

‘Welc(h)omo Naledi’! What does our newest relative have to say to us?

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Project Leader: D.P. Veldsman**Project Number:** 01224719**Description:**

This research is part of the project, ‘Religious Experience from an evolutionary perspective’, directed by Prof. Dr Danie Veldsman, Department Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

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Dates:

Received: 26 Feb. 2016

Accepted: 05 May 2016

Published: 31 Aug. 2016

How to cite this article:

Veldsman, D.P., 2016, ‘Welc(h)omo Naledi’! What does our newest relative have to say to us?, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a3388. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3388>

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The new *hominin* fossil called *Homo naledi* that was discovered 2 years ago in the Dinaledi Chamber (South Africa) was welcomed into the species of human relatives on 10 September 2015. Welcomed? Representing at least 15 individuals with most skeletal elements repeated multiple times, this is the largest assemblage of a single species of *hominins* yet discovered in Africa. Do, however, these bones represent a new *Homo* species? It is this question that I have tried to capture in my playful grammatically incorrect title ‘Welc(ho)mo Naledi’! However, it is not this question that I will endeavour to answer, but a very different theological implication. My aim in this article is definitely not to argue an opinion on the diverse question regarding the discovery of the fossil skeletons from the Dinaledi Chamber. My aim is related but different, much more modest, restricted and focused. It is to ask ‘on the other historic side’ (that is, beyond the fossil record!) of *Naledi* about human distinctiveness and symbolic behaviour, specifically on soteriology. Within the broader contemporary philosophical-theological discourses on anthropology and specifically the fundamental question, ‘Are we special?’, I would like ultimately to take on the intriguing theological implications for soteriology from the *Naledi* (and earlier) findings.

The ‘... experience of good and evil, and the theological distinction between evil, moral failure, sin, tragedy and redemption, lies beyond the empirical scope of the fossil record ...’ (Van Huyssteen 2006:325). Although my reflection on soteriology will in the same manner also lie beyond the empirical scope of the fossil records, it will be deeply connected with their evolutionary significance (Veldsman).

Introduction

The new *hominin* fossil called *Homo Naledi* (meaning ‘star’ in Sesotho, a South African language) that was discovered 2 years ago in the Dinaledi Chamber (Chamber of Stars) of the Rising Star Cave system, part of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, Gauteng Province, South Africa, was welcomed into the species of human relative on 10 September 2015 by WITS University, The National Geographic Society and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the National Research Foundation (NRF). Welcomed? Representing at least 15 individuals with most skeletal elements repeated multiple times, this is the largest assemblage of a single species of *hominins* yet discovered in Africa according to the official *eLife Report* that was released. Do, however, these bones – which have yet to be dated – represent a new *Homo* species as described and claimed by Lee Berger, research professor in the Evolutionary Studies Institute at Wits University? It is this question that I have tried to capture in my playful grammatically incorrect title ‘Welc(ho)mo Naledi’! However, it is not this question that I will endeavour to answer, but a very different theological implication. It is an implication that on the one hand, follows in the wake of revisionary theological discourses (Henriksen)¹ on the discovery of *Homo naledi*, but its answer on the other hand lies beyond the empirical scope of the fossil record (Van Huyssteen).² It is the question of the implications of the findings on our understandings of soteriology. Before, however, embarking on the research journey, it is of interest to ask first: how was the discovery received in academic circles?

Reactions to the discovery

The initial reactions to the public announcement were extremely diverse.³ We encountered reactions harbouring great excitement such as: ‘Humankind: meet our newest relative’; ‘Biggest

1.The sentence must not be misunderstood: Henriksen (2013) has nothing to say on *Homo Naledi*, but on theological revision in the light of evolutionary processes. I will focus on *Homo Naledi* in my exposition in which I will be making use of Henriksen’s interpretative framework to explore the significance of the evolutionary significance of the fossil records.

2.The vantage point on which we can agree and from where our reflection on the significance of embodied personhood can be undertaken, is that the study of human evolution makes clear in which manner our cultural evolution has been determined by our biological make-up. However, such studies cannot explain the particular paths that human culture will take through reflection on rationality, morality, aesthetics and religion. This is what is implied with the reference to ‘beyond the empirical scope of the fossil record’.

3.The following reactions have been taken from a wide spectrum of media releases in newspapers and published reports. See Media Release 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d.

