Dear Gerald,

Thank you for provoking me! Your paper, the way you presented it and the lively discussion which followed helped me to find my way as a Western exegete in the on-going discussion about exegesis, actualisation, and the influence of the present context. I learnt a lot about exegesis in the African context and about how it has to find its own way of liberating itself from the yoke of Western thinking, especially that of historical critical exegesis. On the other hand I felt offended, as if someone—like me—still working with this method has little to attribute to the issues that really matter. Perhaps my reaction should be seen as a sign of uncertainty in this regard. Is what I am doing as an exegete relevant for the situation I am living in? Am I really helping my students when I teach them in the use of the historical critical method?

You offer a clear picture of African biblical scholarship with unexpected but very useful attention to the very beginning of the African reception of the bible. In these first reactions by Africans to this holy object presented to them by the missionaries one may expect to come close to the roots of the genuine African contribution to the understanding and application of the bible as the living and constantly renewed “Word of God”. It also has become clearer to me how difficult it has been and still is for African exegetes to get rid themselves of the Western glasses that came with the bible, received as part of Western Christian culture. They first needed to learn to respect their own culture as not being inferior to Western culture and then to realise that they were free to choose their own way of reading the bible, taking serious their own context, finding answers to their own questions with their own suitable methods.

So far, so good. I could have merely acknowledged this as interesting information and establish that nowadays the relation between African and Western theologians is more balanced. However, you won’t let me! You have made it clear to me that this would be
another example of Western arrogance: “let the Africans do it their own way, we stick to our trusted, scientifically more trustworthy methods of exegesis”. Western exeges should pay more attention to what is going on in Africa and learn from it. One could compare it to the fact that nowadays the missionaries come from Africa to the secularised European countries.

You make a number of sharp statements about the differences between African and Western exeges. Using the distinction of life interests and interpretative interests you maintain that Western exeges are primarily concerned with the latter, whereas their African colleagues are only satisfied with exegetical work when both interests are served. Related to this is that African exeges are more open to observing that they interpret the bible out of and for their own context. In this regard they are more honest than most Western scholars. Of course, these are sweeping statements that can be modified in different situations, both in African and Western biblical scholarship in their manifold representations. That does not alter the fact that you let me look in a mirror and that I do not like what I see. Is this because it is a distorting mirror or is there more truth in this picture than I am happy to admit?

Pondering over this (lack of) honesty in biblical studies I realised that this is part of an old debate initiated among others by John A. T. Robinson (Honest to God, 1962). Apparently it is something that every new generation of biblical scholars has to go through, taking into account the changed context they live in. A good of example of this I found in the presidential address delivered by John J. Collins on the SBL meeting of 2002 about the legitimation of violence in the bible. The problem was not new, but after the confrontation with religiously sanctioned excessive violence in the heart of the relatively peaceful Western culture on September 11, 2001 it became a question that was no longer academic. In his answer Collins also calls for honesty: “The least that should be expected of any biblical interpreter is honesty”, that is, that he/she should be prepared to admit that some texts in the bible are morally offensive. In his view the biblical critic has the task to show that it is an illusion that biblical texts would have authority transcending human discussion and argumentation.

Inspired by your paper, by the Stellenbosch conference, and by a church service in the township of Khayelitsha, I now want to find my own way in these matters. I take up the challenge, try to be as open as possible acknowledging the influence of my own context