



# Women and Children under Siege: Re-reading Biblical Texts in light of Child Abandonment in South Africa

Rev Zukile Ngqeza (Doctoral Candidate)  
Religion Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Prof Lilly (SJ) Nortjé-Meyer  
Head of Department, Religion Studies  
University of Johannesburg  
South Africa

E-mail: [lillynm@uj.ac.za](mailto:lillynm@uj.ac.za)

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## Abstract

The position of women and children in ancient times and today was/is never promising, because they are too often exposed to suffering, hunger, high levels of violence, abandonment, homelessness, and death. Often when the word for 'child (olale/teknon)' appears, violence and suffering are surrounding them. Thus, scholars regard 2 Kings 6:24-31 as a juvenile text of terror and a cannibal text of the Old Testament, contra to a text for example Mark 7:24-30 in the New Testament. In dealing with these texts, male-centred and adult-centred biblical interpretive approaches are mostly utilized. These interpretive approaches judged and blamed women as 'murderers' who 'feed on their children' rather than seeing the women as victims of a highly patriarchal society. Therefore, there is a need to read these texts through the 'lenses' of mothers and children. Biblical trauma hermeneutics, employing the 'lens' of trauma, will be utilised to interpret these biblical texts. This biblical trauma approach has a purpose for survival, recovery, and resilience to those suffering in and outside the context of the text. This paper seeks to re-read and re-interpret 2 Kings 6:24-31 from a gender-childist-trauma perspective considering the manifold stories of abandoned children in South Africa.

**Keywords:** Gender-childist-trauma approach, biblical trauma hermeneutics, 2 Kings 6:24-31, Mark 7:24-30, cannibal mothers.

## Introduction

In the Bible, 2 Kings 6:24-31 is a story of two women who had to consider eating their children due to a situation of siege-related poverty. After they had eaten one child, one woman decided to hide her child. As a result, the mother of the eaten child complained to a male king who ended up blaming the prophet (who is also a man) and subsequently decided to embark on a period of fasting. The fasting was a confirmation that the male king had food while women and children were without food (Hens-Piazza, 2006:272). 2 Kings 6:34-31 has often been read in patriarchal and adult-centred ways by biblical scholars. These women have often been tagged as murderers and eaters of their own children. The adult narrator mutes the voices of the children in this text. 2 Kings 6:24-31 will be read in comparison to Mark 7:24-30 which is a story of a Phoenician woman who was a foreigner (gentile), and her child was demon-possessed. This woman appealed to a



man (Jesus) for help. In this article, a three-pillar methodology of feminist-childist-trauma is used. Scholars have often read these texts using an either/or approach, that is either feminist, or childist or trauma. Using a feminist biblical approach does justice to the mothers of these texts but not to the children as such. Using the childist approach liberates the children of these texts but tends to leave women being regarded as murderers rather than victims. The trauma approach helps us to see the version of the narrator as a construction rather than as a truthful story.

### **Revisiting Recent Studies on 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Mark 7:24-31**

Bible commentators have not read 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Mark 7:24-30 “for the sake of women and children” (Fewell, 2009:33). Many times, they have read these biblical texts in ways that judge women and children. Thus, there is a need to “interrupt” the ways in which biblical texts have been read and interpreted by many biblical scholars and commentators (Fewell, 2009:32). This includes questioning the mainly androcentric and adult-centred interpretative approaches to biblical texts. For instance, Cohn (2000:48-50), Fritz (2003:268-269) and Cogan and Tadmor (1988:83-84) say nothing about children when they read and interpret 2 Kings 6:24-31. This is similar to the concern that Hens-Piazza has, i.e., the treatment of women and children as “extras in the background” of toxic male characters in biblical passages (Hens-Piazza, 2006:88). Although Fritz suggests that the act of killing children in the face of famine happened in these biblical passages and Akkadian texts (Fritz, 2003:269), he does not question why it is children and not adults who are killed in the times of siege-related famine. Fritz seems to suggest that it should be expected that siege-related poverty would lead to the slaughtering of children.

I find, Fritz’s opinion adult-centred. Fritz further praises the fact that the king was present in the time of the siege (hence the woman complains to him) but he does not question why women starve even to a point of considering eating their children, yet the king is present (Fritz, 2003:269). Cohn further accuses this woman of requesting a “terribly perverted justice” and for “uttering lack of self-consciousness about the crime she has committed” as well as for expecting the king to be on her side (Cohn, 2000:50). Although Cohn acknowledges that poverty is a consequence of siege in this pericope, he does not acknowledge that it is mostly women and children who are affected (Cohn, 2000:48-50). Cohn sympathizes with the male king rather than with the mother who came to appeal to him. He says the king was powerless in the face of famine (Cohn, 2000:50). However, Hens-Piazza challenges the view that the king had no power. He suggests that “power and privilege reside in the hands of dominant males,” the king, as the sovereign in Israel, rules the nation and vies with the prophet for domains beyond his control (Hens-Piazza, 2006:88). Thus, the king had “power and privilege” because of his gender as male and his role as king as well as his proximity to the male prophet (Hens-Piazza, 2006:88). To argue that the king did not have the power to change the condition of women and children does not make any sense.

