L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk, eds.

*Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence*

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Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence has been edited by L. Juliana Claassens, Associate Professor of Old Testament in the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, and Klaas Spronk, Professor of Old Testament at the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam. The publication is a collection of essays and responses concerning human dignity. The volume is one of the outcomes of a six-year-long North–South/South–North dialogue between scholars from the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands, and scholars from the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. This collaboration included annual conferences, a series of responsive letters, and additional external responses. The essay collection is interdisciplinary (with contributions from theology, religion, gender, education) and is united by the authors’ engagement in the academic theological discourse about the concept human dignity (except for the essay about Islam from Speelman with a response by Waghid). Altogether fifteen women and ten men contributed to the volume. The initial internal meetings between scholars from South and North (eleven from South Africa, eight from the Netherlands, and one from Belgium) are in the essay collection extended by including five female external respondents (one from the Netherlands, two from the USA, one from Costa Rica, and one from India).
The volume seeks to demonstrate how the biblical sources can serve as a foundation upon which the concept of human dignity is built, and it further intends to suggest how human dignity could and should be dealt with in contemporary societies. Applying Gen 1:26–27 as a key text, *Fragile Dignity* takes its point of departure in the assumption that life is precious and that every human being possesses an inherent dignity and deserves respect and a safe place to live. Because respect and a safe place to live is not the reality for many, the volume looks at the lack of dignity in contemporary family life and society at large. The authors of the various essays and responses “engage the Bible in their reflection regarding threats to human dignity in the context of family” (3). Although this is an academic work, the volume as a whole has a greater goal than merely to communicate the researchers’ academic interests and concerns. It is written out of a common ideological ambition: “It is evident that all of the participants in this project … are deeply committed to respecting the inherent dignity of all people” (5). Further on the same page: “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.”

The collection is organized into three parts with the following titles: “Hermeneutical Framework,” “Engaging the Text,” and “Engaging the Context.” The volume is designed as a three-layered response. First, every part consists of three or more essays with responses. Second, there are responses to the overall theme in each part. The third layer is a response to the book as a whole. After an introduction written by the editors (1–6), part 1 (7–70) provides the reader with a systematic discussion of the hermeneutics of dignity, followed by a critical presentation of the Old Testament anthropologies. The authors of these essays and responses are Frits de Lange, Gerrit Brand, Hendrik Bosman, Klaas Spronk, and Beverley E. Mitchell. In part 2 (71–166), Old and New Testament texts are encountered in relation to ancient and contemporary contexts concerning threats to human dignity. The authors and respondents here are L. Juliana Claassens, Dorothea Erbele-Küster, Charlene van der Walt, Jeremy Punt, Magda Misset-van de Weg, and Elsa Tamez. The essays In part 3 (167–317), focus on context in relation to the biblical texts. The authors here are Petruschka Schaafsma, Robert Vosloo, Anne-Claire Mulder, Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, Cheryl B. Anderson, Ciska Stark, Ian Nell, D. Xolile Simon and Lee-Ann J. Simon, Leo Koffeman, Gé Speelman, Yusef Wagid, and Monica J. Melanchton. Although placed at the end of part 3, the final response, authored by Athalya Brenner, covers the volume as a whole (319–31).

Organizing the volume as a multilayered response with contributors from various contexts around the world works well. By adding different valuable dimensions, the responses widen the perspective on human dignity beyond the specific South–North and North–South dialogue that went on before this publication came into being. Further, the
various responses envisage how complex the concept of human dignity is and how it can
be approached and understood from various points of view. By creating a multilayered
interdisciplinary volume, the editors underline the fact that the traditional disciplines are
in transition, and they show how enriching it can be to approach the topic in question
from multiple angles. When this is said, the editors themselves point out that this volume
does not aim at giving the ultimate answers to the complexity of the concept human
dignity but rather initiates a conversation that will go on (3).

The overall aim of the publication is, as already said, twofold: to demonstrate how the
biblical sources can serve as a foundation upon which the concept of human dignity is
built and to suggest how human dignity can and should be dealt with in contemporary
societies. This twofold design is the collection’s strength and at the same time its
weakness. On the negative side, can one really argue that the few biblical texts about
humans being created in the image of God make a solid enough foundation for an
extensive discussion about human dignity? As a critical reader, I wonder why the
conversation about human dignity is anchored so strongly in the idea of human beings
being created in the image of God. As Bosman, Spronk, and Mitchell’s contributions
show (39–70), there are a variety of diverse and ambiguous biblical perspectives on what
it means to be created in the image of God. Further, the essay collection becomes a faith
conversation when it proposes how the communities of faith could and should deal with
human dignity. This can work well if the reader locates herself or himself within a
Christian framework, but the conversation might not engage the reader who is not part of
this context (see 321). On the positive side, however, this twofold design demonstrates
how an academic discourse on human dignity can be relevant and closely connected to
practice and to those with whom the discussion ultimately deals: human beings. By being
designed this way, the collection as a whole not only contributes to the scholarly debate
but also has the potential to be read in a wider circle.

Having regarded the essay collection together with the overall response at the end of the
volume, the following important viewpoint stands out: where the essay collection
describes and proposes treatment for the symptoms of indignity (prescribing pastoral
counseling and community support for the victimized), Brenner goes straight to what she
sees as the ultimate cause of indignity: the “systemic, built-in scriptural inequality”
created by “the three male-headed monotheistic religions” (326–27). The volume would
have been even more stimulating and thought-provoking if more essays had worked from
such a critical view on the texts themselves.

Despite these few points of criticism, the contribution is a welcomed one for anyone who
wants to be informed about how the concept of human dignity can be dealt with within a
(mainly) Christian theological discourse. In most academic works scholars talk to one
another. This volume should be commended for looking at past texts in the light of present concerns and the other way round. It succeeds in providing the reader with glimpses into a wider theological conversation not only about human dignity but also about what dignity means and should mean in (ancient and) contemporary societies. By including scholars from different disciplines and contexts, the essay collection is experienced as a rich conversation about what it means to be human—a conversation the readers of *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence* can continue with in their respective fields and contexts.