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## Human dignity in the prophetic traditions: Upholding human worth in a context of dehumanisation

### ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the theme of human dignity offers a fruitful avenue to explore the interrelated themes of justice, vocation and human responsibility in the biblical traditions. Human dignity is most evident in the notion of the *Imago Dei*, i.e., the claim in Genesis 1:26-27 that humans, both male and female, are created in the image of God. This powerful theological claim has led to some rich theological reflection by Christian and Jewish interpreters who have argued for the inherent worth of every human being whose dignity is a gracious gift bestowed by the Creator God. Nevertheless, in the Hebrew Bible there are numerous instances where this dignity of individuals and groups are threatened, obscured and violated. And yet, it is exactly in the midst of these situations of dehumanisation that the conversation on what it means to be human becomes most urgent. For instance, in prophets like Isaiah, it is within the depths of the social justice violations that threaten the well being of the society's most vulnerable members that one encounters the prophet's persistent critique that upholds the dignity of each member of the society.

### 1. RECONTEXTUALISING HUMAN DIGNITY

“Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected” (Chapter 2.10, South African Bill of Rights)

So reads the constitution of South Africa – words that are particularly poignant in light of the dehumanising events and injustices that have marked South Africa's history of apartheid. Similar language is also found in the preamble to the United Nations declaration of Human Rights that affirms the inherent rights of all human beings in terms of “the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.” This conviction offers the basis of the organization's resolve “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom” for all peoples and all nations.<sup>1</sup>

Even though these secular documents, including also the constitutions of countries such as Iceland, Greece, Guatemala, and South Korea all employ the language of human dignity as foundation for promoting people's universal and inalienable rights, they do so without giving much (or any) thought to its theological and biblical roots. Actually, the term “human dignity” is introduced as a foundational concept by Church Fathers such as Irenaeus in his reading of biblical traditions that pertain to the compelling image of the *Imago Dei*.<sup>2</sup> The powerful theological

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1 R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead, “Contextualizing Human Dignity,” in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1.

2 It is important to note that the biblical traditions nowhere directly speak of the dignity of human beings. Church Fathers like Irenaeus took the language of human dignity over from Greco-Roman usage (in Latin – “*dignitas*”; in Greek “*to axioma, he time*”) and placed it into the context of Christian belief and practice, Soulen and Woodhead, “Contextualizing Human Dignity,” 3.

claim found in Genesis 1:26-27 that humans, both male and female, are created in the image of God has accordingly led to some rich theological reflection by Christian and Jewish interpreters who have argued for the inherent worth of every human being whose dignity is a gracious gift bestowed by the Creator God.<sup>3</sup>

Stripped from its original biblical and theological context, the concept of human dignity as used in the documents cited above has been decontextualised and hence has become quite vulnerable. For one, divorced from its original interpretative context that roots human dignity in a relationship with God, the worth or dignity of a human increasingly has shifted to come to depend solely on the individual's own attributes and achievements.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the fact that the notion of human dignity is cited with such regularity in the public discourse is problematic in itself. John Witte Jr. writes that the term of human dignity has become "ubiquitous to the point of cliché – a moral trump card frayed by heavy use, a general principle harried by constant invocation."<sup>5</sup> To use the term haphazardly without attention to the context in which it first found its significance is to water down the meaning to the point where it can no longer speak with much force.

And yet there is something compelling about the idea that people regardless of factors such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical or mental abilities possess intrinsic value and as such are deserving of equal and just treatment – perhaps explaining why this term has enjoyed such widespread appeal from national and international bodies as well as in the broader conversation with regard to fostering a universal human rights culture.<sup>6</sup> It is the contention of this paper that the notion of human dignity has the potential to offer a valuable contribution to the discourse about human rights if one is able to move beyond a mere "cipher" or an "empty formula"<sup>7</sup> by rooting it in a particular interpretative context that fills the concept of human dignity with meaning.

For instance, in his recent book, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, Nicholas Wolterstorff seeks to ground or root concepts like justice in a particular narrative context, by showing how justice forms an integral part of the Christian (Jewish) foundational story in the Old Testament (Hebrew

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3 James Luther Mays notes that even though the "image of God" occurs only twice in the biblical traditions, "its actuality is a structural theme of the biblical account of God and humankind," "The Self in the Psalms and the Image of God," in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 38-39.