Mark 7:24-31 has also not been read in solidarity with the gentile woman and her daughter by many biblical scholars. Many biblical commentators such as Johnson and DeWelt (1965:205-206) and Constable (2022:163-164) do not problematize the idea that Jesus compares the woman to a dog. Boring argues that the metaphor of a dog that Jesus uses was not “diminutive and not intended seriously so that Jesus was attempting to dismiss the woman’s request with a joke to test the woman’s faith” (2006:210-211). Furthermore, Boring argues that it was a biblical tradition to compare a gentile to a dog, hence the gentile woman does not contest being called a dog by Jesus (2006:212, 214). Hendriksen (1978:299) shares similar sentiments. However, feminist biblical scholars such as Ringe (2001:89) dismiss such views (the idea that Jesus’ comparing of the gentile woman to a dog should not be taken seriously). Ringe (2001:82) argues that Jesus as



a human was captured by the prejudices of his times or saw things as they were when he compared the gentile woman to a dog." She further notes that "to compare the woman and her daughter to dogs is insulting in the extreme" (2001:89). Even though the statement about dogs was used in the Old Testament to as "a metaphor for Israel's enemies (see 1 Samuel 17:43, Psalms 22:11, Proverbs 26:11, Isaiah 56:10-11). There is no evidence that it was a term used by Jews to refer to gentiles in general, but rather "to groups overtly hostile to God's people or to God's law" (Ringe, 2001:89). Donahue and Harrington also argue that by comparing the woman to a dog, "Jesus seems brutally harsh, since to call someone a dog was an insult" (Donahue & Harrington, 2005:234). The word "throw" in Mark 7:27 gives a picture of "casting food outside for the dogs to eat" (2005:234). On the other hand, even though Ringe does justice in reading Mark 7:24-31 in solidarity with the gentile woman, but she does not do the same to her (gentile woman) little daughter. She does mention that the little girl in the narrative is overshadowed by her mother (and Jesus), but she does not pursue and challenge the reasons for that (Ringe, 2001:87). While Ringe does a good postcolonial feminist reading of this text, she can be accused to be adult-centred. This is an issue we are concerned about.

### **Intersectional Approach to Biblical Studies**

The intersectional approach of feminist biblical interpretation has led to what Scholz calls "productive feminist exegesis" (Scholz, 2014:4). This kind of approach helps biblical scholars from the Global South communities to "challenge accepted biblical interpretations that reinforce patriarchal domination" (Scholz, 2014:4). The intersectional feminist approach redeems the Bible from being captured by one-dimensional Euro-North American, middle-class, and male-dominated interpretations (Scholz, 2014:4). This is a call for Bible readers and interpreters to provide space for the "other". Since there is often a "Western (and male) bias of most biblical interpretation" (Gravett, 2015:222). Gravett argues that it is important to look for literary sources beyond the biblical text to unmask Euro-Centric as well as Afro-Centric androcentrism among those who read and interpret biblical texts. Thus, since the 1980s biblical scholars started to make use of other disciplinary viewpoints from other fields of research such as history, literature studies, psychology, sociology, and anthropology (Gravett, 2015:231). It is from such a context that feminist-childist-trauma methodology is used in reading 2 Kings 2:26-31 and Mark 7:24-30.

### **Narrative Critical Theory as a Strategy of Reading Biblical Texts**

Some scholars see the Bible and biblical texts as relevant today. For instance, Andraos sees the Bible as a "De-colonial tool for Palestinian Christians" (2018:80-87). He reads the Bible in light of the oppressions faced by the people and communities of Palestine. Thus, while the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression, it can also be used as a tool of liberation. For instance, Nortje-Meyer offers a decolonial reading of a Samaritan woman in John 4 (2018:145-154). However, there has also been a concern that biblical narratives are not relevant for contemporary society (Meylahn, 2019:174). People tend to read contemporary "non-biblical" texts since they speak to issues they face daily. As a result, narrative critical theory emerged as a method of reading biblical texts in conversation with "non-biblical literary texts" (Meylahn, 2019:174). For instance, Lerato Mokoena, in her unpublished PhD thesis reads Qohelet in conversation with Nietzsche (Mokoena, 2019:2). Her study is prompted by the similarities between the Qohelet and Nietzsche. Sheurl Valene Davis, in her MTh thesis reads the story of Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6 in light of "the story of Krotoa as portrayed in the 2017 film Krotoa" (Davis, 2020:2). Narrative critical theory from the premise of seeing the Bible as literature and that many of its parts are narratives. In order for biblical texts in general and biblical narratives, in particular, to make sense to contemporary



readers, reading them alongside secular literary material is an option explored by some biblical scholars. Thus, towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholars started using the narrative critical approach as a hermeneutical lens. This does not mean the centrality of the biblical passage and its meaning are lost (Meylahn, 2009:193). Instead, the biblical passage “remains central” while it is read alongside secular literary material in order to make it more relevant to today’s reader. This is the approach I am taking in this study by reading 2 Kings 6:24-31 in comparison to Mark 7:24-41 using the three-pillar lenses of feminist-childist-trauma.

