

**Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Practice**

**Lecture & Seminar**

**Tuesday, 22 June 2010, 16.00 – 19.00**

Villa Jaffé, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, Wallotstraße 10

**Eliyahu Stern (Oxford)**

*Exegesis and the Location of the Modern  
Trajectories of Religious Reform in the Exegetical Work  
of the Gaon of Vilna and Moses Mendelssohn*

This seminar addresses the exegetical and political legacies of the two prominent Jewish figures in eighteenth-century Europe, Elijah ben Solomon of Vilna, known as the Gaon of Vilna, and Moses Mendelssohn, known as the Jewish Socrates. Typically, Elijah is cast as an arch-traditionalist of Eastern European Jewry, while Mendelssohn is portrayed as the beacon of the Jewish enlightenment in Western Europe. Upon careful examination it was Elijah's exegetical notion of *sensus literalis*, and not that of Mendelssohn, the Enlightener, which broke with previous forms of rabbinic interpretation. Whereas Mendelssohn is quick to defend the Sages' exegesis, Elijah unapologetically challenges the Rabbinic tradition. Contrary to the simplistic type-casting of these figures, Elijah the arch-"traditionalist" emerges as the critical and radical exegete vis-à-vis the rabbinic tradition, while Mendelssohn the "great reformer" emerges as more theologically cautious and conservative. This recasting calls into question the value of secularization theory in understanding the development and transformations of religious ideas.

Elijah's and Mendelssohn's exegetical practices are in large measure the result of the differences and similarities between eighteenth century Vilna and Berlin. Whereas Jews in Vilna lived as virtual majorities in relation to their Polish neighbors, in Berlin Jews lived as minorities. Being the leader of a culture that lived as a virtual majority afforded Elijah the security to adopt ideas that in other contexts would have been deemed religiously controversial. On the other hand, being the leader of a minority group, Mendelssohn was forced to defend Judaism and the rabbinic tradition against a radical Enlightenment and German biblical scholarship. Unlike Mendelssohn, Elijah was never hampered by the constraints of assimilation. The lack of a perceived intellectual threat provided Elijah an intellectual freedom not possessed by Mendelssohn who was under constant pressure to defend the rabbinic tradition for a largely Protestant German public. These different demographic realities created vastly different social and intellectual experiences, forcing us to reassess the nature and epicenter of modern Jewish history.

**Dr. Eliyahu Stern** is Junior William Golding Fellow at Brasenose College and a faculty member of the Oriental Institute at University of Oxford. In September he will assume the position of Assistant Professor of Modern Jewish Intellectual and Cultural History at Yale University. In 2008 he received his PhD from University of California, Berkeley, where he completed his dissertation on Elijah of Vilna. His research focuses on the transformation of traditional and secular worldviews in modernity. He is currently finishing a book on eighteenth-century Eastern European Jewry.

The project **Zukunftsphilologie** endeavours to promote and emphasize primary textual scholarship beyond the classical humanistic canon. In an age of advanced communication, intellectual specialization, and unprecedented migration of knowledge and people, the discipline of philology assumes new relevance. Zukunftsphilologie aspires to support research in neglected varieties of philology with the explicit aim to integrate, across the pre/modern divide, texts and scholarly traditions from Asia, Africa, the Middle East as well as from Europe itself.

"Zukunftsphilologie" refers to the polemic between the classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz and Friedrich Nietzsche around the method and meaning of classical studies. As a project it sees itself as part of a growing trend towards a more global intellectual history. It is inspired in particular by the work of Sheldon Pollock and the late Edward Said.

In order to promote historically-conscious philology, Zukunftsphilologie will foster research in the following areas: genealogies and transformations of philological practice, philology's place in the system of knowledge (e.g. its relation to science, theology and jurisprudence), and philology and the university. Furthermore, Zukunftsphilologie aims to support critical reviews of historical and philological practice. In revisiting important "philological wars", the goal is not to merely evaluate the argumentative worth of these debates, but to reflect on the wider cultural and political context in which these "philological wars" emerged and how they have shaped our knowledge of the past.

Zukunftsphilologie is an initiative of the Seminar for Semitistik and Arabistik at the Freie Universität Berlin, and envisages the establishment of a Berlin-based research group of philologists. The project is coordinated by Angelika Neuwirth and Islam Dayeh (both Freie Universität Berlin) and supported by the Forum Transregionale Studien.

The **Forum Transregionale Studien** is a new research platform of the Land of Berlin designed to promote research that connects systematic and region-specific questions in a perspective that addresses entanglements and interactions beyond national, cultural or regional frames. The Forum works subsidiarily to already existing institutions and networks engaged in transregional studies and is supported by an association of the directors of research institutes and networks mainly based in Berlin. It started its activities in 2010 by identifying and supporting three transregional research projects based in Berlin research institutions in the different fields of Law, Philology, and Urban Sociology. The Forum Transregionale Studien is funded by the Senate of Berlin.

For more information please see [www.forum-transregionale-studien.de](http://www.forum-transregionale-studien.de)