CHAPTER FOUR

KEY CONCEPTS IN THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN AFRICAN AND EUROPEAN BIBLICAL SCHOLARS

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One of the specific objectives of the Stellenbosch conference was to discuss the relation between exegesis and actualisation. In what follows, I wish to present a number of the main outlines of those discussions. Four key concepts will be passed in review: context, exegetical methods, actualisation and the reader(s). In the process, I will not limit myself strictly to a summary of the dialogue, but will also outline the broad framework within which the Stellenbosch conference took place. By doing so, I hope to provide the reader an insight into the global developments in the discussion on exegesis and actualisation.

Context

Over the past few decades a great deal of writing and thinking was done on the concept of ‘context’. In Latin America, various attempts were made to describe one’s own reality by means of Marxist-inspired categories. In Africa and Asia a ‘post-colonial’ outlook on reality has played a significant role in reading the bible. Although such forms of ‘contextual bible reading’ rapidly created a furore in the past few decades, we can simultaneously observe that the manner in which biblical scholars refer to ‘the context’ also arouses criticism. The concept as such is relatively vague, partly because it is not always clear whether it is a more descriptive or a more normative description of ‘reality’.1 Below, I will limit myself to discussing three specific hermeneutic meanings of context: (a) the society in which the

1 See the essay by Louis Jonker in this collection in which he distinguishes seven different meanings of the ‘context’ concept in what can be considered an attempt to create some clarity in the discussion.
participants live, (b) the scholarly context in which the participants are rooted, and, (c) the world of the reader(s) to which biblical scholars direct themselves. This section revolves around an exploration of the first two meanings of context. In section four, I will discuss the context of the reader(s) in more depth.

It is self-evident that ‘context’ plays an important role in the reflection on exegesis and actualisation. Indeed, explanation and interpretation of the bible do not occur in a vacuum, but are partially determined by tradition and culture. In the Western European contributions the understanding was conveyed that the Aufklärung propagated a bible reading method intensely focused on what the text meant originally. Within that tradition the call for the current meaning of the bible has by and large, been discarded as unscholarly. African participants emphasised that their outlook on exegesis and actualisation is partially a response to the ‘non-contextual’ manner in which white missionaries introduced the bible in Africa. Only after decolonisation in the 1960s did people in Africa begin to read the bible against the background of their own context. In addition, participants from South Africa indicated that in their own country there is an enormous need to read the bible from the perspective of the pain that the previous system of Apartheid continues to inflict to this day.

However important the historical and social context may be, this does not mean that every context design will wash a priori. Makhosazana Nzimande, a black female biblical scholar from South Africa, argued for reading the bible from a post-colonial and post-apartheid perspective. She emphasised the point that even in the new South Africa, black women are still not subjects but objects, among other reasons, because, among other reasons, they are forced to generate wealth for whites with their labour. Biblical scholars must make an effort to give these repressed women a vote, so that they can become the subject of their own history to a greater extent. From the point of view of some African participants, such an approach runs the risk of setting

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2 It may be appropriate to use the word ‘context’ only in the plural. After all, there is no single context at issue. However, at such a conference, attended by biblical scholars from two different continents and cultures, a certain reductionism of ‘the Western European and ‘the African’ context is practically inevitable.

3 Relatively little research has been done on the question the extent to which a social context influences biblical scholarship views. Among other sources, see the interesting book by Sandys-Wunsch (2005) on this subject.

4 See the essay by Makhosazana Nzimande in this collection.