4 Soulen and Woodhead, "Contextualizing Human Dignity," 12, 24.

5 John Witte, "Between Sanctity and Depravity: Human Dignity in Protestant Perspective," in *In Defence Of Human Dignity: Essays For Our Times*, (Eds. Robert P. Kraynak And Glenn Tinder; Notre Dame/ London: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 121.

6 With regard to the distinction between human rights vs human dignity, Mary Ann Glendon identifies the deficiencies of the "American rights dialect" that is characterized by an exaggerated absoluteness, individualism, and is independent of any necessary relation to personal, civic, and collective responsibilities." She argues as follow: "Our simplistic rights talk regularly promotes the short-run over the long-term, sporadic crisis intervention over systemic preventive measures, and particular interests over the common good," *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 14-15. In response to Glendon, Patricia Lamoureux notes that "Glendon's critique is not an assault on specific rights or on the idea of rights in general. Rather it is an argument for a richer language and better attitudes than the habitual ways of thinking and speaking about rights. At the core, her argument is about what kind of people we are becoming and what kind of society we are in the process of creating," "Immigration Reconsidered in the Context of an Ethic of Solidarity," in *Made in God's Image: The Catholic Vision of Human Dignity* (Eds. Regis Duffy, OFM and Angelus Gambatese, OFM; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999), 109.

7 Michael Welker, "Theological Anthropology versus Anthropological Reductionism," in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Eerdmans, 2006), 327-328.

Bible).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the biblical prophets' persistent critique of social justice violations offers us a valuable resource to recontextualise the discourse of rights, justice, and in the case of this paper the related notion of human dignity – Israel's prophetic traditions forming the basis of a rich interpretative context that through many centuries past has inspired people to work for a more just society. For instance, throughout every socio-cultural context reflected in the book Isaiah – a composite volume that spans at least four centuries – it seems that the quest for justice is a primary concern.<sup>9</sup>

For the purpose of this article, I will consider the way in which the book Isaiah constitutes one possible interpretative context for human dignity, so recontextualising this term that is invoked with such regularity in the national and international arenas.<sup>10</sup> Obviously one cannot do justice to the book as a whole in the limited space of a paper; however, it will be shown how selected examples may be fruitfully employed in a discussion on human dignity.<sup>11</sup> I will highlight three theological perspectives with regard to human dignity in the context of a theological engagement with the book Isaiah that may offer a thicker description of this important concept. These theological perspectives have profound implications for our sense of vocation that will be addressed in the concluding section of this article.

## 2. THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

### 2.1 Human dignity in a context of dehumanization

In her book, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology and Human Dignity*, Beverly Mitchell argues that it is precisely in those contexts of extreme dehumanization in which the dignity of individuals and groups are threatened, obscured and violated that the conversation on what it means to be human becomes most urgent. She goes on to show how, in ironical fashion, it is the indignity experienced by the African American slaves on the slave ships and on the plantations in the Southern part of the United States, as well as the humiliation suffered by the millions of Jews during the Holocaust, that reveals to us something about the incontrovertible and indestructible nature of human dignity.<sup>12</sup>

In this regard, it is not coincidental that the profound formulations upholding human worth in the South African constitution emerged out of the context of human rights violations that accompanied the apartheid regime. And it is precisely in reaction to the atrocities of World War II that one saw the national and international declaration of human dignity and rights by the

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8 Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Justice in the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible," in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 65-95.

9 Thomas LeClerq, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001).

10 Cf. also Soulen and Woodhead who have proposed a "theological recontextualization of the concept." They argue that the notion of human dignity is not "a self-explanatory nor self-sustaining term. Its meaningfulness is dependent on its being embedded within a broader and more comprehensive cultural, conceptual and social framework," "Contextualizing Human Dignity," 2.

11 Particularly in the part of the book Isaiah known as Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah, one finds a creative engagement with theological themes denoting God's creation, new creation and final consummation – themes that incidentally according to the church fathers such as Theophilus of Antioch and Clement of Alexandria very much constitute the context of human dignity. Cf. Soulen and Woodhead who show how the church fathers understood human dignity in terms of God's great works: (a) in God's work of creation of humankind as a whole; (b) the church and God's work of new creation in Christ (c) God's consummation as the eschatological goal of creation," "Contextualizing Human Dignity," 3.

