Dear Frances,

Many thanks for your paper entitled, “Quo Vadis, Feminist Scholarship? Reflections from the Threshold between African and European Biblical Exegesis”, in which you so carefully and in such a vulnerable way, search for your place in the scholarly and existential spectrum of female Western and Post-colonial traditions. This really is an example of how our scholarly experience can be mixed-up and completely influenced by our everyday lives. We as biblical scholars often fail to separate the two, without noticing or even realising how strongly under the surface such influences are at work. The hidden power of everyday struggles and problems, as huge as they are in the post-colonial context can no longer be denied, and that is what you have so clearly revealed in the account of your personal and scholarly quest.

First, I wish to tell you a few things about my background and the reason why I am glad to be able to write a sororal letter as a reaction to your paper. From 1980–1985, I lived and worked in Suriname, one of the former Dutch colonies. I got in touch with a group of Surinamese (mostly black) theologians and learnt a lot about the personal impact of post-colonial relations in the personal lives of my (male) friends. I read Franz Fanon’s The Damned of the Earth and as for power-relations I thought in terms of Franz Fanon. In his words, Black people who behave in a ‘White’ way have a ‘colonised consciousness’. For me, White women, who accepted a subordinate role regarding men, also had a ‘colonised consciousness’. During those years, I soon realised, although I guess, in a less confronting way than you, that I could not do very little with regards to my being in solidarity with my Black friends. I have a white skin and a Dutch passport. I could have changed my passport, but not my obviously white skin and moreover, my deeply Western consciousness. So, in a painful way I noticed that my solidarity necessarily could only be free of obligations.

When back in the Netherlands, I wrote my doctoral dissertation and got acquainted with feminist approaches, which taught me that
there is no such thing as an objective way of reading the bible. In those days (1992), there was a Women’s Synod being held in the Netherlands. Many rumours circulated concerning supposed clashes between the White and Black women delegates present, the White women pretending to be sympathetic with the Black women. The Black—partly womanist—women postulated that their positions and struggles made them understand themselves as Black Women facing Whites, more than as Women (whether White or Black) facing Men. The White Women felt offended in their consciousness of solidarity. During this Synod, post-colonialism was stronger than feminism.

Regarding my own position, I was particularly stuck by the same powerlessness I felt in your paper. Like you, I can understand that female African scholars want to rule their own scholarly field. My understanding and solidarity as a White Dutch Women can only be a cheap reaction, because I have not experienced all the pains and struggles that a Black Woman can go through living in the African context. Nevertheless, it serves to convince, when you describe your own liminal position, looking at both sides of the threshold and accepting that our solidarity as White Western Women is not always welcome, because it can be viewed as being maternalistic. By not making the threshold a part of our refuge, but a place of strength, it seems to me something worthwhile to be tried out.

As to historical criticism and exegesis of Women, after reading your letter, I pondered a lot about methods and their outcomes. During my studies, I was educated in a Dutch variant of the New Criticism. During this time, I was connected to a politically leftist view and an awareness of post-colonial relationships. On the other hand, historical criticism always seemed connected to politically conservative standpoints. When Karl Barth’s (historical-critical) teachers did not attempt to protest against World War I, he connected the theological method to the political and sought out a new method of reading.

In recent years, together with German feminist biblical scholars, I noticed that it was, as you also have mentioned, the other way around, whereby the historical-critical approach offers opportunities to investigate the circumstances of Women in biblical times. On the other hand, in the Netherlands there is the biblical scholar Mieke Bal, who traces via her focalisation method (a new variant of the New Criticism) hidden voices of women within the biblical texts.

At our Stellenbosch Conference, in conversation with Louis Jonker, I noticed that the approach of the New Criticism within the South