Dear Jurie,

It was a great pleasure for me to listen to you in Pietermaritzburg last year. It is an even greater pleasure to read your paper entitled, “Africa and the Future of Our Scholarly Past”. Your paper is a plea for the appropriation of the critical intellectual tradition developed mainly in Western Europe from the Eighteenth century onwards. This makes me proud because I see myself as a part of this tradition.

I could stop agreeing with you that it is necessary to adopt the historical critical method in order to understand the Old Testament in an adequate way. I will not do this however, not because I disagree with you, but because I am not sure whether I am allowed to do so. Let me use a comparison. The task of an exegete may be compared to that of a translator. In order to translate a text from one language to another one must know the original language as well as the target language. Ordinarily, translators are taken from the realm of the target language, because only a mother tongue speaker possesses what one might call natural competence. Of course, although translators must be experts in the original language, they must also study their mother tongue as well.

Exegetes are translators. They should be experts in the ‘language’ of the Old Testament. Of course, ‘language’ here means more than the philology of biblical Hebrew. It is a metaphor for the whole world of the Old Testament. Exegetes should be experts in the history of the Ancient Near East, in the social institutions of ancient Israel, in literary forms and traditions, in the religions of antiquity, and so on. The more perfect they are, the better they are able to understand the ‘original language’. But their task does not end in understanding the original language. They have to translate it into their ‘mother tongue’. Again, ‘mother tongue’ is a metaphor for all that constitutes our actual world. Although we are all experts in our mother tongues, a translator has to study her or his own mother tongue in order to
produce good translations. By way of analogy therefore, an exegete should study her or his own society, religion, literature, etc., in order to translate the old texts in an adequate manner.

We have now reached the point where our views may differ. I agree with you that every exegete has to know the ‘language’ of the Old Testament. This is independent from the part of the world in which she or he lives, independent from what her or his mother tongue is. However, exegetes have to translate the ‘language’ of the Old Testament in their different cultures. Here I can only speak of my own culture, or to be more precise, from that part of the academic sector that I call my own. In this sector, it would be impossible to translate the Old Testament without using the historical-critical methods generated by the academic world of European and later American universities. I gather from your paper that you understand yourself as being part of the same academic world. I have learned from my two visits to South Africa that the academic world in Stellenbosch, Pietermaritzburg, or Pretoria (where I have not yet been) is part of this realm. You are thus totally right to speak of “our scholarly past” in the headline of your paper. It is yours in South Africa as it is ours in Germany. As such, it has a future, in South Africa as well as in Germany.

I presume that amongst our cultures there are sectors which ‘speak another language’. As exegetes, we have to translate the Old Testament for them as well. We must not forget the ‘original language’ to translate our texts for these sectors; otherwise, instead of offering a translation, we may be found guilty of transporting our own ideas! As a result, we must be ready to learn even more languages, the languages of these sectors of our respective cultures.

The question of where these sectors are to be found will be answered in different ways in South Africa and in Germany. There will also be different answers to the question of how dominant the academic sector in a given culture should, or should not be. These are discussions where a European colleague can only take the role of a spectator. I do not see it as my task to give you good counsel. I read your paper as a plea for the position that stresses the academic sector. I read it with great empathy, but would not like to take sides in your discussion, because it is an internal African discussion.