12 Beverly Eileen Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology and Human Dignity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 26-29.

United Nations and the constitutions of countries mentioned before.<sup>13</sup>

Also in the biblical traditions, one finds ample evidence that questions regarding human dignity arise out of situations that seriously impede people's quality of life and even right to life. So it is significant that the profound formulation of the Imago Dei in Gen 1:26-27 breaks into the broader context of alienation outlined in Genesis 1-11 that sees story after story of human disobedience, egotism, revenge, and fratricide. As James Mays suggests, it is indeed so that "... the image of God belongs to the human being beyond and through all the drastic failures of mortals recorded in Genesis 3-9."<sup>14</sup>

The book of Isaiah offers some good examples of how it is within the depths of the social justice violations that threaten the wellbeing of society's most vulnerable members, that one finds the prophet's persistent critique upholding the dignity of each member of the society. For instance, Isaiah 5:8ff presents a litany of social justice violations that highlights numerous examples of in which people have perverted justice, giving substance to the charge outlined in the clever wordplay in v 7 denoting God's disappointed expectations:

God expected justice (לְמִשְׁפָּט), but received bloodshed (בְּדָמָיִם);

God expected righteousness (לְצִדְקָה), but received an outcry (צִעֲקָה).

So in Isaiah 5:8, the greed of the people who confiscated the property of their vulnerable neighbours so destroying their property rights and their ability to make a meaningful existence, is cited as example of the injustice of which the people stand accused. As the outcry resounds: "Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!" And in v 23 it is clear that the very judicial and societal structures that were supposed to protect the poor have become the means that exploit and oppress these most vulnerable in society when Israel is indicted for "acquitt[ing] the guilty for a bribe, and depriv[ing] the innocent of their rights!"<sup>15</sup>

However, amid this long list of examples in which people's basic rights are violated; in which people are "bowed down," and "everyone is brought low" (v15), we encounter the bold claim in Isa 5:16 that the Lord God is exalted in justice, made holy by righteousness. This is a good example of how the image of God that is meant to be honoured and glorified in the world breaks into those situations of dehumanization in which people are trampled, indicating a God who identifies with people in the most dire of circumstances – a theological perspective that will come to be exemplified in the New Testament in terms of a God who identifies with the cross.

This divine image of a God who is closely associated with justice functions as a bright shining light in a world trapped in darkness; as a beacon held up of what the world is supposed to be. The bold theological claim in Isa 5:15-16 picks up on God's expectations that were vividly outlined in v 7: God expects justice and righteousness. In the reality of situations of bloodshed and outcry, the image of God who hears the cries of the victims and who is not blind to the injustices of those most vulnerable serves as a reminder that justice and righteousness truly glorify God.

In a very different socio-historical context reflected in Trito-Isaiah, we further see an example of the prophetic critique breaking into those circumstances in which people are downtrodden and disrespected. In Isaiah 58-59, we see how reality and potentiality co-exist side by side when

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13 Soulen and Woodhead, "Contextualizing Human Dignity," 9.

14 Mays, "The Self in the Psalms and the Image of God," 34. Cf. also Psalm 8 in which the human being is honoured and held up as the means by which God's reign is glorified in the world is situated in the midst of a series of lament psalms (Ps 7, 9, 10) that directly speak of those situations in which the dignity and the worth of people are violated and/or disregarded (p 36).

15 Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice*, 57.

it is in a context in which justice is said to be far off and distant (v 9); a context in which people's "hands are defiled with blood," and in which wickedness is said to mark their thoughts and actions (vv 3-7) that people are called "to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isa 58:6).<sup>16</sup>

As we will see in the following sections, it is the belief in human dignity as a gracious gift from the Creator God that inspires the prophets to advocate an unwavering belief in God's redemptive work through which God promises to mend a broken world.

