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Ihr IxTheo-Team

A Fraternal Letter from Rainer Kessler, Marburg (Germany), to Jurie le Roux, Pretoria (South Africa)

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 on “Africa and the future of our scholarly past”. Your article is a plea for the appropriation of the critical intellectual tradition developed mainly in Western Europe from the 18th century onwards. This makes me proud because I see myself as a part of this tradition. Now I could stop here 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, not because I disagree with you, but because I am not sure whether I am allowed to do it. Let me use a comparison. The task of an exegete may be compared with the one of a translator. To be able to translate a text from one language to another one must know the original language as well as the target language. Normally, translators are taken from the realm of the target language, because only in your mother tongue you have something one might call natural competence. Of course, translators must be experts in the original language. However, they must study their mother tongue, too.

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. Though we are all experts in our mother tongues, a translator has to study his or her mother tongue in order to produce good translations. In analogy an exegete should study her or his actual society, religion, literature, etc., to translate the old texts in an adequate manner.

We now have 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 his or her mother tongue is. However, exegetes have to translate the “language” of the Old Testament in their different cultures. Here I can only speak for my culture, or even only for the academic sector of my culture. 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 learn from your paper that you understand yourself as part of the same academic world. I have learned from my two visits in South Africa that the academic world in Stellenbosch, Pietermaritzburg, or Pretoria (where I have not yet been) indeed is part of this realm. So you are 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, too, in South Africa as well as in Germany.

I suppose, however, that in our cultures there are sectors which “speak another language”. As exegetes we have to translate the Old Testament for them too. We must not forget the “original language” to translate our texts for these sectors. Otherwise we would not translate them but transport our own ideas. We must, however, be ready to learn some more languages, the languages of these sectors of our 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 be or not be. These are discussions where a European friend can only take the role of the 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.

I am convinced that the best way to learn from each other is to listen to the other. Thank you again for your contribution. It helped me to formulate my own position in a clearer way than I would have done before.

With fraternal greetings from Marburg to Pretoria,

yours Rainer