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discovery on African soil'; 'A unique 'Species' of unclear evolutionary importance'; 'Baffling new branch to family tree'; 'This face (of homo naledi) changes the Human story. But how?'; 'Why we need Homo Naledi'. But also reactions of suspicion and rejection: 'Scientists question Homo Naledi'; 'Homo Naledi does not solve our problem!'; 'Without a date, we are told not much!'; 'Fairy Tale!'. The latter two remarks must have been close to the early judgement of the journal selection of *Nature* who was not convinced of its conclusions and subsequently rejected the article for publication.⁴

My aim in this article is definitely not to argue an opinion on the diverse question regarding the discovery of the fossil skeletons from the Dinaledi Chamber (such as: new species?/single species?/dating?) that have since been posed. My aim is related but different, much more modest, restricted and focused. It is to ask 'on the other historic side' (that is, beyond the fossil record!) of *Homo Naledi* about human distinctiveness and symbolic behaviour. Within the broader contemporary philosophical-theological discourses on anthropology and specifically the fundamental question, 'Are we special?', I would like ultimately to take on the intriguing theological implications for soteriology from the *Homo Naledi* (and earlier) findings. From the tentative observation that there are some indications that the individuals may have been deliberately placed in the cave near the time of their death, that is, this primitive-looking *hominin* may have practiced a form of (ritualised) behaviour previously thought to be unique to humans,⁵ I would like to move to the contemporary influential discourses on embodied personhood. Firstly, to position my question, that is, in discourses on embodied personhood: Where does the question to our uniqueness fit in? If we are as special as has been proposed in the paleo-anthropological light of a historical perspective on *Homo sapiens* and her newest relative *Homo Naledi*,⁶ how does it – or not – contribute to our philosophical-theological understandings of the emergence of human uniqueness or distinctiveness – but then within the contemporary broader stream of discourses on personhood? Secondly, what are the implications of such a 'welcoming' to theological anthropology, and specifically with regards to my topic of interest, namely soteriology?

4. On the publication of the Naledi findings in the journal *Nature*, Lee Berger made the following remark. He said he avoided 'high-impact' journals like *Nature* or *Science* because their peer-review process – in which fellow academics scrutinise their counterparts' work – took so long. Instead, he chose *eLife*, an online, open-access journal which – like other such journals – has a quicker, far easier peer-review process than long-established rivals (Media Release 2015d).

5. Jamie Shreeve (2015) – who is the Executive Editor for *Science* at National Geographic magazine – gives a very insightful summary of the question: 'How did it get there?' and why the question is important. In a brief and neat summary of the significance of the question he writes: 'Disposal of the dead brings closure for the living, confers respect on the departed, or abets their transition to the next life'.

6. Just for interest sake: Where does *Homo Naledi* possibly fit in according to early dating speculations?? The primary outstanding mystery in human evolution pertains to the origin of *Homo Sapiens* between two million and three million years ago. On the far side of that divide are the apelike *australopithecines*, epitomized by *Australopithecus afarensis* and its most famous representative, Lucy, a skeleton discovered in Ethiopia in 1974. On the near side is *Homo erectus*, a tool-wielding, fire-making, globe-trotting species with a big brain and body proportions much like ours. Within that murky million-year gap, a bipedal animal was transformed into a nascent human being, a creature not just adapted to its environment but able to apply its mind to master it (Shreeve 2015:5/26). This is what Berger is looking for.

Deliberate placement of bodies and symbolic behaviour

Do the findings of possible deliberate placement of bodies from the untold stories of *Homo Naledi* tell us something of our history of being special?⁷ The opinions are strongly divided on how to value the finding and consequently on its significance. To give some examples: John Hawks⁸ who was a member of the team says that the best hypothesis is that the bodies were placed in the cave by other members of the species; Paul Dirks⁹ agrees; William Jungers¹⁰ is more cautious and warns against hasty conclusion based on 'complex social organization and symbolic behaviours' (*Homo naledi* 2016: 6/11); Carol Ward¹¹ supports his caution. Lee Berger however favours a more radical explanation, namely that – although not in a religious sense – these individuals were capable of ritual behaviour, a sign of symbolic thought (Media Release 2015c; *Homo Naledi* 2016: 7/11). For Rick Potts¹² it is merely a mystery on how these bones ended up in the cave. Chris Stringer¹³ calls it a 'big puzzle' (cf. Media Release 2015c).

Mystery, big puzzle – even an archaeological blow as low as paleofantasy(!)¹⁴ are just some of the unconvinced reactions. But be that as it may.¹⁵ We will have to wait upon the scientific community of paleoanthropologists to provide us in the near future with the best possible explanations. On more or less how or if at all the *Homo Naledi* finding will change the human story, I am not sure. However, as a community of theologians I am convinced that we do not have to wait upon a clear and sure 'Welc(h)omo Naledi'-outcome before engaging and

7. There are also some critical remarks – to name but a few – on the *Homo Naledi* findings coming from a very different and unexpected angle as have been voiced by Tim White and Christoph Zollikofer. White is an American paleoanthropologist and Professor of Integrative Biology at the University of California, Berkeley. Zollikofer is an anthropologist at the University of Zurich. They are of the opinion that the fossils were excavated too fast to protect them from damage, in a desire to get publicity, and that the findings were not examined and peer-reviewed sufficiently before publishing (*Homo Naledi* 2016). Lee Berger disputes these opinions and considers that the openness of the excavation, the analysis, publishing and availability of the fossils used valid methods (*Homo Naledi* 2016; Media Release 2015c). See also the very critical remarks in the Media Release (2015d) which refer to the way that the Naledi finds were revealed and analysed in less than two years so that it represents – according to these paleoanthropologists – a dangerous precedent, a 'media circus' that 'threatens to split palaeontology into old and new schools and which could damage our attempts to understand the path of human evolution' (Media Release 2015d).

