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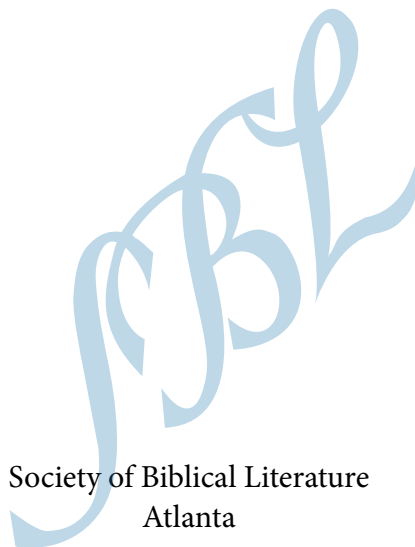
Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence

FRAGILE DIGNITY

INTERCONTEXTUAL CONVERSATIONS ON SCRIPTURES, FAMILY, AND VIOLENCE

Edited by

L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk



Society of Biblical Literature
Atlanta

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INTRODUCTION

L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk

In her book *Frames of War*, Judith Butler reminds us of a reality we know all too well: human beings are vulnerable, prone to injury, disease, and death. From the moment we are born, our survival depends on what Butler calls “a social network of hands” (Butler 2009, 14–16). Most of us are born into families that provide a child care not only to survive, but also to thrive. Family thus serves as the space that protects life. However, in many instances today, the family has unfortunately become the space in which human life is prevented from flourishing.

This volume focuses on the notion of human dignity and particularly on how this concept relates to those instances in which families or society at large fail to protect human life and human dignity. The collection of essays is the result of the collaboration between the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, Netherlands and the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The essays reflect both on theoretical aspects of the notion of human dignity and on its social ramifications. Together they constitute an extended case study on in/dignity in and around the family as well as on the performance of dignity—or, as will be evident from this volume, quite often indignity—in wider communities.

The title of this volume, *Fragile Dignity*, captures the paradox that, on the one hand, human beings are endowed with an inherent dignity as creatures created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). This “eccentric existence,” as David Kelsey calls it in his work with the same title, maintains that the call to respect human dignity is not related to an individual’s intellectual or physical abilities, but is rooted in the individual’s relationship with the Creator God (Kelsey 2009, 289–90). This dignity is thus inherent in all human beings regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, intellectual abilities, or other traits. On the other hand, however, this dignity is also a fragile dignity, as is evident in the continual violation of human worth,

and as is particularly evident in the ugly face of violence inflicted on and affecting individuals and groups at home and in the public sphere.

Recognizing this fragility of human dignity led the two universities to come together in dialogue. Even though we come from very different contexts—North versus South; developed versus developing world—the internal boundaries in our respective contexts are already more porous: as other European societies, the Dutch, for example, must learn how to negotiate the presence of immigrants in their midst, and South Africa, with its complex apartheid history, is still learning to negotiate complex race relations.

Building on a six-year collaboration that comprised yearly conferences alternating between our two institutions and focusing on various aspects pertaining to human dignity, these two Faculties of Theology engaged in dialogue, responding to one another's contributions in the form of responsive letters—the salutation and greeting contained within each response suggesting something of the personal relationship involved in the act of intimately engaging with one another's work. For us, these North-South and South-North dialogues were a great example of theology as encounter, according to which we face one another in our differentness, asking difficult questions of one another, and coming to see ourselves in a new light. The Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes the value of dialogical engagement to reveal new dimensions of a particular topic: When two people look over each other's shoulders, they inadvertently occupy different positions and hence look at the same thing in different ways, thus complementing and mutually enriching each other's perspective (Bakhtin 1986, 7; cf. Holquist 1990, 21).

The dialogues that form part of *Fragile Dignity* indeed attest to the rich perspectives that emerged from the ongoing conversation between the two theological faculties from the Northern and Southern hemispheres. However, in light of the fact that the dialogical nature of words or texts implies that new voices continually may be recalled and may join to the dialogue—what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the *unfinalizable* character of the dialogical nature of the word—this volume seeks to model the importance of extending the conversation. Therefore, *Fragile Dignity* sought to add more voices to this conversation on family, violence, and human dignity. As a result, the initial dialogues were extended by including a series of external responses: four female respondents from different parts of the world (Beverly Mitchell from the USA, Elsa Tamez from Costa Rica, Cheryl Anderson from the USA, and Monica Melanchthon from India,

who during the writing of this book moved to Australia) responding to the various sections contained in this volume, culminating in a third-level response to the book as a whole (“Reflections on Reflections”) by yet another female respondent, Athalya Brenner, who splits her time between Israel and Amsterdam. These multilayered responses by respondents from very different contexts were crucial to the final form of this book, as they represent voices beyond the initial North-South dialogues joining the conversation on human dignity, attesting to the underlying conviction that the conversation initiated in this book on human dignity in our respective contexts is far from over.