## 2.2 Human dignity and the creator God

For the church fathers like Chrysostom, human dignity constitutes a gracious gift from the Creator God. Drawing inspiration from the rich tradition of the *Imago Dei*, to be created in the image of God focuses the attention squarely on God's activity rather than on human ability or achievement. This profound theological insight moreover implies that human dignity belongs to all people regardless of factors such as skin colour, gender, social status, physical or mental capabilities, sexual orientation, etc.<sup>17</sup>

Particularly in Deutero-Isaiah, in which themes of creation are utilized as the basis for the promise of redemption and new life for the despondent exiles, one finds that acts of creative redemption on the part of the Creator-Liberator God are not dependent on human ability or achievement. For instance, in Isaiah 43:1, one sees for example how the exiles are reminded that they are special in the eyes of the God who has created them. This belief that God has chosen *you*; formed *you* and knows *your* name holds particular significance for broken exiles who had to be convinced anew that God's favour is upon them. In v 4, the exiles are called precious and honoured and loved by God – probably some of the most profound expressions of human worth in the biblical traditions.<sup>18</sup>

Also in Isaiah 42, themes of creation, election and redemption are creatively interwoven when God's creative activity is manifested in v 5 in the act of giving spirit/breath to people. As in the first creation account in Genesis 2 according to which God breathed breath into the newly formed earth creature ('ādām – cf. Phyllis Trible's translation reflecting the wordplay of the 'ādām being formed out of the 'ādāmā)<sup>19</sup>, God's breath denotes the gift of life. One sees this notion vividly expressed in Ps 104:29, when it is said that all created life depends on the Creator God; when God takes away their breath they die and return to dust.

The undeserved gift character is particularly evident in this first servant song in Isa 42:1-7. In

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16 Joseph Blenkinsopp outlines the miserable social conditions that were the norm during the first century of Persian rule (Neh 5:1-5; Hag 1:6, 9-11) which were responsible for the social justice infractions outlined in this passage. Due to a succession of bad harvests that proved fatal in a subsistence agrarian economy, many farmers were forced to borrow money at exuberant interests rates. If, or rather when, they were unable to repay, they were sold into indentured service, *Isaiah 56-66* (AB; New York: Double Day, 2003), 177-178.

17 Chrysostom writes in a sermon on Philippians: "Humans possesses dignity of rational nature, but this comes to them as a gift, not as something they have earned," (Homilies on Philippians 7), Quoted in Soulen and Woodhead, "Contextualizing Human Dignity," 6. Cf. also Hans S. Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 139.

18 One should also note that as so often in the biblical traditions, things are not uncomplicated. For instance, the beautiful promises of God's presence, God's favour and God's redemption are complicated by the reference in v 3 that God sold the other nations (Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba) in exchange for Israel, raising questions with regard to whether all are then not equal in the eyes of God? In this regard, one should of course remember that this text that is intended to console a bereaved Israel is very much written from the perspective of Israel.

19 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 77-78.

this song that highlights God's act of creative redemption, the servant's worth is not based on his own accomplishments or abilities. The individual (or people Israel depending how one construes the identity of the servant) is said to be a dimly burning wick and a broken reed – metaphors that strongly underscore the idea that God's favour and God's activity is by no means depended on human ability or worth.<sup>20</sup>

For a despondent people who have been wounded by the hand of the powerful nations all around, these words serve as a source of hope. But more so, the perspective that human dignity is not dependent on anything humans are or do, is a profound belief that has important implications for how we view people of all walks of life, regardless of ability, moving the conversation away from achievement or utility value.<sup>21</sup> In our own society in which race matters, class matters, gender matters, sexual orientation matters, the very idea of one's createdness as foundational to be treated with honour and respect is a compelling thought indeed.

### 2.3 Human dignity in relation

A third important perspective to consider is that human dignity is inherently relational rather than individualistic in its orientation. Closely associated with the undeserved gift character highlighted above is that human dignity as conferred by the Creator God is not an end itself but has the purpose of affecting others.<sup>22</sup> As Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead formulate it: "Dignity consists not so much in self-possession as in dispossession, not so much in entering into

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20 The undeserved gift of God's creation/election/redemption is a theme that repeatedly recurs in the biblical traditions. R. Kendall Soulen rightly points out that "God's election repeatedly falls not to those who by reason or natural descent occupy positions of strength and superiority, but to the unlikely to the unpromising, and indeed to those who could not exist at all by dint of the power of natural descent alone. God's election singles out the younger son, the weaker combatant, the aged woman, the one without form or comeliness," "Cruising toward Bethlehem: Human Dignity and the New Eugenics," in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 108. Cf. also the important theme of power in the midst of vulnerability that underlie these metaphors. Because of God's spirit that works through him, the servant will not be broken or be quenched, rather he will faithfully continue his mission, Paul Hanson *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 244; "Divine Power in Powerlessness: The Servant of the Lord in Second Isaiah," in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology* (ed. Cynthia L. Rigby; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 192.