## Trauma Biblical Approach

### Brief History of Trauma Biblical Approach

Trauma theory is another perspective used by biblical scholars in reading and interpreting biblical texts. The scholars of biblical studies have realized that trauma theory can be “a powerful interpretive lens” for biblical texts (Frechette & Boase, 2016:1). Two important academic conferences took place in 2012, namely, the interdisciplinary colloquium on “Trauma and Traumatization: Biblical Studies and Beyond” as well as the SBL Annual meeting from 2012 to 2015 where papers were read on the intersections of trauma and biblical studies, especially in the “Biblical Literature and Hermeneutics of Trauma” group (Frechette & Boase, 2016:1-2). Trauma biblical interpretation came out of conversations with scholars of different academic disciplines and theoretical approaches. Since trauma is more than just a physical wound it is also psychological and sociological. Diverse disciplines such as “psychology, sociology, refugee studies and comparative literature” have all impacted how trauma can be used as a lens of reading (biblical) literature (Frechette & Boase, 2016:2). The trauma approach is thus now an interdisciplinary field of research.

2 Kings 6:24-31 occurs in the context of siege and *war-related* (famine was a result of siege and war) famine. There is also a trauma of mothers having to consider eating their children. In the last few years, the trauma approach “has become a popular lens for reading the Hebrew Bible that emerged in the shadow of the succession of empires” (Claassens, 2021:2). For instance, Claassens uses postcolonial biblical criticism in combination with trauma theory to read Jonah. She suggests that this approach may help today’s readers of Jonah and offer them a more liberating interpretation. Reading biblical texts using the trauma approach does not only help to see the extent to which trauma affected biblical communities but also helps “traumatized individuals and communities” navigate their way to recovery and healing (Claassens, 2021:2). On the other hand, Spronk uses trauma hermeneutics to read Nahum’s messages to the people of Judah who were oppressed under the Assyrian empire. In these prophetic messages, Yahweh is displayed as “a violent god” (Spronk, 2018: 237). The trauma approach assists a biblical scholar to identify aspects whereby in today’s medical understanding can be seen as “symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as gaps in the memory of events or very distressing recollections, emotional problems, and avoiding behavior” (Spronk, 2018: 237). The trauma approach can also enable biblical studies to contribute to the journey of dealing with trauma. The Old Testament records many stories of war, exile, and forced migration. Focht reads the biblical texts in conversation with Judith Herman’s steps of “recovery from trauma: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life” (Focht, 2020:210). He writes on the intersectional relationship between pastoral care and biblical studies, arguing, that pastoral care practitioners can use this approach when they have clients who are suffering from traumatic experiences and who take the Bible as the infallible word of God.



## **How the Trauma Biblical Approach Helps the Traumatized Dealing with Traumatic Events in the Bible and Contemporary Society**

### **Defining Trauma and Traumatic Events**

There are many ways to define trauma and traumatic events. Birnbaum describes traumatic events as “an unusual or shocking incident subjectively experienced as an uncontrollable threat to survival, often involving violence and major life consequences” (Birnbaum, 2008: 533). Trauma is qualified by an “emotional stress associated with various stressful events” (Birnbaum, 2008: 533). On the other hand, post-traumatic stress disorder denotes a “significant impairment of functioning in a traumatized individual” (Birnbaum, 2008: 533). Regarding collective trauma, Birnbaum observes that traumatic events such as the tragic fall of the World Trade Centres on 11 September 2001 and the Indonesian Tsunami tragedy on 26 December 2004, have the potential to traumatize individuals, groups of people, communities and all nations of the world (Birnbaum, 2008:534). Birnbaum further observes that multifaceted international pandemics such as climate change that has a “long lasting threat to health, ecology, economy, and social stability” have the ability to cause a substantial collective trauma (Birnbaum, 2008:534-525). The same kind of collective trauma has been caused by Covid-19. Trauma theory views these exilic events as experiences of collective trauma (Sponk, 2018:238).

### **Traumatized Communities in the Bible**

Events such as those described above also happened in biblical times, for instance, in Isaiah, the city of Jerusalem plays a vital role, but the desolation of the city does not appear. According to Spronk, this gap between chapters 39 and 40 denotes a loss of memory of traumatized people. Using the trauma approach allows us to see that the endless violence in Nahum does not only occur in Yahweh’s name but is also perpetrated by Yahweh (Sponk, 2018:238). As a result, “biblical scholars who work in trauma biblical interpretation have demonstrated how many parts of prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible can be understood in term of trauma literature” (Claassens, 2018:221). Thus, individuals and communities who were victims of traumatic events “were able to write their way out of the depths of despair, in which these traumatic events had hurled them” (Claassens, 2018:221-222). This is the reason prophetic literature is often referred to as “disaster/survival literature” by trauma hermeneutics scholars (Stulman, 2015:133-137 and Groenewald, 2018:97). Some verses in Jeremiah and Isaiah which give a picture of a woman crying due to the pains of giving birth are utilized to denote the traumatic pain of the Israelites and other trauma survivors (Jeremiah 54:31, 6:24, 22:23, 30:6 and Isaiah 13:8, 21:3), while on the other hand, the same metaphor of birth pains denote communities that are on the journey to recovery and healing (Jeremiah 31:8, Isaiah 42:13-14, Micah 4:9-5:3). As a result, trauma theory can contribute positively to biblical interpretation, especially on issues of war, loss, stress, and trauma.

