

Gershom Scholem on his Studies in Munich (Retrospective Account, 1977)

Abstract

During the 1920s, topics of Jewish interest were typically pursued in other departments at German universities, including departments of Protestant and Catholic theology and of Oriental and Semitic studies. Chairs in Jewish studies were not introduced at German universities until the 1960s.

Source

In those days I came to reject the phenomenology of Husserl, though I had been greatly in sympathy with it for a few years, having been impressed by the very subtle *Logische Untersuchungen* [*Logical Investigations*]. But the lectures of Husserl's disciple Wilhelm Pfänder completely alienated me from this mode of thinking. In a public lecture—I myself was present—Pfänder performed the feat of making the existence of God (which I have never doubted) “visible” by phenomenological means. This was too much for me. His seminar also helped to drive me out of this circle. Once a dead serious discussion extended over several hours in the presence of some very penetrating minds (I still remember Maximilian Beck), concerning the question whether a fried fish was a fish or not. I should add, though, that Benjamin's intellectual perspective, with which I had such close contact in those years and which was the farthest thing imaginable from what one could call academic philosophy, prevented me from taking very seriously university teachers of philosophy who were not historians.

Thus, at Bäumker's advice I changed my major to Semitics. There I received a very friendly reception from Fritz Hommel (in whose readings of Arabic texts and seminar I was already enrolled), though Hommel had accepted a dissertation in Judaica only once in his long career. Bäumker and Hommel were already over sixty-five—the one a devout Catholic, the other an equally devout Protestant, a very pious Lutheran. Hommel was primarily an Assyriologist, but he was generous enough to exempt me from this particular area of Semitics and asked only that my major include Arabic and Ethiopian in addition to Hebrew and Aramaic, with which I was already conversant. In his life as a scholar he was at the center of numerous polemics. During the two and a half years that I was his student we were on the best of terms.

In the first winter semester in Munich the Catholic Old Testament scholar Göttberger announced a discussion course entitled “Readings in the Babylonian Talmud.” Together with Elsa Burchhardt and Rudolf Hallo, I went to see what the course would be like. All the other students were Catholic seminarians. I should point out here that the text of the Talmud has no punctuation, and one of the difficulties in the study of the Talmud is to determine whether one is dealing with a statement or a question. At the very beginning the professor made a bad blunder. I raised my hand and said: “Professor, that is not a statement but a question.” “How do you know?” asked the professor. “It says so in Rashi,” I replied, “and is a centuries-old tradition.” “Rabbinical sophistry!” With this the professor closed the discussion. Thus we realized with amusement that nothing was to be learned from that gentleman.

Source: Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem. Memories of my Youth*. Translated from the German by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1998, pp. 118–20.

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