8. John Hawks is an anthropologist from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. To support his viewpoint, he argues that all the bones recovered are hominid and that there are no signs of predation. There is also no other good reason for these bones to have accumulated (e.g.: no evidence of either rocks or sediment having dropped into the cave from any opening in the surface nor of water flowing into the cave carrying the bones into the cave).

9. Paul Dirks is a geologist at James Cook University, Queensland in Australia

10. William Jungers is an anatomical scientist from the School of Medicine at Stony Brook University, New York.

11. Carol Ward is a pathologist from the University of Missouri. Her reason for being sceptical about deliberate placement of bodies in the cave is simply the difficulty to get to the cave!

12. Rick Potts is the director of the human origins program at the Smithsonian Institution's Natural History Museum, Washington, DC.

13. Chris Stringer is the head of human origins at the Natural History Museum in London.

14. See the very readable and careful article by Shreeve on the story of the findings as they unfolded. The reference to 'paleofantasy' is actually a positive remark by Lucas Deleuzene (University of Arkansas) who was one of the 30 young scientist who Berger invited – to 'put a lot of eyes on the bones' – for a 'blitzkrieg fossil fest lasting six weeks' (Shreeve 2015:14/26). For Deleuzene to be involved with this research was like a dream come true, namely to figure out a pile of fossils no one has seen before! I use it however in the negative sense of critics of Berger who accused him of transgressing the protocol of such research (cf. Shreeve 2015:13/26).

15. Another way of putting the above in one sentence: 'If we learned about a completely new form of hominin only because a couple of cavers were skinny enough to fit through a crack in a well-explored South African cave, we really don't have a clue what else might be out there' (Shreeve 2015:26/26).

proceeding with the multidisciplinary conversation. There are very specific contributions for us to make – neither in a ‘tentative meantime style’ nor in interdisciplinary isolation – but as constructive interdisciplinary contributions to a more encompassing (transversal)¹⁶ interpretative framework of the far reaching implications of rethinking theological anthropology and also specifically religious experience and fundamental themes from evolutionary perspectives. There are ongoing theological challenges, revisionary invites and diverse multidisciplinary demands that continuously stem from the very evolutionary process.

Where do we currently stand more or less with an interpretative framework for theological anthropology? What are the most important dimensions that determine the contemporary discourses?

Multi- and interdisciplinary reflection on the *imago Dei*¹⁷ as – most probably – the most influential and fundamental notion of theological anthropology have forcefully pulled us – in the words from the Gifford Lecture by Wentzel van Huyssteen from the twilight zone of abstraction where:

... dis-embodied theological notions of human uniqueness could easily float free above text, body, and nature in exotically baroque, overly abstract, metaphysical speculations. (Van Huyssteen 2006:273)

No more easily free floating! Where has the reflective discourse forcefully been ‘pulled to’?

Humankind has emerged from complex forms of life. Reflection on being human or humankind is done contextually and executed as embodied existence. It is reflection that acknowledges:

- the biological origin of human cognition¹⁸ and at the same time our close connection with the animal and hominid world (that is, our animality)¹⁹

16. With the bracketed reference to transversal, I simply want to emphasize the importance of pursuing the research question on human distinctiveness in an interdisciplinary, multi-disciplinary manner.

17. For Van Huyssteen (2006:274; cf. 2006:320) the image of God ‘is not found in humans, it is the human, and for this reason the *imago Dei* can be read only as *imitatio Dei*: to be created in God’s image we should act like God, and so attain holiness through our compassionate care for the other and for the world’.

