Episode Book

EPISODE #5642

What Archaeology Says About the Bible

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SYNOPSIS

What happens when you take the Bible to the archaeological record and ask what can actually be verified? This episode works through the ledger: King Jehu on the Black Obelisk, the House of David on the Tel Dan Stele, the Merneptah Stele's mention of Israel — and then the other column, where the Patriarchs as a datable era collapsed, the Exodus numbers don't survive logistics, and Joshua's conquest doesn't match the destruction layers. Along the way: why the historical-critical method can't adjudicate a miracle regardless of the historian's faith, and why the internal critique of the text started with believers — Hobbes, and Spinoza, who was excommunicated for it in 1670.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's what Daniel wrote in this week. He wants to talk about biblical criticism, and he's careful to set up his own position first. He's a Jewish person living in Israel, he immigrated here, and he says plainly that no part of him is challenging whether the events in the text happened or whether the temples stood in Jerusalem. That's not the question he's asking. What he's after is the dividing line between how he reads the Bible and how somebody reads it who has no faith at all, who's in it purely for what the scientific method and archaeology can support. And he thinks he's found that line. It's divine attribution. If you're an atheist looking at these materials, there can be no such thing as divinely authored texts, because that presupposes God. So he wants us to look at this whole tradition of criticism, and then at the ledger. What has secular archaeology actually validated, what's disputed, what's been read as allegory, and what's been refuted, at least in part.



Herman

That's a good frame, and it's a frame that the field itself would mostly recognize. The historical-critical method is naturalistic by design. It's not that nineteenth-century German scholars sat down and decided to be atheists about it. It's that the method asks what can be explained by ordinary human causes, and miracles and divine authorship are, by definition, outside the toolkit.



Corn

So the dividing line Daniel's drawing isn't really believer versus atheist.



Herman

No, and this is where the nuance lives. Bart Ehrman makes the point that historians as historians can't affirm or deny miracles. He says it's not a problem for one kind of historian, atheist or Baptist or Muslim or Jew, it's a problem for all of them. Because the method itself can't adjudicate a miracle. It's not that the method is hostile to God, it's that the method has no instrument for God.



Corn

So a believing historian and a secular historian, working honestly, end up writing the same paper.



Herman

On the question of whether the sea split, yes. On the question of what the text is doing and when it was composed, also yes. The difference shows up when they step outside the method and say what they personally believe about it.



Corn

Which is a strange thing to sit with. The cleanest dividing line Daniel's looking for is real, but it's a line about method, not about souls.



Herman

And there's a wrinkle in it that I think he'd enjoy. The internal critique of the text didn't start with atheists. It started with believers. Thomas Hobbes in sixteen fifty-one, in Leviathan, argues from clues inside the text that Moses couldn't have written the whole Pentateuch. And then Spinoza, sixteen seventy, in the Tractatus, points out that Moses can't have written the account of his own death in Deuteronomy thirty-four.



Corn

Which got him excommunicated by the rabbinical council of Amsterdam.



Herman

Excommunicated. And here's the part that complicates Daniel's framing in the most interesting way. Spinoza wasn't an atheist in the way we'd use the word. He was a heretic. He was reading the text closely and concluding it couldn't be what it claimed to be. That's a Jewish argument, made by a Jew, about a Jewish text, two centuries before German Protestant scholarship got hold of it.



Corn

So the thing Daniel's calling the secular world of criticism has Jewish fingerprints on it from the start.



Herman

Deep ones. And Jewish discomfort with it is also real and old. Solomon Schechter called higher criticism higher anti-Semitism, because a lot of it was a Protestant enterprise with supersessionist assumptions baked in. But Jewish scholars used it too. Yehezkel Kaufmann in the nineteen thirties turned higher criticism around and used it to argue against Wellhausen. David Zvi Hoffmann wrote two volumes of philological critique of Wellhausen to defend orthodoxy.



Corn

So the tool isn't owned by anybody.



Herman

The tool is a tool. What you build with it is a separate question.



Corn

Let's get to the ledger, then, because that's the meat of what Daniel's asking. What has archaeology actually put its hand on.