### **Trauma Reading of 2 Kings 6:24-3**

The association between trauma and memory has major consequences when we apply trauma to read and interpret 2 Kings 6:24-31. For instance, since trauma causes loss of remembrance and knowledge, the versions of the narrators in these biblical texts can be questioned. How does the narrator or even victims remember accurately a traumatic event of a siege, starvation and forced migration? If trauma is a “forgotten history” how are these traumatic stories remembered by the narrators in these biblical texts? It appears that the narrators of biblical trauma narratives often wrote their versions of what happened, and those versions should not be taken as truth.



Therefore, based on applying trauma theory to 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Lamentations 2:20 & 4:10, the mothers of these biblical texts under the stress or anxiety of the trauma of siege-related hunger and poverty, could not think rationally anymore and consequently opted to eat their children. The traumatic situation of these mothers influenced their memory of good parental behaviour. In other words, trauma had a destructive impact on the ability of these mothers to act motherly to their children. As a result, the mothers decided to eat their children (2 Kgs 6:29). The trauma approach to Mark 7:24-31 deals with the fact that the gentile woman accepted it when Jesus compared her to a dog in verse 27. The trauma of having to leave your demon-possessed child at home (most probably without her father) and go to ask help from a man who belongs to another tribe than her own. It was her trauma that made this gentile woman not to contest the fact that Jesus compares her to a dog (in that Jesus cannot waste his children's bread on dogs).

Regarding whether the actions of these biblical mothers were right or wrong, Janzen (2012:59) and Rambo (2010:10) say that trauma does not only destroy memory, but it also disturbs the language and meaning-making when we tell the stories of trauma. When we read, interpret or tell the stories of trauma we cannot use the morality language that is utilized in non-traumatic narratives. A biblical scholar cannot utilize a good or bad perspective to interpret traumatic events regarding the choices and actions made by victims of trauma as well as survivors (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2012:258). Therefore, employing this category of trauma theory in reading and interpreting 2 Kings 6:24-31 and denotes that the actions of the so-called cannibal mothers (at least in the version of the narrator) cannot be considered as right or wrong. Such a classification (of good or bad) is not conducive in these traumatic narratives simply because trauma kills the morality language and meaning-making. Making use of ethical language in reading these biblical stories results in judgemental and androcentric interpretations which are inherently flawed.

### **A Feminist Reading of 2 Kings 6:24-31**

Women's experiences are not universal, but they are particular to a specific socio-economic context. Even feminist criticism acknowledges the idea of social locations since "geographic, national, ethnic or racial, socioeconomic - particularize women's oppression, by enmeshing women in diverse gender-linked systems of exploitation" (Connolly 2018:16). There is a difference between a white middle-class woman who lives in the USA and a black poor woman who lives in South Africa. To be a woman in a former British colony with a legacy of apartheid and colonialism positions the author will interpret in a different way than a middle-class woman in a Euro-North American country when it comes to bread-and-butter politics (Connolly, 2018:17). This led to the formation of the Womanist approach by African American women, Majorista or Latina feminist by Hispanic women theologians and postcolonial perspectives by Asian women theologians (Salas, 2014:163). These approaches confirm how women, and their experiences are diverse and different. Thus, feminist biblical scholarship takes the issue of (social) location very seriously. Scholz (2014:1) agrees with Connolly (2018:16-17) on the importance of social location in feminist biblical scholarship. He argues that the goal of feminist biblical scholars when they read the Bible is to bring about "counter-readings to the androcentric status quo prevalent in Christianity and Judaism, as well as in general culture and society" (Scholz, 2014:1). Thus, their location as women is vital in forming different views.

Understanding one's social location is very important in feminist biblical interpretation. The social location is characterized by different classifications such as "race, class, education, work/employment status" etc. (Scholz, 2014:5). We are, therefore, aware of our social locations as it differs significantly. Zukile Ngqeza is a 35-year-old South African male of colour who grew up in a Christian family that upholds male headship in intimate relationships. However, since 2014



he was introduced to intersections of Gender Studies and Biblical Studies. Theologically he takes pride in being formed (some directly and some indirectly) and learning from exceptional feminist biblical scholars such as Miranda Pillay, Juliana Claassens, Charlene van der Walt, Fundiswa Kobo, Madipoane Masenya, and Lilly Nortje-Meyer. He is aware of his privileges as a male at home, church, and society. He is therefore careful not to speak on behalf of women. But his own experiences of oppression based on race, class, and sometimes his age let him take the approach of feminist biblical scholarship with solidarity and humility.