21 This perspective in particular has important implications for how we think about the emerging field of theology of Theology and Disability. For instance, in his essay on human dignity, Hans Reinders refers to the example of Kelley, a severely mentally challenged young woman. The fact that her value is not situated in her achievements nor in her cognitive abilities is responsible for the fact that we are encouraged to see Kelly as she is seen by God: "a child of God who is lovable in his eyes just like any other of his children," "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," 139. Cf. also the important work done by Thomas Reynolds in the book he wrote regarding his experience with his son Chris who is living with Asperger syndrome, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Wheaton, IL: Brazos, 2008). For the theme of disability in biblical studies cf. the work of Jeremy Schipper, *Disability and Isaiah's Suffering Servant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

2011); *Disability Studies and the Hebrew Bible: Figuring Mephibosheth in the David Story* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

22 Reinders, "Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency," 123. Reinders says the following: "To be a creature is to be created, and to be created is to be created with a purpose. Human beings who themselves stand in relation to their Creator God are placed in relationship that is indispensable for their very being. Cf. also Christopher Schwöbel who argues: "We are related in order to relate," "Recovering Human Dignity," in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 47.

oneself but in reaching out in love and care to the other.”<sup>23</sup>

One sees something of this thought illustrated in the figure of the servant introduced earlier. The special relationship between God and the servant, and the dignity bestowed on the servant in Isaiah 42:6 by God taking him by the hand and keeping him is not an end in itself. God’s special favour upon the servant has the distinct purpose of reaching out to others, establishing justice in the earth. So in v 7, the servant is to serve as “a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

It is noteworthy that the servant’s duty takes him to the worst instances of dehumanisation as imaged by the use of images such as dungeons and prisons. The servant’s actions are concerned with the dignity of others, to lift them up, to give life and light to those who are blind, freedom to those who find themselves in the oppressive circumstances – actions that would later be exemplified in the inaugural speech of Jesus of Nazareth (Lk 4:18-19 quoting Isa 61:1-2a).

However, as evident from the prophetic critique outlining social justice violations that threaten people’s wellbeing and existence, some members of the community have forgotten this communal aspect of human dignity. So we see numerous instances in which the community is impaired, in which the dignity of the most vulnerable members of the community (the widows, orphans and the poor) is violated. For instance, in Isaiah 3:14, the leaders of the community are accused of devouring the vineyard and harbouring the spoil of the poor in their homes. In the most violent language it is said that the leaders have crushed God’s people, and ground the face of the poor. These acts of violence and robbery and dispossession show a community in which human life, human worth and the wellbeing of the entire community is seriously threatened.

The communal aspect of human dignity furthermore implies that victim and perpetrator are inescapably connected so that both are in need of healing and restoration. We see for example in Isaiah 59:9 how the perpetrators of social justice violations also experience no justice when they say:

Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! There is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.

In this regard, our South African context with its painful history of apartheid is a prime example that it is not just the victim who is affected by injustice. So at the height of the struggle against apartheid, religious leaders, such as Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, insisted that liberation of black people would also lead to the restoration of the human dignity of the white members of society.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the relational aspect of human dignity is particularly evident in the context of worship where believers gather in the presence of God.<sup>25</sup> Worship offers the space in which people come together; in which the community is reminded of the communal aspect of their life together as

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23 Soulen and Woodhead, “Contextualizing Human Dignity,” 6. Hans Reinders describes this relational aspect of human dignity as follows in light of the example of the young mentally challenged woman, Kelley, mentioned before: “It is a dignity that is communicated to her [Kelley] in the acts of people caring about her and about her well-being.” And because people in the eyes of God are considered worthy, regardless of their abilities, dignity-respecting actions such as exemplified by Kelley’s caretakers are indeed like Reinders suggests, “a genuine act of communion that glorifies God the Father,” “Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency,” 138.