Herman

Start with the names, because that's where the biggest shift happened. King Jehu appears on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser the Third, about eight twenty-seven BCE, bowing and paying tribute to Assyria. That's an Assyrian king's monument depicting a king of Israel by name.



Corn

And the House of David.



Herman

The Tel Dan Stele, found in nineteen ninety-three, ninth to eighth century BCE, contains the phrase bytdwd, which is read as House of David. There's a possible second reference on the Mesha Stele. Since Tel Dan, most scholars accept that there was a polity ruled by a



Herman (continued)

Davidic line. The argument now is about scale, not existence.



Corn

Say more about scale, because that's where the fight actually is.



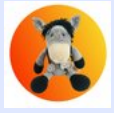
Herman

Thomas Thompson, who's the strongest minimalist voice, says flatly there's no evidence of a united monarchy, no evidence of a capital in Jerusalem, no evidence for kings named Saul, David or Solomon, no evidence for a temple there in that early period. On the other side you've got Khirbet Qeiyafa, an Iron Age Judahite site where the Israel Antiquities Authority said the excavations reveal an urban society in Judah already in the late eleventh century BCE. That undercuts the claim that Judah only developed in the eighth century.



Corn

And Jerusalem itself?



Herman

Finkelstein argues tenth-century Jerusalem was a small country village. Amihai Mazar counters that it was a rather small town with a mighty citadel, which could have been the center of a substantial regional polity. Most scholars now sit somewhere around Mazar. Real, but modest.



Corn

The Bible gives you Solomon with a navy and a harem and a temple lined in gold. Archaeology gives you a small town with a citadel.



Herman

And that gap is exactly the gap Daniel's asking about. It's not validated or refuted. It's a scale dispute.



Corn

What about the Merneptah Stele?



Herman

About twelve oh seven BCE, and it's the earliest surviving historical mention of Israel as a people in or around Canaan. That's an Egyptian pharaoh bragging about a campaign. It doesn't tell you anything about a kingdom. It tells you the name was in use.



Corn

So by the ninth century you have Israel on an Assyrian monument and David's house on a stone in the north. The names are real.



Herman

The institutions are contested. The glory is mostly not attested.



Corn

Now do the other half. What's been walked back.



Herman

Genesis one through eleven, the creation, the flood, the Tower of Babel. Mainstream consensus treats that as schematic literary work, theology in mythological form rather than history or science. And that's not a recent concession. By the early eighteen hundreds no responsible scientist was defending a literal Mosaic creation. Adam Sedgwick, who was a geologist and also a clergyman, publicly recanted flood geology in eighteen thirty-one.



Corn

A clergyman giving up the flood.



Herman

Publicly. That's the thing people forget. The retreat from literal Genesis was led in part by devout men who couldn't make the rocks fit.



Corn

The Patriarchs next.



Herman

That's the paradigm shift. Thomas Thompson's book on the historicity of the patriarchal narratives in nineteen seventy-four, and John Van Seters on Abraham in history and tradition in seventy-five. After those two, the idea of a patriarchal age that you could date and reconstruct largely collapsed. Today many, possibly most, scholars reject it as a historical period. There's a minority argument that the patriarchal names fit Middle Bronze Age Amorite naming patterns, and that's not nothing, but it's a minority.



Corn

And the Exodus, which is the one everybody actually cares about.



Herman

Most mainstream scholars don't accept the biblical Exodus as history. The numbers are the first problem. Six hundred and three thousand five hundred fighting men implies two and a half to three million people moving through Sinai. That's not a logistics problem, that's an impossibility. No Egyptian record of a large-scale slave departure. No pharaoh named. The geography is vague.



Corn

But.



Herman

But a majority of scholars think there's probably some historical kernel. A small group of Egyptian-origin people who ended up in the highlands. William Dever tentatively links them to the tribe of Joseph. Richard Friedman links them to the tribe of Levi. Kenton Sparks calls the whole thing mythologized history. Estimates for the actual group run from a few hundred to a few thousand.



Corn

So the event isn't nothing, it's just not the size the text says.



Herman

And that's a pattern. It's the same pattern as the monarchy. Something happened. The text inflates it and gives it a theological shape.



Corn

The conquest of Canaan is the one where the old consensus actually died, right?