The feminist biblical approach was developed in both North America and in Africa, but for the South African context, the Bosadi, an African womanist approach, will be applied. Feminism started in the 1700s in the Euro-North American context when women in those countries protested against the marginalization and suffering, they were facing (Connolly, 2018:15). Feminism was therefore not initially concerned about a matrix of oppressions faced by women of colour. The reason for this is that feminism was founded by mainly white-middle class women who were based in Euro-North American institutions and countries. African American women and other women from the global South emerged in feminist movements later. However, in recent years it has been realized that within the feminist movements women are not only marginalized based on their gender but also based on other aspects such as "race, economic status, and its manifold implications, cultural values specific to ethnicity, religion and even international relations or world politics, to name a few" (Connolly, 2018:15). A womanist approach (as advocated by African American women) is concerned with issues such as racism, sexism and classism that African American women are facing (Masenya, 2004:120). Since in this research 2 Kings 6:24-31 read in comparison to Mark 7:24-30 in the context of South Africa, the Bosadi approach has been applied. Although there are similarities between African American women and African South African women (in that all of them are African and their approach is African-rooted and are oppressed based on race, sex and class), there are also vast differences (Masenya, 2004:120). For instance, African American women were moved out of their African countries through slavery and became minorities in North America while African South African women still live in Africa and can draw from certain values and the heritage of their African culture that seeks to liberate them. This is what Masenya attempts to do in her Bosadi approach.

A Bosadi approach takes seriously the African-ness of African South African women<sup>1</sup>. It is, therefore "local, focusing on the South African situation, it is contextual, for it focuses on the context of African women in South Africa as well as the context of the biblical text under discussion" (Masenya, 2004:121). It is important to note that South Africa as a social location has a different context than Euro-North American countries or elsewhere in the world. Such context is particularly African even though other cultures are embraced (Masenya, 2017:163). Since it is mostly African South African women who sometimes have to consider abandoning their children due to a matrix of socio-economic challenges such as *inter alia* poverty, hunger, unemployment, inability to negotiate safe sex due to patriarchy etc., and that there are similarities between the experiences of women and children of 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Mark 7:24-31, the Bosadi approach is more appropriate than other feminist approaches in reading these biblical texts.

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<sup>1</sup> While the Bosadi approach takes seriously the "Africanness of African South African Women", this does not mean that African South African Women are homogeneous. There are different cultures, languages, traditions and norms in Africa. However, there are similar patterns and practices among African South African women. For Instance, the man as the head of the household, polygamy (the man having many wives which also carries an idea that a man cannot cheat but he is extending his family), men as primary negotiators of the lobola, women as carers of children/household while men do paid work etc. Differentiating between African South African women and African-American women helps us to be more contextual and relevant to the unique challenges of African South African women.



According to Masenya (2005:746) the meaning of the Northern Sotho word “*bosadi*” is “womanhood.” This word is also found in other Southern African languages, for instance, Xitsonga “*wansati*”, IsiZulu “*umfazi*,” Tshivenda “*musadzi*” and in Tswana and Southern Sotho “*mosadi*.” According to Masenya, a Bosadi approach is a method of reading and interpreting biblical texts and was formed to see these texts from the perspective of the issues of African-South African women. Mainly, the emphasis of the Bosadi approach is the unique experiences of the African-South African women with the intention to liberate them (Masenya, 2010:148). A Bosadi approach is therefore different from feminist criticism, womanist criticism, majurista, or postcolonial feminist perspectives. The fact that Masenya uses indigenous words such as *bosadi/mosadi/umfazi* implies her dedication to African-South African women from the grassroots communities and not only to women in academia (Masenya, 2005:747).

The Bosadi approach acknowledges the multifaceted challenges of women which to a certain extent emerged from the “legacies of apartheid, sexism in the African culture, post-apartheid racism, classism, HIV/AIDS, and Xenophobia” (Masenya, 2010:148). African-South African women are not only marginalized based on their sex and gender but face a matrix of oppressions which include socio-economic exclusion, poverty and GBV. An individual African-South African woman may be oppressed multiple times, that is, abused by an intimate partner at home, face racism at work (women who do domestic work for other middle-class women), while she is also HIV positive. Another woman may be oppressed by being African/black with all its social and economic challenges while she is also oppressed by being lesbian or belonging to sexual minority groups. The Bosadi approach is relevant for reading 2 Kings 6:24-31 from the South African context. Masenya indicates many aspects of the Bosadi approach, but only four will be utilized in reading and interpreting 2 Kings 6:24-31.

### **Bosadi and Ubuntu/Botho**

The Bosadi approach makes use of African idioms and proverbs that are liberating to women. Using African values and wisdom in biblical interpretation can also be liberating to African-South African women (Masenya, 1997:448). For example, an African proverb, in IsiXhosa says, “*umntu ngumntu ngabantu* or in Sotho “*motho ke motho ka batho*” implies that my humanity is tied to the humanity of another person. The idea of Ubuntu encompasses the morale and values of honouring others, justice, fairness, compassion, solidarity and respecting patriarchs and matriarchs as well as affirming the lives of the poor people (Masenya, 1997:448). Ubuntu shifts us from the “I” factor to the “we” which the “I” comes from. This is unlike the Cartesian concept of “I think therefore I am” and it is more about “I am related, therefore I am” (Kobe, 2021:5). Ubuntu is about equal and shared humanity among people, including women. Since both South African men and women are oppressed based on their humanity, Masenya argues that Ubuntu provides a platform for both men and women to jointly work for the common good. Although Gyekye writes about personhood in the African context, he argues that in the Akan cultures when a person exhibits the virtues of “generosity, kindness, compassion, benevolence, respect and concern for others”, the community says about him or her “*oye’nipa* (he/she is a person)” (2002:303). However, when the person “fails to exhibit” the virtues such as those of ubuntu, he or she is referred to as “*õnye’nipa* (he/she is not a person)” (Gyekye, 2002:303). Thus, to be a person (*motho*) is to uphold the values and the virtues of ubuntu. Furthermore, Masenya argues that African-South African men should understand African women’s struggle more than any other human since African men also have experience oppression based on race while African women are oppressed because of their race and their gender. Ubuntu should therefore be lived out by both men and women. However, African society expects more often women than men to uphold