18. From discourses within evolutionary epistemology we have learnt to take the epistemic implications seriously of our biologically determined cognition. The Systematic Theologian of the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, Dirk Evers (2015) shares in his contribution on the question *What makes humans Human?* the important work of the American developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello on the development of human cognitive skills. Tomasello is the co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. He has developed a theory of the origins of human cultural behaviour from the findings of the importance of social cognition, social learning and communication for the development of human cognitive skills. Evers (2015:320) emphasises two important consequences of the work of Tomasello for our question on human distinctiveness. Firstly that nearly all human characteristics must have been predisposed in our primate ancestors. The basic point is: Many features – such as the structure of the brain, the use of tools, communication etcetera – can be observed in basic forms with nonhuman primates and other animals. It simply implies according to Tomasello that none of these are an exclusive *differentia specifica* for human beings (cf. Evers 2015:320). Secondly that the cultural development that makes humans human cannot be the accumulative result of a number of genetic mutations, but must be understood according to Tomasello as a complex interplay of basic features that reaches a new level of interaction among human beings (cf. Evers 2015:320,321). For me the important part of his theory is his statements on the relationship between culture and human nature, as well as his view on what he calls, shared intentionality. The former is qualified by Tomasello in the sense that culture has an evolutionary basis that makes it possible, but it reaches a point at which its development is set free from its genetic basis. The latter, namely his viewpoint on intentionality, refers to what he calls the ‘we-structure’ of human behaviour of cooperation on which important strands of human culture rest.

19. Of extreme importance in this regard is the valuable and all-determining insight that the biological, organic and phylogenetic dimensions of being human

- that it stems from emerged embodied symbolic mythical minds
- the characteristics of being human, namely consciousness with self-awareness and moral awareness; language; imagination; mythology.²⁰

How can we unpack in an interdisciplinary manner the notion of embodied humanness? In a rather lengthy paragraph, Van Huyssteen (2006) captures the various anthropological dimensions neatly:

As *biologically* specific, we human beings occupy a niche in the hundreds of thousands of species living things on the planet. As *animals* rather than plants, we are mobile and perceptual. As *vertebrates* distinguished from non-vertebrates, we have a backbone and other features of vertebrate life-forms. As *mammals*, we are warm-blooded and live-bearing, and nurse our young. In contrast to marsupials and felines, we share many physiological, genetic, and even behavioural features with *primates*. As the one remaining hominid on the planet, we have an erect posture and are bipedal. In this concrete, bodily sense human uniqueness can never be defined as an abstract, intellectual, or spiritual capacity alone, for it is precisely these kinds of taxonomical observations that add up to the fact that human specificity is the specificity of a species ... And this kind of embodied specificity ... should be of direct relevance for a theological interpretation of human uniqueness’. (p. 278)

The point is: it is our evolutionarily developed bodies that are the background and bearers of human uniqueness (Van Huyssteen 2006:279).²¹ By itself the human biological condition (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:300) does not present us with a specific value such as good or evil. It rather presents us with a ‘set of capacities and tendencies’. These capacities and tendencies are – in the words of Van Huyssteen (2006:300) the:

... basis of, and are incorporated into, the distinctive experiencing life of human beings, that is, into language, embodiment, and ways of being spatial, social, and temporal. (p. 300)

And with it – unavoidably – comes the complex experience for us as self-aware human beings of vulnerability – be it physical (e.g. injury, disease, pain and death) or social (e.g. oppressive systems, relationships, self-realisation).

Since the very beginning of the emergence of *Homo sapiens* those characteristics – like consciousness, imagination, language, symbolic minds and behaviour – that made humans uniquely different from even their closest sister species have always included religious awareness and religious behaviour (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:324).

(footnote 19 continues...)
do not just constitute possibilities for theoretical hypotheses about our human condition, but they in fact constitute important aspects of the condition itself (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:278).

20. In his conclusion to the Gifford Lectures, Van Huyssteen (2006:325) makes the same point in the following way: ‘The distinguishing characteristic of *Homo Sapiens* is not solely a remarkable embodied brain, a stunning mental cognitive fluidity expressed in imagination, creativity, linguistic abilities, and symbolic propensities. But even more, as real-life, embodied persons of flesh and blood’.

21. What is important when Van Huyssteen refers to human uniqueness, is that he argues in the Gifford Lectures that the notion of human uniqueness cannot adequately be captured in a single trait or characteristic. However, that is not to deny that as human beings we share an identifiable and peculiar set of capacities and propensities that clearly distinguishes us from other animals on this planet (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:288). See also the further insightful development of his argument in Van Huyssteen (2014) with his focus on moral sense and symbolic behaviour.

However, before we turn to the latter dimension, namely religious awareness and specifically the soteriological dimension thereof, I would like to briefly position our question on our uniqueness within the broader realm of discourses on personhood.

Positioning the question within anthropological discourses

Within contemporary science and theology, there are the following four key issues²² currently being addressed in the interdisciplinary discussion of human (embodied) personhood.²³ They are: Identity vs. Multiplicity; Human Uniqueness; The Evolution of the Self and Emergence Theory. The reason for this positioning of the question 'Are we special?' is simply to take cognisance of the connectedness or relatedness of the question with other dimensions of anthropological reflection.