Herman

The Albright school held that Joshua's conquest matched the archaeological destruction layers. That collapsed in the late twentieth century. The cities Joshua says were destroyed were either unoccupied at the time or destroyed at wildly different times. Jericho is the famous case. Kathleen Kenyon dated the destruction of the walled city to about fifteen fifty BCE, which is far too early for any biblical timeline. Lorenzo Nigro found a later Late Bronze Age settlement there and said explicitly it has nothing to do with the biblical accounts.



Corn

So the walls didn't come down at the right time.



Herman

The walls came down at the wrong time, twice.



Corn

Now the temples, because Daniel flagged them specifically and I think this is where the episode earns its keep.



Herman

It's the sharpest example in the whole field, and it's sharp because the two temples are in completely different evidentiary positions. The Second Temple is essentially uncontested. You've got Josephus, you've got Roman sources, you've got the Temple Warning inscriptions forbidding pagan entry, corroborated by Josephus, you've got the Trumpeting Place inscription marking where the priests announced Shabbat and the festivals, both from the Herodian expansion. And you've got the Western Wall and the platform itself. No stone has been definitively identified as part of the temple building, but the complex is there under your feet.



Corn

And the First Temple.



Herman

No archaeological remnants have been found. There's evidence Jerusalem was a hub of religious devotion at the time, but nothing you can point to and say that's the temple. The location on the Temple Mount is itself debated. Three main theories. Under the Dome of the Rock, which is the traditional one. North of it, per Asher Kaufman. East of it, per Joseph Patrich.



Corn

So the building the whole tradition is oriented around is, archaeologically, a hole in the record.



Herman

A hole with a very strong literary tradition around it. And there's a new find worth mentioning. Burned wooden beams, probably destroyed during the Babylonian invasion, believed to be part of a roof over an inner courtyard that collapsed when the fire came through. That's tied to the five eighty-seven, five eighty-six BCE destruction. It's not the temple, but it's the destruction layer the text describes, showing up in the ground.



Corn

That's a nice thing to be able to say. The fire is attested.



Herman

The building isn't, yet.



Corn

Let me push on something. Daniel says he isn't challenging whether the temples existed. And the research backs him on the Second Temple completely and on the First Temple as plausible. But the way you just laid it out, the First Temple is exactly the case where his reading and the secular reading should diverge, and they mostly don't.



Herman

They mostly don't, because the claim that there was a temple in Jerusalem is a modest historical claim. The claim that it was built by Solomon in the tenth century at the scale described, with the gold and the cherubim and the whole thing, that's where the maximalist and minimalist readings split. A secular archaeologist can say, yes, there was almost certainly a temple, and no, I can't confirm the description.



Corn

So the disagreement isn't about whether. It's about how much.



Herman

It's about how much, and about whether the text's account of it can be trusted for detail. Which is the same shape as the monarchy dispute. Same shape as the Exodus. The pattern is consistent.



Corn

Which makes me want to ask the question underneath Daniel's question. If the pattern is always something happened but smaller, what does that do to the category of allegory?



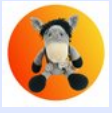
Herman

That's the interesting part. Allegory is the wrong word for most of it. Allegory means the author intended a symbol and never claimed history. What you have here is closer to what Sparks calls mythologized history. Somebody took a real event, a small group leaving Egypt, a real king, a real temple, and built a theological narrative around it. The event is load-bearing. The narrative is doing something else with it.



Corn

So it's not fiction and it's not reportage.



Herman

It's a third thing, and the third thing doesn't have a clean modern analogue. The closest is maybe a national founding story that everybody knows is shaped and nobody thinks is invented.



Corn

Now let's get to the part Daniel actually cares about, which is the divine attribution line. Because I want to test it.



Herman

Test it.



Corn

He says if you're an atheist, there can be no such thing as divinely authored texts, because that presupposes God. That's true as far as it goes. But it seems to me the method doesn't need that premise. The method just says, I can't see the author, so I'll describe the text.



Herman

Right, and that's the distinction Ehrman draws. The historian qua historian can't affirm or deny. So the atheist and the believer are in the same boat methodologically. The atheist's atheism doesn't do any work inside the method. It only does work when he steps outside and says what he thinks the text actually is.