Ubuntu values. For example, “perseverance, patience, loving-kindness” are Ubuntu values that are mainly expected from women than from men (Masenya, 1997:448).

In 2 Kings 6:24-31, the idea that the male king had access to food (in that he can fast in 2 Kings 6:24-31) while women and children were hungry, demonstrates the lack of Ubuntu. Sharing as part of Ubuntu is what lacks from the male king in this pericope. In 2 Kings 6:30, the male king vows to kill the prophet Elisha instead of taking responsibility by ensuring that he shares the food and resources he has with women and children. The king views the mothers’ decision to do something about their hunger as negative, hence, he embarked on a fast. On the other hand, the two mothers demonstrate the values of cohesion, collaboration and sharing when one woman said to the other “*come let’s eat your son today, then we will eat my son tomorrow*<sup>2</sup> (NLT<sup>3</sup>)”. In other words, the invitation was to share what they have as women while the male king chooses to fast rather than sharing his food with women and their children.

When reading Mark 7:24-30 from the Bosadi approach, we see a woman who was a foreigner (gentile) approaching a Jewish man (Jesus) to heal her daughter from demon-possession. Jesus dismisses her by saying “*First I should feed the children - my own family, the Jews* (Mark 7:27, NLT).” Jesus’s response does not exhibit the values of Ubuntu, but the woman’s response exhibits the values of Ubuntu. She challenges the xenophobic (in the sense that Jews will only help the Jews and not a gentile) perspective of the male Jesus by saying “*That’s true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children’s plate* (Mark 7:28, NLT).” Even though this woman is a foreigner, she insists on pushing Jesus toward the values of Ubuntu in terms of helping her daughter who does not belong to the tribe of Jesus. The gentile woman challenges and changes the xenophobic perspective of Jesus into Ubuntu. Through this woman’s resistance, Jesus ended up helping her child, “*Good answered! he said, Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter* (Mark 7:29, NLT).” At the end of this pericope, Masenya’s wish that both men and women use Ubuntu for common good is fulfilled, Jesus is now helping a person beyond his tribal and gender context.

### **Bosadi and Family**

The Bosadi approach is not against the importance of the family. However, it acknowledges its vital role but also realizes that many times families have been a tool to oppress women. The family institution has often been a platform for patriarchy and androcentrism. However, this does not deny the existence of families that encourage the flourishing of women and children (Masenya, 1997:449).

In 2 Kings 6:24-31 we only hear about the mothers who are presented as murderers of their children while the fathers of the children are absent. This is a form of toxic masculinity and patriarchy. The absence of the fathers in the face of famine can be seen as neglect of the child and of the spouse. Even in Mark 7:24-30 we do not hear about the father of the demon-possessed child. It is her mother who crosses religio-cultural and tribal boundaries to seek help for her daughter. This is the kind of toxic and hegemonic masculinity faced by women and children in South Africa today. Men leave their children and spouses hungry even when they are capable of taking responsibility to support them.

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware that eating your child cannot be considered acceptable. However, when interpreting 2 Kgs 6:24-31 from the perspective of trauma hermeneutics, it will demonstrate the ways in which this event cannot be taken as the truth. However, the idea that the two mothers agreed to share what they have with each other is a form of Ubuntu.

<sup>3</sup> New Living Translation of the Bible.



## **Feminization of Poverty**

Masenyā submits that the Bosadi approach takes the “feminization of poverty” seriously (Masenyā, 2017:167). The fact that women are poorer than men in South Africa, is an issue the Bosadi approach does not ignore. This is also pointed out in the biblical texts. For instance, in both 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Lamentations 2:20 & 4:10, it is women and not men who are hungry. Poverty and hunger are gendered and feminized in these texts. On the other hand, food security and the acts of impoverishing women are masculine. The male king Ben-Hadad in 2 Kings 6:24-25 sent his army to besiege and impoverish the city of Samaria. On the other hand, the male king of Israel in 2 Kings 6:27 says he does not have food, yet in verse 30 he embarks on fasting. Thus, men are food secured while women are hungry and food insecure. This is similar to the condition of women in South Africa today. The majority of women in post-1994 South Africa are both economically limited and experience food insecurity while men are by and large in a better position.

