

Presenter: Bernard M. Levinson, University of Minnesota

**Title: “The Impact of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Discovery of the “Original” Version of the Ten Commandments upon Biblical Scholarship: The Myth of Jewish Particularism and German Universalism”**

Panel: Judaism, Jewish Studies and Anti-Semitism

In 1773, the twenty-four year old Johann Wolfgang von Goethe anonymously published an essay entitled “*Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen: Zum erstenmal gründlich beantwortet, von einem Landgeistlichen in Schwaben*” [Two Important but as yet Unaddressed Biblical Questions: Fully Answered for the First Time by a Country Clergyman in Swabia]. In this text, the young Goethe experiments with many of the literary devices that will mark his mature work. This essay is the first work of literature known to me in which the newly emergent discipline of academic biblical scholarship, just then being introduced into the curriculum of the European university, is directly thematized and given literary treatment. The intellectual significance of Goethe’s essay has not been fully recognized. It has fallen “between the cracks” of Germanists on the one hand and biblical scholars on the other. The essay had a major impact upon one of the most important German scholars of the Old Testament, Julius Wellhausen, and contributed to his analysis of the sequence and dating of the sources of the Pentateuch. While biblical scholars have certainly noted the essay’s influence on Wellhausen, the cultural biases that govern the essay and the way it constructs a double myth of Jewish identity (as particularistic and ritual bound) and of German identity as universal and ethical—while nonetheless excluding Judaism as binary “other”—have not been addressed.