24 H. Russell Botman, “Covenantal Anthropology: Integrating Three Contemporary Discourses of Human Dignity,” in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 75.

25 Cf. Soulen and Woodhead’s assertion that “The indispensable context of human dignity is the church, the gathering of the faithful. Thus human dignity has an ecclesial rather than an individual horizon,” “Contextualizing Human Dignity,” 7.



well as how the regard they have received from God ought to extend to the others with whom they share space. In Isaiah 58 with its reference to the Sabbath and religious rituals such as the fast, it is thus so deeply ironic that the people engage in worship while continuing to disregard their fellow brothers and sisters in the form of the poor and the afflicted.

So we read in v 2 how they seek God's presence and search God's ways. And yet, reminiscent of the harsh words in Isa 1:11-15, condemning hypocrisy and worship without ethics, in Isaiah 58:3-7 Israel is indicted for engaging in religious practices such as the fast, withholding food on purpose while being oblivious to those who are truly hungry. It is deeply ironic that in v 3 God is said not to notice, which incidentally is the reason why the believers engaged in fasting in the first place. The problem with their actions is that their religious activities are completely self-serving, focusing on their own relationship with God without attending to the communal aspect of their life together. The community is indicted for oppressing their workers, for living in discord and according to evil inclinations towards one another. Poverty has become a yoke crushing the poor; the bonds of injustice making it impossible to escape.

### 3. VOCATION: CALLED TO REPAIR THE BREACH

The untenable situation of where the rights of some are violated according to which people in the community are still hungry, homeless, and without warm clothes calls for action on the part of the community. In Isaiah 58:12, we read the following charge: "you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." Israel is called to restore and mend the divided community – in this way, mirroring God's restorative action outlined in the second part of the book of Isaiah, adhering to a key aspect of the belief that humans are created in the image of God is that humans are called "to represent and resemble God in the world." As James Mays formulates this charge: "The Israelites' identity and destiny as the people of the Lord is a movement toward the realization of humanity's identity and destiny as image of God."<sup>26</sup> Writing from the South African context with its painful history of apartheid, the now rector of Stellenbosch University, Russell Botman shows how this act of healing broken relationships or reconciliation indeed forms an important aspect of human dignity. He writes as follows about the necessity of reconstituting or repairing the relationship: "Through the practice of reconciliation, the victim and the perpetrator seek mutual embrace and freedom from conflict."<sup>27</sup>

In this process, we can contemplate the role of the church of serving as the channel of "God's creative and re-creative action in constituting and reconstituting identity and dignity."<sup>28</sup> One avenue in which the church may live out this vocation is by helping people unlearn those thought-patterns that are at the root of dignity-defying actions such as racism, sexism and homophobia. At the heart of those actions that deny people's inherent worth as created in the image of God one finds a particular logic – what Peter Ochs calls a "logic of indignity," i.e. "humanly constructed diagrams of the rules of human reasoning" that in some way tarnish the image of God, causing people to suffer indignity. An important aspect of countering those situations of dehumanization is to interrupt the logic of indignity with a "logic of redemption,"

<sup>26</sup> Mays, "The Self in the Psalms and the Image of God," 39. Cf. also Welker who describes this vocation as "the involvement in the divine life itself, by way of being a witness, by becoming a mirror of God's purpose and glory," "Theological Anthropology versus Anthropological Reductionism," 330.

<sup>27</sup> Botman, "Covenantal Anthropology," 75.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Schwöbel's essay, "Recovering Human Dignity," in which he writes: "...the church of Christ is committed to sharing the situation of those who have lost their dignity in human eyes and to communicating to them the message that their dignity is re-created by the one who first bestowed it upon them. In communicating this promise in speech and action, the church is called to become the witness of the recovery of human dignity because humans are dignified by God," 57- 58.



challenging and changing existing (harmful) thought-patterns – in the case of Ochs “reading Scripture for the sake of repairing humanly constructed logics.”<sup>29</sup>