Firstly, the issue of Identity vs. Multiplicity, that is, viewpoints on multiplicity that on the one hand are formulated from the notion of narrative identity and a kind of 'core self' in which the focus falls on outward openness and malleability of the self. These features stand over against the viewpoints – often based on understandings of an essentialist self – that overemphasise the centredness of the self. In short: the 'self' is not a thing but a relation that precedes, and creates subjectivity (Franklin 2012:122). Those scholars that focus on identity, on the other hand, engage especially with the notions of individuality, relationality and the continuity of the self. In his reflection on the viewpoint regarding the issue of Multiplicity vs. Identity, Franklin (2012:122) rightly states that all of the scholars agree that essentialist views of human self and personhood must be rejected. There is however the critical concern that in some of these viewpoints, the individual's will to power and free choice for self-actualisation are overemphasised against the role that relationships play in healthy identity construction. In Narrative Philosophy,²⁴ according to Franklin (2012:122), a mediating philosophical

22. This is not to imply that there are not any important issues. The only point that I try to make is that from the most recent publications on embodied personhood, these four are the most proliferated issues presented in the publications.

23. For the following exposition, I am indebted to the short Essay Book Review by Patrick Franklin (2012) on the human person in contemporary science and theology. Franklin discusses the publications that were edited by Van Huyssteen and Wiebe (*In Search of Self*, 2011), Jeeves (*Rethinking Human Nature*, 2011), Murphy and Knight (*Human Identity at the Intersection of Science, Technology and Religion*, 2010) and the published doctoral dissertation by Fischer (*Human Significance in Theology and the Natural Sciences*, 2010). See however the more recent publication *Issues in Science and Theology: What is Life?* (2015) that has been edited by Dirk Evers, Michael Fuller, Antje Jackelén and Knut-Willy Sæther with a few excellent essays on Personhood. Also the publication *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Rationality in Physical Science and Theology* (2010) that was edited by John Polkinghorne and *Becoming Human: Innovation in Prehistoric Material and Spiritual Culture* (2010) that was edited by Colin Renfrew and Iain Morley. Earlier at the turn of the century, Niels Henrik Gregersen, Willem Drees, and Ulf Görman edited the very good publication *Human Person in Science and Theology* (2000). Many prominent scholars have specifically focus on the question of personhood in their recent publications. To name but one scholar and two of his publications: Wentzel van Huyssteen in his *What makes us human?* (*Toronto Journal of Theology* 26(2) 143–160, 2010) and *When were we persons? Why hominid evolution holds the key to embodied personhood* (*Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 52, 329–349, 2010).

24. Franklin (2012:122) rightly emphasises that in viewpoints stemming from Narrative Philosophy the continuity of the self is promoted without falling prey to essentialism. Many scholars (e.g.: Kierkegaard; Pannenberg; Volf) reflecting on (Christian) theological anthropology will put a strong emphasis on the continuity of the self without falling into essentialism by holding 'being' and 'becoming' together in creative tension as gift to be received and goal to be attained.

position can be found. It conceives of personhood and identity within the context of formative relationships, communities and cultural contexts which imparts to individuals a value-laden view (conceptually as well as affectively!) of the world.

Secondly, some scholars prefer the concept of distinctiveness to that of uniqueness because the former emphasises the biological continuity of human beings with other animals in such a manner that it represents a quantitatively higher degree of human complexity. Other scholars again prefer the latter concept of uniqueness because they wish to emphasise the qualitative differences that have emerged from lower systems (e.g. human language) – a difference not only in degree but in kind. A few scholars use both terms but in very much this conceptually qualified manner. In his reflection on the viewpoints on uniqueness and distinctiveness, Franklin (2012:123ff) rightly observes that the motivation to see greater continuity between humans and other non-human creatures is to address the fear of a sense of human superiority that easily can give rise to various abuses of creation. Being human is being special in some distinct ways but then as being interconnectedly part of all of life.²⁵ However, although viewpoints do differ on the ethical question regarding how unique (as privilege, responsibility or both?) human beings are with respect to the rest of creation, scholars do agree on the importance of caring for creation. How this specific moral responsibility should be motivated and explicated, views do differ.

Thirdly, the evolution of the self or (embodied) personhood represents one of the most important themes in the current discourses within theology and science. Currently there exists a high level of consensus in affirming the biological evolution of human beings from lower ancestral forms (cf. Franklin 2012:125). The core of the many surveys on human origins is represented by the conviction that the human sense of self has arisen from the distinctly human capacity for symbolism which makes advanced communication possible (cf. Franklin 2012:125). Franklin (2012:125) poses the question on why this specific issue raises so much concern in conservative Christian circles. In answering the question, he refers to the search for interpretations of the creation accounts (Genesis) and the concept of *Imago Dei* that will not be a threat to the inspiration of the Bible, theological viewpoints of the Fall and to the uniqueness of being human. The search brings about dense epistemological and accompanying hermeneutical discussions.