Another key feature of *Fragile Dignity* is that it contains important perspectives with regard to the way one uses biblical texts in a normative conversation on the promotion of human dignity in contemporary contexts. This is evident from the overall shape of this volume. For instance, in the first section that constitutes the hermeneutical framework for this volume, the notion of the *imago Dei* cited above is problematized in the contribution by Hendrik Bosman, with response by Klaas Spronk, as it shows how biblical traditions present a variety of diverse and ambiguous perspectives on what it means to say that humankind is created in the image of God.

The contributions to this volume furthermore build on the assumption that the biblical texts are complex, ambiguous, and even messy, mirroring the complexity and ambiguity that constitute our contemporary contexts. This is particularly evident in the second section of this volume, “Engaging the Text,” in which biblical scholars engage with the biblical text with an eye to context, both ancient and contemporary. Moreover, the interdisciplinary collaboration in this volume is reflected in the fact that it includes scholars who are not traditionally trained biblical scholars but who, nevertheless, sought to engage the Bible in their reflection regarding threats to human dignity in the context of family. One finds in the third section of this volume, “Engaging the Context,” how practical theologians, missiologists, theologians, church historians, and educators engage with the context with an eye to the biblical text (and in at least one instance, the Qur’an). It is evident in many of the contributions that the biblical text functions not so much in a normative fashion, as a means of ending the conversation with an authoritative last word, but rather as a way to open up discussion to its transformative power. The biblical text may, for instance, function as a mirror of a society that, as one participant notes, sometimes produces a rather hazy image. Yet the scriptural tradi-

tions helped all the participants to discover who they are and what the (re) construction of human dignity might entail.

The essays contained in this volume relating to the theme of family, violence, and human dignity share the underlying assumption that life is precious; that humans possess an inherent dignity that deserves to be respected; and that human beings ought to be given the opportunity to flourish. However, these essays also consider those forces that prevent life from reaching its full potential. For this reason, quite a few of the contributions focus on the way domestic violence threatens the dignity of men, women, and children. This reality finds literary expression in the biblical traditions. (See, for example, the dialogue between Anne-Claire Mulder and Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel and the dialogue between Xolile and Lee-Ann Simon and Leo Koffemann.) Gé Speelman (with a response by Yusef Waghid) moreover considers this theme in the context of Islam, and L. Juliana Claassens (with a response by Dorothea Erbele-Küster) investigates how violence against women is used as a metaphor for describing the sociopolitical situations in both the Book of Lamentations as well as in the Nobel prizewinning novel *Disgrace* by South African author J. M. Coetzee.

In the process of compiling this volume, we gained a number of important insights. First, the collaboration reflected in *Fragile Dignity* proved to be an enriching experience for all involved. All were constantly surprised by the rich perspectives and new angles revealed by this interaction. For instance, it soon became evident that what we mean by family is not as self-evident as one would think in our respective contexts. In the same way, Jeremy Punt's contribution (with response by Magda Misset-van de Weg) reveals the complexity of and diversity in what constitutes the family in the New Testament traditions. This challenged us to also acknowledge the complexity and rich variety of kinds of family in our respective contexts of South Africa and the Netherlands. Blended families and families ravaged by HIV/AIDS; families torn apart by apartheid policies, and more recently by globalizing forces, have forever changed what we mean by family.

Moreover, the very notion of human dignity itself revealed many different layers of meaning as the contributors explored the concept from various angles. Throughout the consultation, it became evident that this term is much more complex than initially believed—something already introduced in the introductory essay that considers the hermeneutics of dignity (Frits de Lange, responded to by Gerrit Brand). Moreover, we grappled with questions of what dignity means in the midst of the tense Muslim-Christian relations experienced by some of Stellenbosch Univer-

sity's Nigerian students, or in the context of desperate women seeking to conceive by means of assisted reproductive techniques, and for surrogate mothers and potential egg donors.

Second, the theological engagement found in *Fragile Dignity* is a truly interdisciplinary venture as the dialogues quite often cross disciplinary lines. In his reflection on the role of universities in times of political transition, Stellenbosch University president Russel Botman (2011) argues that multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary engagement is vital for solving the problems we are facing in the contemporary world, problems so complex that we cannot go at them alone. The same could be said about theology done in our globalizing context, in which it seems that the efficacy of the theology of the future rests on its ability to cross borders, both disciplinary and geographical.

Finally, the complexity and unfinalizability of these dialogues do not preclude the participations from working toward a common goal. It is evident that all of the participants in this project—both initial conversationists and respondents—are deeply committed to respecting the inherent dignity of all people, regardless of the ways in which we differ in race, class, gender, and so on. John Rogerson (2010, 193) is right when he says: “We become more truly human the more that we accept others as being truly human.” The fragile dignity highlighted in this volume implies that people are engaged in an ongoing process of becoming more human. In allowing their fellow human beings the opportunity to flourish, to reach their full potential in the world, people may live into the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–27), in this way becoming the realization of God's purposes in the world (Rogerson 2010, 174).

This book is dedicated to the memory of our colleague Gerrit Brand, who sadly died before the publication of this book and whose life attests, amidst the fragility of our existence, to this ongoing quest to become more human.

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