, Kenneth T. “Proverbs.” Pages 405-422 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Edited by John Barton and John Muddiman. Oxford University: Oxford, 2001.
- Camp, Claudia. *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*. Decatur: JSOT (Almond), 1985.
- Davis, Ellen F. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*: Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.
- Estes, Daniel J. *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Fontaine, Carole R. “Proverbs.” Pages 495-517 in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*. Edited by James L. Mays. Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1988.
- Forti, L. Tova. *Animal Imagery in the Book of Proverbs*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.
- Hölldobler, Bert and Edward O. Wilson. *Journey to the Ants: A Story of Scientific Exploration*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1994.
- Hubbart, David. *Proverbs*. The Communicator’s Commentary. Dallas, Tex.: Word Books Publisher, 1979.
- McKane, William. *Proverbs*. London: SCM, 1977.
- Perdue, Leo. *Proverbs*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox, 2000.
- Parsons, Greg. “Proverbs.” Pages 151-168 in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*. Edited by Roy B. Zuck. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995.
- Schloerb, Rolland, W. “Book of Proverbs.” Pages 779-957 in vol. 4 of *The Interpreter’s Bible*. Edited by George A. Buttrick, et al. New York: Abingdon 1955.
- Toy, Crawford, H. *Proverbs*. The International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 1959.
- Trembler Longman III, ed. *Wisdom and Psalms*. Baker Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Van Leeuwen, Raymond. “Proverbs.” Pages 7-264 in vol. IV of *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997.
- Whybray, R. Norman. *The Book of Proverbs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.
- _____. *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994.
- Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’a Mphahlele), Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, UNISA, 0003, Republic of South Africa. Email: masenmj@unisa.ac.za.

³⁶ Davis, *Proverbs*, 57