Fourthly, and probably the most exciting, wide-ranging and lively debate within contemporary discussions within theology and science, is represented by viewpoints on emergence theory. Emergence theory (ET) – that attempts to explain how uniquely human capacities and qualities²⁶

25. Franklin (2012:124) summarises neatly: 'There is consensus in affirming that humans are part of the global ecosystem while playing a special role within it'.

26. Emergent capacities and qualities refers to consciousness, language, the forming of interpersonal relationships, morality, spirituality, abstract thinking, art, music, culture.

emerge from their biological rootedness in complex systems which have in turn emerged from lower-level biological systems and parts – combines observations and discoveries in evolutionary biology and neurophysiology with insights gained from information systems theory to depict human development (cf. Franklin 2012:126). And the striking contribution of ET – on a negative note – pertains to unacceptable popular viewpoints such as: we are our brains; we are nothing more than our biological make-up. On a positive note it vastly contributes to reflections on a more comprehensive understanding of the whole human person; it lively fuels explorative thinking on the nature of emergent capacities, such as consciousness; on the human person as ‘pneumatic complex’ (Keller) and at the same time, on the mystery of human existence; on morality.

It is against this broader interdisciplinary discussion of human (embodied) personhood within contemporary science and theology discourses as background that I would now turn to the question of my choice, namely soteriology.

Beyond the fossil record: On Soteriology

‘All life is in some way or another included in the salvific process’ (Henriksen 2013:179)

If I combine the question on our uniqueness and/or distinctiveness and emergence theory from the preceding positioning (without discarding the other dimensions, but simply selecting two from the reflective discourses to focus on and subsequently to explore the soteriological implications), fascinating implications present themselves. Let me formulate the core of the fascinating questions that arises in my opinion.

If embodied personhood with its unique characteristics emerged from complex evolutionary processes of ‘becoming human’ as understood from emergence theories, at what point does ‘soteriology’ then kick in?²⁷ The question is primarily posed here formally and generically without taking any specific soteriological content into account.²⁸ Becoming human again – but then in a completely different sense – with the realisation of *Homo sapiens* as being a human person, is subsequently faced with becoming human as challenge anew! Henriksen (2013:166) explores in a much more comprehensive manner the very same question, asking: ‘Should the difficulty related to defining what counts as a human being have an impact on theological anthropology or soteriology?’ Henriksen (2013:166) himself however does not offer an affirmative answer to the question he poses, but

27. Much of the following reflection has been inspired by the very insightful article on theological anthropology by the Norwegian theologian Jan-Olav Henriksen (2013), namely: Distinct, unique, or separate? Challenges to theological anthropology and soteriology in light of human evolution?

28. The reason for my emphasis on ‘formally and generically’ is important since a great number of questions come into play on the content of soteriology which I at this stage do not address. In traditional soteriological designs within – for example – Christian Theology it is clear from what humans are saved (‘sin’) and more or less what it entails as ‘salvation’ and its promises. These questions however will have to be worked out anew.

rather pursues the notion of deep incarnation that the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen has formulated, arguing that it presents us with a ‘fruitful point of departure for a more encompassing notion of the whole evolutionary process that allows for a wider notion of soteriology as well’. I am interested in exploring only the latter in the light of Henriksen’s exposition.²⁹

Becoming biologically human from complex evolutionary (emergent) processes that ultimately find concrete expression in being human, that is, embodied life characterised by consciousness as self-consciousness, presents itself from symbolic behaviour in moral, aesthetic and religious awareness. And in so doing, characterises embodied life and living anew in the task or challenge of ‘becoming human’ in the sense of the cultural realisation of what they are meant to be. In this sense, human evolution and theological anthropology is surely much more than a Darwinian matter (cf. Henriksen 2013). However, at what point does it become much more than a Darwinian matter?³⁰ We are indeed exploring the significance of embodied life beyond the empirical scope of the fossil records. Our exploration fuels a broad spectrum of very diverse questions. Take for example: religion. Can one historically actually ‘pinpoint’ the realisation of religion? Looking at the ‘emergence’ of religion from an evolutionary perspective, we are presented with human capacities for religion, and in broadening our perspective, we are presented with its contents.³¹ Its mere existence as a mode of being in the world invites us to seriously ask why, when, how and what? If – for example – we would for one moment linger on the why, then one finds a thick discourse on religion as having developed from natural human cognitive capacities, that is, as an evolved human capacity. We are as humans ‘hardwired for religion’. Or to formulate it in a different manner in combining the earlier remark on symbolic behaviour with religion: It’s a hardwiring that capacitates symbolic behaviour in the natural expression of religion! And the God of religion (in a generic sense)? Formulated in evolutionary terms of our temporal-relational experience, God as a human-made symbol is used in order to make sense of reality (Henriksen 2013:174). We have thus – on the one hand – the experiencing of humans beings of God that is conditioned by how we engage our symbolic capacities; on the other hand we find that the most important feature emerging from the symbolic capacity is the ability to articulate selfhood (Henriksen 2013:170). And this capacity has only developed over the

29. For the unfolding of his very interesting viewpoint, Henriksen (2013:166ff) argumentatively turns to Christology to explore the significance of the ‘resurrected Jesus Christ as the realization of the future human being. In Jesus, humans can recognize what they are meant to be’. For my argument, I am not pursuing this Christological focus.