One sees how this regularly happens in the prophetic traditions, how the Isaianic prophet identifies the flawed logic of indignity and interrupts it with an alternative discourse that challenges the status quo. I mention three examples: First, in Isa 5:20, one finds a classic example of such a misguided logic when the Israelites are accused of calling evil good and good evil. According to this logic, they confuse light and darkness and bitter and sweet. As in the song of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7), these are people who can see putrid grapes and call them good; who see bloodshed and call it justice, or hear despairing cries and call it righteousness.<sup>30</sup> It is the same logic according to which the people whom the prophet addresses expand their houses, take food from the poor, and fast while others go hungry.<sup>31</sup>

These injustices grow out of people’s lack of insight; from their inability to see whom the God is they are supposed to worship. Like people who are intoxicated by wine and strong drink, who live a life of self-indulgence and exuberant festivity, they are oblivious about what is going on around them (vv 11-12).

A second example comes from Isaiah 58, which indicates that social justice concerns continue to be important in a post-exilic community. In this text, we see evidence of a flawed logic, identified and interrupted with an alternative way of thinking when the logic of worshiping and fasting while engaging in acts of oppressing one’s workers or living in strife with one’s fellow worshippers in vv 3-5 are called unconscionable. In vv 6-7, in a first-person voice, God gives new content to the fast that God prefers, so offering a counter-argument rooted in the way the world is supposed to be:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Finally, probably some of the best examples of identifying a misguided logic upholding injustice and offering an alternative way of engaging one another rooted in justice is to be found in eschatological texts such as Isaiah 65:17-23 (cf. also Isa 2:2-4, 11:1-10) in which the prophet imagines an alternative world.<sup>32</sup> In this world where there will be no more weeping or the outcry of which we read in Isa 5:7, there will be no more infant mortality or people dying before their time (v 20). People will have adequate access to housing and nutrition (v 21), the right to work and to see this work come to fruition (vv 21-23). However, one only has to read the chapters surrounding this beautiful vision to know that the prophet’s words are rooted in and emerge

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29 Peter Ochs describes this “logic” as the “visible mapping of patterns of activity in this world that would otherwise be merely implicit in our activities, and, in that sense, invisible,” “The Logic of Indignity and the Logic of Redemption,” in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 143.

30 LeClerq, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice*, 60.

31 Brevard S. Childs notes that what is at stake here is not “civil rights” but rather the “divine order of justice that, God established for his chosen people,” *Isaiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 48.

32 Fraser Watts writes that “enhanced respect for human dignity requires imagination. Such imagination can become impoverished or distorted in various ways, and we must locate current threats to human dignity more precisely to understand better exactly how failures of imagination bear on them.” Watts continues that if people are able to look differently one may succeed in opening up alternative possibilities in our world that were previously invisible to us, “Human Dignity: Concepts and Experiences,” in *God and Human Dignity* (Eds. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 259-260.

from a world that is marred by injustice, where people are robbed of their livelihood; where people's justice is perverted; where people are poor, homeless, and hungry.<sup>33</sup> It seems that it is exactly amidst assaults on human dignity that the prophet offers to us in Isaiah 65 a rich discourse regarding human dignity that upholds people's inherent right to live, to work and to eat. This vision of the world where dignity is the norm and not the exception has the effect of changing the conversation – and one would hope potentially also the way people think and act.

Many centuries have passed since the time the prophets writing in the name of Isaiah advocated for a more just society. And yet it seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same. All around us we find instances of where there is either a lack of imagination or a flawed imagination where racism, sexism, homophobia, elitism, ageism prevail. Our challenge is to help each other find creative ways to unlearn these negative thought patterns, substituting it with a logic of human dignity that is rooted in a particular interpretative context such as was outlined in terms of the prophet Isaiah that conceivably can help the church to live up to her vocation of mending the world.

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33 Blenkinsopp shows how this text holds up a "transformed existence in which past misfortunes will be forgotten" which is particularly poignant in light of the high mortality rate of especially young children, as well as the fact that the average life expectancy was 40 years for men and 30 years for women. *Isaiah 56-66*, 286-287; Carol L. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 112-113. Cf also John W De Gruchy, "A New Heaven and A New Earth: An exposition of Isaiah 65:17-25," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 105 (1999): 65-74.

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#### **KEY WORDS**

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#### **TREFWOORDE**

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