



SMITTEN BY BERLIN  
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I didn’t want to leave. Still miss the place. I didn’t even want to submit this report, which meant having to take stock of the year and declare it now, finally, *zu Ende*. Indeed, I am relieved that Angelika Leuchter, the patient editor of the *Jahrbuch*, has not yet commissioned a hit squad or sent a contingent of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to wrench it from my reticent hands. I loved the year that I spent in Grunewald at the *Wissenschafts-*

*kolleg*. That is not to say that it was all easy. My research is in the area of academic religious studies, and I specialize in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East. There were times that I felt like an alien in a strange land attempting to explain my interest in the literature, religion, and law of ancient Mesopotamia and Israel, let alone why they mattered in terms of current academic questions and concerns. Perhaps this pushed me even further to try to make these connections clearer in my work. But I found the year liberating and transformative. In part, it was simply being away from the daily academic grind of teaching and service, of academic politics, of normal daily life. Primarily, it was the combination of the freedom to do my own work, the support for that work, the individuals who made up the community that was our *Jahrgang* (both Fellows and staff), and the way that conversations with colleagues stimulated my writing and thinking.

I arrived in Berlin at the end of August, on a Friday of pouring rain, with the hope of accomplishing the following goals:

- To finish two manuscripts that were each in progress: one for Cambridge called *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel*, on the shift from collective to individual punishment; and the second, a selection of my articles to be published in updated form for Mohr Siebeck, called “*The Right Chorale*”: *Studies in Biblical Law and Interpretation*;
- The “formal” project for the year, to complete a book for Oxford, to be called, *Revelation and Redaction: The Role of Intellectual Models in Biblical Studies*;
- To improve my German, especially for speaking (I had spent a year in Germany in 1993, arriving with almost no speaking ability, and had become decent at speaking, but had little practice since then);
- To explore Berlin, with its urban diversity and its rich history.

As my mother used to say, however, *Mensch tracht, un Gott lacht* (Yiddish; in German, *der Mensch denkt, Gott lenkt*), which is to say, “Man proposes and God disposes.” It was impossible, of course, to do all of this, and in some ways I simply allowed myself to become as immersed as possible in my work. I threw myself first into the intensive German course during September, but found it more difficult for things to click than I had anticipated. At the same time, my gut was pulling me in another direction, that of the speaker in Andrew Marvell’s *carpe diem* poem, “To His Coy Mistress”: “But at my back I always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.” I basically withdrew from the German course and decided instead to focus my energy on completing the two manuscripts. Still, the issue of my German skills became one of the more consuming concerns for me during the year, one that I

thought about almost on a daily basis. Whenever possible, I spoke German to the German-speaking Fellows, and the ability to have intellectual discussions and friendships with them, in German, was one of the most rewarding components of the year. The same was true with my relationships with the Institute staff, and it became a way to enter more meaningfully into their world and into Berlin. In the end, I never made it to the intended, formal project, and must still write my editor to request an extension. Each of the two projects that I assumed would go quickly grew much larger, in part because of the stimulation I received from my Fellows.

A conversation with Patricia Kitcher, in my intensive German course, led to my asking her to look at something I had already written on Kant. I saw a connection between the notion of individual responsibility that is developed by the prophet Ezekiel (ch. 18), and Kant's conception of human freedom. That conversation led to my restructuring the chapter I was working on and allowed me to give myself permission to explore something I had long been interested in. The original short paragraph became a new five-page section of the volume as I tried to think through not only the similar ideas about moral freedom and choice in both authors but why these connections had not already been recognized within intellectual history: how the gap between the disciplines obscures knowledge. The section that resulted is one of the parts of the book that I am proudest of. Similar things happened when I asked Rüdiger Campe to look at some of my ideas about the connections between Jewish literary history and the function of the canon in creating a notion of German identity prior to the existence of a unified state. In this case, simply being able to see that my ideas made sense to a Germanist at the very point where I was treading new ground and taking risks, allowed me to continue with renewed confidence.