30. Henriksen (2013:168) rightly emphasises in this context the task that theological reflection takes on: ‘Theology is not an attempt to explain the world scientifically. It is a way of interpreting human experiences from all possible sources in the best way possible and building on the sources of tradition as well as the sciences’.

31. Henriksen (2013) formulates it poignantly:

We would not have religion if we did not have evolution’. Evolution is what has made the distinctive human mode of being in the world possible, and this mode is expressed in a profound manner also in the capacity for religion. (p. 169)

last 60 000 to 40 000 years when *Homo sapiens* were emerging. To now pursue these evolutionary implications further within the context of religion, and specifically from a Judaeo-Christian salvific perspective in which God is confessed as Creator and as source of life becomes – as reflection - radically adventurous and at the very same time highly problematic. On the one hand it is radically adventurous because the Immanuel perspective of ‘God-with-us’ can theologially be revisioned as ‘God-with-all-living things’ (Denis Edwards).³² On the other hand it is highly problematic because one is to make sense of the history of pre-human forms of life in relation to the core significance of salvation and its full theological incarnational³³ expression in Jesus Christ as God’s Logos and our saviour.

The question that I then would like to put from a ‘beyond welc(h)omo naledi-perspective’, is strikingly formulated by Henriksen (2013) as follows:

Where do we draw the line between humans who can be elected for salvation history, and the primates that have made these humans able to understand themselves as elected? (p. 173)

Do we thus have to ask in an unacceptable way within an evolutionary framework for a ‘day and date of “conversion”’ on which God’s salvific activity becomes ‘operational or applicable’? Formulated bluntly in metaphoric terminology, on the ‘Saturday morning’ of creation, human beings were still becoming, were still in the making. Those beings that were part of the becoming of human beings in the morning are not included in our soteriological viewpoints. However, in the realisation of *Homo sapiens* on the ‘Saturday afternoon’ of creation, they are evolutionary part and parcel of our soteriological viewpoints. Do we then also have to accept in an insensitive, irresponsible manner that the pre-human forms of life only served ‘instrumental purposes’? The hardwiring was in biological process and was only still ‘becoming’! On both questions the answer is an emphatic No. It is precisely however soteriological questions like these that are posed formally and generically that newly present themselves from what we know of human evolution and subsequently force us to revise our theological convictions. An unavoidable soteriological implication as revision presents itself for serious consideration: All of God’s creation is included in God’s

32. In his chapter on the opportunities and challenges of deep incarnation, Gregersen (2015b:372) mentions that the Australian theologian Denis Edwards from Flinders University School of Theology in Adelaide, South Australia, in his *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (2006) was ‘probably the first to see the connection between deep incarnation and ecological theology’. He subsequently quotes Edwards who argued that biology ‘does not allow us to see human flesh as an isolated entity’. He continues with the statement by Edwards – which is of the utmost importance for my argument here – that ‘human beings can only be understood as interrelated with other life-forms of or planet and interconnected with the atmosphere, the land, and the seas that sustain life’ (Gregersen 2015:372). In his *Groaning of Creation* (2008), the British theologian Christopher Southgate argues in the same vein for the connectedness of all of creation and a hope for creation that will include also nonhuman creatures. Southgate, who was originally trained as biochemist, is Honorary University Fellow in Theology at the University of Exeter in England.

33. See the very insightful exposition of Henriksen (2013:175ff) in which he employs the Danish theologian Niels Gregersen’s viewpoint on deep incarnation to unfold a convincing cosmic perspective on God’s incarnation (‘becoming flesh’) that reaches into the depths of material existence.

salvific activity. Salvific inclusivity presents itself forcefully as an insightful indirect implication from the history of human evolution. It is a history that is powerfully and comprehensively based on the connectedness of all the creations.³⁴ A connectedness even more basic than our animality, but in the very stuff that the cosmos consists of. In the very descriptive words of the American theologian Elizabeth Johnson (2015:137) in her reflection on the story of the universe:

... (E)verything is connected with everything else; nothing is isolated. What makes our blood red? Iron. Where does it come from? (p. 137)

