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Interview with Prof. Francois Tolmie

LS: How do you feel at this stage of your life?

FT: I am truly grateful and fulfilled – grateful for my wonderful wife and the three gifted children we have, and for the privilege I had of turning my passion into a full-time career. I feel fulfilled, as I have accomplished most of the goals that I set for myself in life.

I was born in Keetmanshoop, in Namibia, where my parents served in the ministry. Their journey led them to Stilbaai, a small town without electricity back then, where I began my schooling. Subsequently, we settled in Oudtshoorn, where I completed my primary school education and the initial year of my secondary school education. Our next destination was Middelburg (in the Karoo) where I matriculated in 1977.

As I planned to follow in the footsteps of my father and become a minister, I enrolled for a three-year BA Admission degree at the University of the Orange Free State in Bloemfontein the following year. At that time, one had to move either to Stellenbosch or to Pretoria to do the final four years of postgraduate theological training required for ministry in my denomination, and my initial plan was to do so at Stellenbosch. However, in 1979, our University decided to inaugurate a Faculty of Theology, allowing me to stay on in Bloemfontein. What began as a planned three-year stint eventually evolved into a lifelong connection with the University of the Free State. I transitioned from undergraduate to postgraduate studies and was appointed, in 1990, as Senior Lecturer in New Testament Studies, and thus began the forging of a deep-rooted bond with this institution.

LS: Why the interest in theology? Why this particular discipline?

FT: My father was in the ministry, and, for some reason, I never considered any other occupation, always wanting to become a minister myself. I became a New Testament scholar primarily because of the influence of one of my Greek lecturers, Prof. Kobus J. van W. Cronjé. During my undergraduate studies, he introduced us to the fascinating field of classical rhetoric in one of the third-year Greek modules. It was such an intriguing approach to the reading of texts that I eventually specialised in the rhetorical analysis of the Pauline writings. Under his guidance, I completed a Master's and a PhD in Greek, focusing on the Letter to the Galatians. Prof. Cronjé also encouraged me to study General Theory of Literature, which exposed me to the discipline of narratology – the academic study of narratives. This newfound knowledge greatly influenced my academic journey. Subsequently, while pursuing a DTh in New Testament under the guidance of Prof. Jan A. du Rand, I integrated narratological insights into my research on the Farewell Discourses in the Gospel of John. This approach expanded into my second field of specialisation – the narrative-critical investigation of the Gospel of John.

My research focused mainly on two areas: the narratological analysis of the Gospel of John and the rhetorical analysis of the Pauline letters. In the case of the Gospel of John, I initially conducted a detailed study of the Farewell Discourses (John 13-17) from a narratological perspective (published as: *Farewell and discipleship: John 13:1-17:26 in narratological perspective*). Following this, my focus shifted to examining the role played by characters in the Gospel such as God, “the Jews”, Peter, Pilate, Judas, and the royal official. I also co-edited a book on characters in the Gospel of John (*Character studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative approaches to seventy figures in John*) with Profs Steven Hunt (Gordon College, Wenham MA, USA) and Ruben Zimmermann (Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany). We engaged approximately 40 Johannine scholars from four continents in a three-year research project. This resulted in a comprehensive study of all the characters in the Gospel, including minor characters mentioned only briefly.

In my other field of specialisation, I initially conducted a rhetorical analysis of the Letter to the Galatians. Soon after it was published (*Persuading the Galatians: A text-centred rhetorical analysis of the Letter to the Galatians*), I was appointed as Dean of the Faculty of Theology and, because I would have less time for research, I decided to study the rhetoric of the Letter to Philemon next, given its brevity. This turned out to be a much longer journey than I had anticipated, as I accidentally stumbled into another

field in our discipline, namely reception history, when I began to read the earliest commentaries on Philemon (starting from Ambrosiaster). The insights gained from this investigation were compiled and published in a book titled *Pointing out persuasion in Philemon*; however, I have not yet reached the end of this academic journey.

Over the years, I have benefited immensely from the insights of other New Testament scholars – from their publications, but also from interactions with them at conferences and at scholarly societies such as the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, the Society of Biblical Literature, the European Association of Biblical Studies, the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, the Colloquium Ioanneum, and the International Colloquium for the Study of the New Testament.

During our time in Bloemfontein, we were members of two congregations: Langenhovenpark and Universitas. In both, I served on the Church Council, and, in Universitas, I also conducted Bible Schools focusing on topics from the New Testament. Beyond the local congregation, I engaged in broader church work as a member of the ATBV, a committee of the General Synod dedicated to Bible translation and interpretation. Moreover, I dedicated time to community service as member of the Board of ENGO in the Free State. This experience was particularly meaningful as we had to navigate numerous challenges and financial shortages, striving to provide essential services to thousands of disadvantaged individuals across various communities.

Additionally, I endeavoured to apply insights from my academic work to benefit the community. I participated in several Bible translation projects, including the Afrikaans Bible for the Deaf, an Afrikaans interlinear Bible, the *Afrikaanse Standaard Vertaling*, and the *2021 Direkte Vertaling*. Furthermore, I collaborated with my friend, Prof. Jan G. van der Watt in translating numerous Old and New Testament apocryphal writings into Afrikaans (*Apokriewe: Ou en Nuwe Testament*) – a project from which I learned a great deal.

Serving as Dean of the faculty from 2008 to 2013 afforded me a first-hand perspective on the intricate workings of a large institution. It was a privilege to witness the efficiency, meticulous planning, and dedication required to run such a massive organisation successfully. During this time, the Faculty also had to face a challenge by Prof. Jonathan Jansen, the vice-chancellor, to initiate a transformative process at an epistemological level within the Faculty. This task sent us on a difficult yet stimulating journey of adaptation and academic and personal growth. Prof. Rian Venter, our Vice-Dean, played a pivotal and decisive role in this endeavour, guiding

us through various strategic planning sessions and workshops. We made significant progress. The Faculty also published two substantial academic books (under his editorship): *Transforming theological knowledge: Essays on theology and the university after apartheid* (2012), and *Theology and the (post)apartheid condition: Genealogies and future directions* (2016). These publications marked important milestones in our pursuit of academic and social transformation within the Faculty and their impact is still visible in what happens in our Faculty now.

LS: Plans for retirement?

FS: We have recently relocated to Mossel Bay. I plan to dedicate more time to my wife and loved ones. Academically, I will continue as a research fellow with the department, focusing predominantly on my research on the Letter to Philemon.