The volume that eventually resulted from this work, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel*, seeks to open a dialogue between academic biblical studies and the broader humanities and argues that the concept of "canon" should properly serve as a meeting point for interdisciplinary scholarship. This theme reflects the vision of the Wissenschaftskolleg itself, and I felt that the volume was embedded there. The Preface marks the location of its genesis in other ways as well, including the memorial to Reich Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau – erected where he was assassinated on June 24, 1922 – which I passed daily, crossing over Koenigsallee to walk up Wallotstraße. The second volume, *"The Right Chorale": Studies in Biblical Law and Interpretation* (Mohr Siebeck), consists of twelve previously published articles that have all been extensively updated and revised, so as to make a sustained statement about the nature of textuality in ancient Israel. Just days before

I left Berlin, a couple copies of each of the two volumes arrived in published form. It was a remarkable conclusion to the year to have them actually in my hands, and leave one of each for the wonderful staff of the Library.

I also worked on a couple of smaller projects during the year. I published a new version of an article examining the impact of National Socialism upon German biblical scholarship in the period from 1933–1945, with a focus on the history of the faculty of theology at the University of Jena. One of the Staff in the Admissions office, Francisco M. Casas, graciously helped me wend my way through the Thuringian bureaucracy in seeking permission to use archival photos from the period. I also made headway on a translation of and commentary upon an early essay by Goethe on the Decalogue, one that brings to light a series of long-lived but highly problematic cultural assumptions about the relation between Judaism and Christianity. In this work, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus provided stimulating responses and very helpful commentary.

Separate from the writing I was doing, I also worked hard on being able to present an academic paper in German, something that I had never done. Even with a prepared text, I found it challenging to read out loud and to get past my mixed Canadian-American accent. Some of the key technical terms in my field – words like *Sünder*, *Rechtsgeschichte* or *Keilschriftrecht* – seemed all but impossible for me to enunciate, as I tripped repeatedly over clusters of umlauts, sibilants, and pharyngeals. There was an imminent risk of causing lasting trauma either to the ears of my audience or my own throat. I am especially grateful to Sophia Pick who pushed me hard to learn how to project and to stay centered when I present in German. She conducted her coaching with both patience and humor, in a way that went beyond language skills to a larger concept of communication. In the end, I presented a full-length version of my Dienstagskolloquium *auf Deutsch* in both Göttingen and München. I still hope to improve my German, but these presentations to colleagues and students in their own language were an important source of accomplishment for me.

The relationships with both Fellows and staff were very rewarding, intellectually and personally. It began to feel like a community. There were some awkward moments, of course, but it was easy to see the camaraderie emerging: as barriers broke down at lunchtime, as people spoke, lingered, sought one another out, teased, and showed interest in matters of life and work. Care began to emerge and it became visible in the nature of the interactions, and it marked cohesion and connection at many levels. A number of potentially lasting friendships were forged during the year and I hope that they continue. Fellows who also worked in religion became especially important, in particular, Peter Schäfer and Denis

Thouard, and also Salman Bashier. But it was equally rewarding to discuss the problem of equality in biblical religion, or the sophisticated system of imperialism in Neo-Assyria, with Ron Rogowski, as a political scientist concerned with such issues in the modern period. Others Fellows became friends simply because of connecting easily, like Meenakshee Mukherjee or Hans Biesalski. There were too many people who mattered to name them all. Among the staff, Angelika Leuchter was a terrific neighbor to have in the adjacent office, and there were many conversations about real issues. I was also grateful for the way my girlfriend Hanne, who visited several times from Oslo and stayed for an extended period in the summer, was welcomed and made to feel at home.

The close-knit nature of the community at the *Wissenschaftskolleg*, which involved Fellows and their families, and which included the staff, was very distinctive. In my experience, “Princeton on the Spree” has an advantage over the Institute after which it first modeled itself, where the several Schools and greater numbers of Fellows make it more difficult to create a single integrated community. There were some disappointments. I didn’t take enough time off to explore Berlin properly, to really get to know it as a city. But entire days spent in museums or on tours of neighborhoods, guided by Susanne Muth or by Horst Bredekamp or simply making visits independently, were exhilarating. The greatest disappointment was that the year had to end.