It was produced says Johnson in quoting Arthur Peacocke, in some galactic explosions a billion years ago and eventually condensed to form the iron in the crust of the earth from which we have emerged. In this very concrete sense:

... (h)uman beings are made of the stuff of the cosmos.... (T)he story of life’s evolution makes evident that we share with all other living creatures on our planet a common genetic ancestry. Bacteria, pine trees, blueberries, horses, the great grey whales – we are all genetic kin in the great community of life. (Johnson 2015:137)

Salvific inclusivity as evolutionary implication in my opinion thus necessitates a theological re-thinking of an earlier viewpoint on salvation, namely the *apokatastasis* (Restoration)³⁵ viewpoint of Origen of Alexandria (185–254 C.E.). But then it must immediately be stated: Much dispute surrounds the clarity of and on his viewpoint.³⁶ That can and must be addressed at a later stage. Suffice to say that a core element of the doctrine, namely of universal reconciliation can be revisioned from contemporary discourses from evolutionary perspectives on embodied personhood and within a cosmic framework that includes all of (becoming) creation. The story of life’s evolution, our connectedness from a common genetic ancestry in the community of life, opens new reflective vistas. At the same time, two forceful insights will determine our

34. Perhaps a short summary of the story of the universe as Johnson (2015:136,137) presents us with will be helpful at this point. I found it very helpful. It assists us to see and understand the comprehensive evolutionary scope of connectedness. I take the following summary directly from her exposition of the story of the universe. She writes: Prevailing scientific theory has it that the universe originated 13.7 billion years ago in an explosive event rather inelegantly called the big bang. This inconceivable, singular instant poured out matter and energy that, after an initial inflationary period, expanded according to a precisely calibrated rate, unfurling neither too fast nor too slow. Its lumpy unevenness allowed swirling galaxies to form as gravity pulled particles together and their dense friction ignited the stars. Over billions of years, nuclear reactions within the stars cooked simpler elements into heavier ones such as carbon, iron and sodium. Roughly five billion years ago on the outer arm of one spiral galaxy, certain giant, aging stars died in great supernova explosions that spewed these elements into the surrounding cosmos. Following the original pattern of explosion and attraction, some of this cloud of dust and gas reformed and reignited to become our sun, a second generation star. Some of it coalesced into chunks too small to catch fire, forming the planets of our solar system, including Earth. Three or more billion years ago, another momentous change took place when the material of this planet so arranged itself that it burst into self-replication creatures: the advent of life. Out of the big bang the stars; out of the ashes of stars the Earth; out of the molecules of the Earth, life. They were single-celled creatures at first. Then, out of their life and death came an advancing tide, fragile but unstoppable: creatures that live in shells, fish, amphibians, insects, flowers, birds, reptiles, and mammals, among whom recently emerged human beings, we primates whose brains are so richly textured that we experience self-reflective consciousness and freedom, or in classical terms, mind and will.

35. Interestingly Gregersen (2015:374) mentions that he himself supports a ‘version of *apokatastasis*’. He however immediately qualifies his statement, saying that there ‘may be forms of life that cannot inherit the divine kingdom...’.

36. See Norris (2004) and Edwards (2014). For a good recent study, see Ilaria Ramelli (2013), *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*.

ongoing reflection. Firstly, we are forced from evolutionary insights to reflect on human distinctiveness not in terms of value superiority over the non-human or so called pre-human or even over the rest of creation. Secondly, not conceiving ourselves in a superior, disembodied anthropocentric position we are insightfully compelled by the evidence to reflect on human distinctiveness solely in terms of species specificity and concrete embodiment (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:271–272).

Say something, but I am not giving up on you!³⁷

I do not think that *Homo naledi* at this specific evolutionary moment in time has much to say to us in the process of welcoming her as our newest relative. She is actually rather quiet because there are indeed many puzzling and unanswered questions. Puzzling and unanswered questions on the so-called deliberate placement of bodies and the accompanying question on the possibility of whether these individuals were capable of ritual behaviour, and thus as a sign of symbolic thought.

However, *Naledi's* silence speaks loudly beyond the fossil record in unleashing an ongoing storm of revisionary theological reflection – such as on soteriology which I chose as topic for my revisionary exposition. A revisionary exposition that brought us to strongly consider a viewpoint of cosmic salvific inclusivity. We should therefore not give up on her; not give up the implications that can be pursued beyond the fossil record. Or perhaps formulated in conclusion more clearly and to the point, we should continue and with even more fervour pursue theological revision of basic doctrinal positions and traditional convictions in the light of the ongoing insights that continuously flow from insights from human evolution and paleo-anthropological findings.

37. The play of words of the heading is on the big musical hit *Say Something* (2013) by the pop group A Great Big World and the well-known pop artist Christina Aguilera on the album *Is There Anybody Out There?*

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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