My main presentation at the Stellenbosch conference focused on the relationship between African and European interpretation of the bible. I had been asked by the organisers to read an introductory paper, addressing whether a dialogue between African and European biblical studies actually makes sense. And, having explored some examples from colonial and post-colonial times, I offered a rather pessimistic conclusion. We have to acknowledge that the relationship between the two continues to be influenced by power structures of the colonial past.

At the end of the conference I was asked to reconsider my pessimism, in the light of the experiences of the conference. This was in many ways a fair request, not only because the very idea of the conference was to build bridges between African and European biblical studies, but even more because the conference turned out to become one of those rare occasions where open-minded scholars actually are willing to be touched and influenced by each other’s academic and existential concerns. The following few pages are therefore an attempt from my side to follow up the atmosphere of the conference. I will revisit the pessimism I expressed in my introductory paper and see whether I am prepared to modify it, taking into account what I learned throughout the conference.

What I will say falls in three parts: First, I will share some thoughts about the relationship between the two key concepts ‘dialogue’ and ‘interpretative power’ as I have seen it reflected in a totally different context, namely, the institutional interaction between church and synagogue in Rome. Second, I will use this Fremdkörper from Rome as a backcloth to highlight the corresponding (I would say) institutional interaction between African and European biblical studies. And third, I will argue that it is our responsibility as concerned African and European scholars to create contexts for a dialogue.
**Dialogue and Interpretive Power: Church and Synagogue in Rome**

I normally visit Rome once a year, for research purposes. When in Rome, I do as the Romans, and walk along the Tiber. I follow the street of Lungotevere, from Castel Sant’Angelo to Sinagoga di Roma, the Great Synagogue of Rome. The synagogue was built in the early years of the twentieth century, at a corner of the old Jewish quarter. From the sixteenth century on the Jews of Rome were forced to live in the Ghetto, a special quarter along the Tiber. On the Sabbath, selected members of the Jewish community were compelled to attend services—with clear, but not necessarily very successful conversionist sermons—in a neighbouring church (Roth 1972:249–50). The church is still there, just across the road from the synagogue. Its old function vis-à-vis the Jewish community is still visible, in the form of a text written above the main entrance. The text is written in Latin, of course, but also in Hebrew, as some kind of contextualisation, it being a quotation from the prophet Isaiah:

> I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually (Isa. 65:2–3a NRSV).

Let us for a second or two try to imagine some members of the Jewish community of Rome, compelled to attend a service in this church on the Sabbath, and then reflect on the relationship between the concepts ‘dialogue’ and ‘interpretative power’. The question to be raised is then whether the Isaiah text on the front wall of the church had a potential of creating a dialogue between the Christian and Jewish communities of Rome, say, a couple of hundred years ago? I would argue that it did not. The fact that the two religious communities share some of the same classical religious texts is overshadowed by an obvious lack of balance between the two communities with regard to interpretative power. A couple of hundred years ago the Christian community in Rome had the political, economic and institutional control of the interpretative context, and the Jewish community was consequently and effectively silenced. In other words, a sharing of texts is not enough to create a dialogue. A dialogue also requires a balance with regard to interpretative power.

After the Italian unification in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the traditional discrimination against the Jews came to an end, and at the beginning of the twentieth century the Great Synagogue...