Even though Mark 7:24-30 is not so much about poverty, the excuse that Jesus gives for not wanting to help the gentile woman is presented in a metaphor of food, “*First I should feed the children – my own family, the Jews* (v.27, NLT).” In verse 28, the gentile woman likens her desperation for Jesus’ help to a dog that feeds from her master’s table “*That’s true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children’s plates* (v.28, NLT).” On the other hand, it is her daughter that is sick, and in Africa, there is often a link between poverty, sickness and witchcraft which is a cause of demon-possession.

## **Bosadi and Other Oppressive Forces**

The Bosadi approach uses the intersectional oppressions of African-South African women such as racism, sexism, classism and African culture as features of forming how African women read and interpret the scriptures (Masenyā, 1997:450). African-South African women are at the bottommost of the socio-economic ladder in the country. This is a result of systematic patriarchy (which is about the sovereignty of men and subordination of women) and sexism which entails “gender privilege of men over women” (Ackermann, 1993, 21). Since “there is no value-free interpretation of the Bible,” this aspect of the Bosadi approach will locate the intersectional oppressive powers that marginalize women in the biblical text for the benefit of African-South African women (Masenyā, 1997:450). Contrary to western feminist approaches that highlight the androcentricity in biblical passages, the Bosadi approach deals with oppressive elements, for example, “class of people, whose interests the text serves, and the class of the author of the text” (Masenyā, 1997:125). The Bosadi approach is more concerned about those who are “at the margins of society” who are grouped as “other”. For example, they will rather focus on women, children, slaves, foreigners, etc.

In 2 Kings 6:24-31 are matrixes of unjust issues or what Masenyā (1997:125) calls “multiple life-denying forces” such as class of the author, the class of the male characters (Ben-Hadad, Israel’s King and Elisha the prophet) and patriarchal culture. All this hinge and intersect with gender injustice in these texts. Thus, the class of male characters is not equal to the class of the mothers in these texts. Elisha is a prophet with a messenger and elders (cf. 2 Kings 6:32). The two kings mentioned are royal men. The status of these men guaranteed them economic inclusivity while women were hungry and economically excluded to such an extent that they consider eating their children. Socio-economic challenges like poverty, hunger and economic affect women and children, while men in the biblical story are not faced with these challenges. Since 2 Kings 6:24-31 takes place in the context of a siege, which is a main oppressive force, women are victims of political sabotage that is maintained by male kings and a male prophet. In Mark 7:24-30 it is a woman and not a man who is at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. The woman is a



gentle/foreigner and probably poor because she cannot secure a healer for her sick daughter. On the other hand, a male (Jesus) is the one to whom the woman appeals. He has the power to help or not to help. Jesus has the social power the gentile woman does not have.

### **Childist Biblical Approach**

Over and above the current debates regarding “what is childhood, who is a child”, there is a growing interest in the humanities and social sciences to emphasize “the implementation of the globalization agenda and related ideas that have and will, most likely, continue managerialise and marginalize childhoods, in order to govern and police children and their childhood experiences, and argue for the best interest of the child” (Malone, 2020:5). Thus, there is a yearning to interrogate and challenge “what we – as adults – understand children and their childhoods to be” (Malone, 2020:5).

### **Childist Reading of 2 Kings 6:24**

#### **Quest for Humanness**

The question of whether children are fully human is at the centre of the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. Rogers observes that from the 1970s there has been a call from the discipline of sociology and from development practitioners for a move from seeing children as only “a bundle of needs that must be met” into seeing them as fellow human beings who have their own issues, goals and desires (Rogers, 2008:149). In this context, children are viewed as citizens as well as right holders and not just as recipients of aid. When we move from a conversation of meeting children’s needs to meeting their rights, then treating children as social actors is possible. Even though the period of childhood requires some form of physical growth and maturity, at least more than adulthood, it does not imply that children are “incomplete” or not-yet-human (Rogers, 2008:150). Regarding the status of children as “fully human”, Malone et al note that “less than 200 years ago many children on the planet were viewed merely as ‘human’, as an animal, maybe younger, less skilled and less productive, than older human animals, but human, nonetheless” (Malone, 2000:30). However, after the emergence of the global industrialization and democratization from the western society children were no longer seen as those who are on the journey to complete humanity. School education was the means by which children would be made human. This resulted in a “child-adult binary” which placed borders that intend to “position children from a deficit perspective, as in the process of becoming (something of value), becoming adult, becoming more than a child, rather than being viewed as legitimate ‘humans’ as a child” (Malone 2000:30). In this case, children are referred to as “other”.

The fact that children are turned into food in 2 Kings 6:24-31 may suggest some ways in which the more recent debates on the human status of children is pre-empted in biblical documented practice where children reduced claims to humanity resulted in them being treated differently from adults. For instance, in 2 Kings 6:24-31 we see that when there is no food, children are made food for adults. The woman appeals to the male king says: “*This woman said to me: ‘Come on, let’s eat your son then we will eat my son tomorrow. So, we cooked my son and ate him. Then the next day I said to her, ‘give your son so we can eat him, but she has hidden her son’*” (2 Kgs 6:28-29, NLT). In this text both mothers and children were hungry, yet mothers (who are adults) see children as food. The child-adult binary leads to the dehumanization of children by adults. The idea that children are “not-yet-human” makes them a food project for adults.



