

GELLER RETIREMENT TALK

Apr 2017

I first encountered Stephen A. Geller in an article assigned by Ed Greenstein in a graduate class in 1987 or '88. The article was "The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in Biblical Narrative," published in the *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 14 (1984), a journal edited by Ed Greenstein and David Marcus. I thought it was brilliant, and eagerly read the companion article that came out in *Prooftexts* a few years later, "The Sack of Shechem: The Use of Typology in Biblical Covenant Religion." When Ed Greenstein told us that Stephen Geller was joining the faculty of the JTS Bible Department in 1991, I was thrilled and a little intimidated.

In Dr. Geller's classes, we started taking notes the minute he walked into the room and didn't stop until he walked out. There was no greeting or introduction, he would just start teaching. His facial expression would never change. Every once in a while he would make a joke, deadpan, and a minute or two later one or more of us would get it and chuckle. We know this because you can hear it on tapes some students made of his classes, to supplement our notes.

Once, in a class on Egyptian mythology, Dr. Geller left his notes home by accident, and had to read the hieroglyphs directly from the text. No problem.

Another time, someone asked a question and Dr. Geller answered it by drawing the relevant inscription freehand on the board, from memory. In Egyptian hieroglyphic.

When it was time for me to work on my dissertation, I asked the Graduate Dean for advice on choosing a doctoral advisor. I was taken aback when Dr. Garfinkel suggested Stephen Geller. Even though I had taken several classes with him, I was sure he didn't even know my name. Dr. Garfinkel was persistent. Finally, I remember saying that I would just have to get used to working with an advisor who never made direct eye contact.

Dr. Geller was the perfect doctoral advisor for me. He was supportive of my literary approach, and encouraged my effort to find my own voice. But it was not always smooth sailing.

The first time I brought a section of my draft to discuss, I was shocked when Dr. Geller intoned in a stentorian voice, "If you persist in this line of thinking, you'll never get a degree from this institution!"

Tears came to my eyes, I was crushed. It turned out he had a problem with the wording of a single sentence, which we quickly revised.

I learned to take Dr. Geller's dramatic statements in stride. Good thing, too. The night before my dissertation defense Dr. Geller told Dr. Greenstein and Dr. Marcus that he wasn't sure I had made the case for my thesis. This is NOT something an advisor should announce on the eve of a defense. Luckily, I didn't know about it until after my dissertation was accepted, with distinction.

After the defense, Dr. Geller told me I didn't have to address him formally any more, since we were now peers. He said, "My first name is Stephen, but even my mother calls me Geller." Geller it has been ever since.

Geller's own doctoral advisor at Harvard was Frank Moore Cross, who came to speak at a JTS graduation sometime after I was already finished with my degree and teaching at JTS. I was so excited at the prospect of meeting him. I told Geller that Cross was my academic grandfather, since Geller was my Doctor Father. Geller warned me NOT to say anything like that to Frank Moore Cross. So I didn't.

But when Geller introduced us and mentioned that I had been his doctoral student, Cross threw open his arms and said to me, "Then you are my grand-daughter!"

Geller is eccentric, but he is also generous with his knowledge, reading drafts of my work in progress, even now, and suggesting citations from his prodigious memory. Geller is a loyal friend and colleague. He's always there with a wry quip or a dour comment on the day's news.

Geller is also a passionate collector of ceramics, paintings, and other objects. Before I left for a trip to China in 2009, Geller schooled me in the ceramic styles and glazes of 2000 years of Chinese art. The final exam was at the Met, where Geller had me talk him through the exhibit on China ceramics.

I still carry around my crib notes!

One recent experience illustrates Geller's mastery of global art forms as well as his perverse generosity:

A month or two ago I returned from a trip to Southeast Asia, an area heavily influenced by Indian traditions in religion and art.

When I returned I had a small gift for him, a book on Angkor Wat, renowned for its intricate sandstone high reliefs and for the many

portraits of Hindu and Buddhist deities cavorting on the walls in syncretistic profusion.

At the same time, Geller offered me a piece of a sandstone relief, a head of a deity carved in the style of Hindu temples, that he had found in a local thrift store. (I had to go halfway around the world--and HE found it down the block from his house!)

Geller said it was in keeping with his practice of giving his friends souvenirs from places they had visited and returned from.

When I thanked him, Geller said that he gives all his friends these souvenirs, not from any particular feeling of affection, but just as a way to get rid of his stuff, to clear a space for something new. He says it makes his friends feel happy, and allows him to feel virtuous.

Whatever his motivation, I treasure my sandstone carving, and I am grateful for my friendship with my colleague and mentor, who fills my mind with wonderful things--and I include in this the course in "Historical Linguistics!"

Geller, thank you on behalf of the hundreds of students you have schooled in your own unique and eccentric way. I am grateful to be one of them. And I am SO glad we're friends!

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