## Children as Social Beings and Agents of Change

In recent years there have been developments in the files of social sciences and humanities (such as developmental psychology and sociology) of seeing children as social actors who form their own “identities, create and communicate valid views about the social world and have a right to participate in it” (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008:161). Children are therefore independent beings who are also meaning-makers rather than the old views of seeing children as those who cannot make decisions for themselves and their lives. Furthermore, the ability of children to be social actors denotes that they can be companions of adults in creating a better world in the form of policies and advocacy (MacNaughton & Smith, 2008:161). There is a deliberate call for adults to stop considering the views and the choices of children as inferior to the views of adults. Instead, adults should see children as their partners in making the world a better place.

Regarding agency, Malone et al argue that adults are not the only members of society who have agentic ability. Instead, adults share agency with children and non-human species of society (Malone, 2020:85). Agency is not something static and uniform, but it is impacted by various factors in various circumstances. However, the agency is only conducive “in environments that are stable, constant and deemed and appropriate” (Ivankovic, & Izsak, 2019:139). Adults must, therefore, create enabling conditions for children and their agency to thrive. Children’s agency speaks to their “ability to act on the world already situated within a wider worldly relationship of effect and dependency” (Malone, 2020:83). MacNaughton and Smith (2008:165) caution from using “for” or “about” perspectives when designing and developing a curriculum for early childhood development. Instead, they recommend a “with” perspective. This is a situation where scholars do research “with” children rather than doing research for and about children. Such an approach would demystify the child-adult imbalance in the production of knowledge. To acknowledge and endorse children’s agency in their childhood period goes against the views on children and childhoods that were held by society in the past. These theoretical views that “children were ontologically incomplete” and for them to be complete they must grow into adulthood, then they would be seen as “full participants in decision making or as agentic actors within or on their lives” (Malone, 2020:85). Furthermore, seeing children as social agents has implications for seeing them as holders of rights. For instance, if children are allowed to speak against the physical abuse they experience at home and at school, then there is a potential for adults to start seeing them (children) as those who deserve to have rights. To deny children their voice and agency affects their potential of being seen as fully human and as rights holders.

In 2 Kings 6:24-31 children are not only denied humanity by the adult narrator and adult characters but they are also denied the ability to participate as social beings with agentic ability. The narrator of the text does not see children as “social beings” in their homes and community. We do not hear what their mothers said to them or what they said to their mothers. We do not see them playing with each other or even concerned about the famine they were facing with their mothers. We do not hear them crying for their absent fathers. It does appear that in 2 Kings 6:24-31 children are not considered as societal beings with the ability to make sense and meaning of what is happening in their homes and community. Furthermore, children in these texts are not only denied humanity (in that they turned into food projects for adults), or their status as social beings who can participate and make sense of what is happening in society, but they are also denied the ability to be agents of change. Amidst poverty and crisis are only adults (mothers, a king and a prophet) who are presented by the narrator as those having the ability to be agents of change. For instance, in 2 Kings 6:28-29 the mothers (adults) decide to do something about their poverty by cooking their children (even if it’s unacceptable to eat your child). In 2 Kings 6:26, the mother (adult) of the eaten child appeals for the intervention of the king (adult). In 2 Kings 6:31 the king (adult) vows to kill the prophet (adults). The adult narrator mutes the voices and the agency of children:



children say nothing, and they do nothing. They are not regarded as fully human with the ability to be makers of change. Therefore, 2 Kings 6:24-31 is a product of the adult narrator who is both androcentric and adult-centred.

Even in Mark 7:24-31 the little child/daughter of the gentile woman does not speak, it is her mother who speaks on her behalf, appealing to another adult, Jesus. The fact that we do not hear her voice, makes me doubt whether she was demon-possessed as the adult narrator portrays her to be. In African communities and churches women who challenge systems are often accused of being demon-possessed. In the same manner, the silencing of the girl and the denial of agency make the tag “demon possession” part of the project dehumanization of children by adult biblical narrators.

## Conclusion

Using an either/or methodological approach to read 2 Kings 6:24-31 and Mark 7:24-30 does not do justice to the lives of women and children. A three-pillar methodology of feminist-childist-trauma is therefore necessary. The feminist approach helps to see that the mothers of 2 Kings 6:24-31 are not murders but victims of patriarchy and androcentrism. In Mark 7:24-31, the feminist approach problematizes the gentile woman’s appeal to a man, Jesus, and displays how Jesus (man) has a social capital over the woman. The childist approach helps to restore the voice, social being and agency of children which were muted by the adult narrator. The childist approach also problematizes the fact that the voice of the demon-possessed daughter is muted by the narrator, while the trauma approach makes her voice and concerns heard. The approach aids us to consider that the version of the narrator is a construction rather than the truth. The trauma approach emphasizes the trauma of a gentile woman having to leave a demon-possessed daughter at home to go and look for help from a man who belongs to the ‘enemy’. The fact that this woman accepts it when Jesus likens her to a dog, demonstrates that she was traumatized to such an extent that she had even forgotten her worth and humanity.

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