Corn

Which means Daniel's dividing line is real but it's not where he put it.



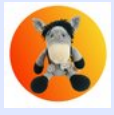
Herman

Where would you put it?



Corn

Not between atheist and believer. Between people who think the method can settle the question and people who think the method has a ceiling. A believer and an atheist who both accept the ceiling write the same archaeology. A believer and an atheist who both think the method can settle it are both wrong, just in opposite directions.



Herman

And it matches the field. The people who think the method settles it are the ones who end up at the maximalist or the minimalist extreme, and both extremes are now marginal in mainstream scholarship.



Corn

Which brings us to the state of the debate, because the shape of it has changed.



Herman

Lester Grabbe wrote the assessment I'd point to. He says the debate has settled down. The minimalists have triumphed in many ways, though they don't admit it. Most scholars reject the historicity of the patriarchal period, see the settlement as mostly indigenous Canaanites, and are cautious about the early monarchy. The Exodus is rejected or assumed to be based on something much different from the biblical account. But on the other hand, there isn't the widespread rejection of the biblical text as a historical source that you find among the main minimalists. There are few, if any, maximalists left in mainstream scholarship, only on the fundamentalist fringes.



Corn

So the middle won.



Herman

The middle won, and the middle is boring, which is why nobody writes about it.



Corn

There's an irony here I want to sit with for a second. The Documentary Hypothesis, the JEDP theory, Wellhausen's great nineteenth-century achievement, the thing that made biblical criticism look scientific, is itself in decline.



Herman

In sharp decline. One scholar described it as being in a state of advanced rigor mortis. There's no replacement consensus. So the scientific consensus of eighteen seventy-eight got dismantled by later scholarship using better tools.



Corn

Which is a healthy thing for a field and a terrifying thing for anybody who wanted the method to give a final answer.



Herman

The method doesn't give final answers. It gives better questions. That's the whole point of it, and it's also why it can't do the thing Daniel's asking it to do, which is to adjudicate between his reading and the secular reading. It can only tell you what the text is and when it was written. It can't tell you whether God was involved.



Corn

So where does that leave the ledger?



Herman

Validated: Jehu, the House of David, Israel on the Merneptah Stele, a real Judahite polity by the eleventh century, the Second Temple in full, the Babylonian destruction layer, and Jesus of Nazareth, who the overwhelming majority of historians accept existed, was baptized by John, and was crucified under Pilate. Sources there are Paul's letters within twenty to twenty-five years, Josephus around ninety-three or ninety-four, Tacitus around a hundred and sixteen.



Corn

Disputed: the scale of the united monarchy, whether the Exodus happened and at what size, the conquest narratives, the patriarchal period.



Herman

Refuted or treated as non-historical: a literal Genesis one through eleven, the flood as a global event, the numbers in Exodus, the destruction of Jericho at the biblical date. And in a category of its own, the First Temple, which is plausible, expected, and unproven.



Corn

That's the ledger. And I notice the ledger doesn't have a column for divine authorship.



Herman

It can't. That's the point.



Corn

Here's the thing I keep circling. Daniel says the clean split is divine attribution. And it is, in the sense that the atheist can't get to a divinely authored text. But the believer can't get there through the method either. The method is silent on it for everybody. So the split isn't between two readings of the evidence. It's between two things people bring to the evidence.



Herman

It's a split about premises, not about findings.



Corn

Which means the archaeology is shared ground. Which is a stranger and better outcome than either side usually admits.



Herman

It is, and I'd add one more wrinkle. The internal critique of the text, the thing that looks most like secular criticism, was pioneered by believers. Spinoza, Hobbes, Astruc, who was a French physician applying textual criticism to Genesis in seventeen fifty-three. These weren't atheists dismantling a holy book. They were close readers who noticed the text didn't behave the way it was supposed to.



Corn

So the tradition Daniel's describing has a Jewish and Christian spine.



Herman

And a Jewish counter-tradition that used the same tools to defend the text. Kaufmann, Hoffmann. The tools don't belong to one side.



Corn

Alright. I want to go back to the two temples one more time, because I think that's the most useful thing we've said.



Herman

Go.



Corn

The Second Temple is proven and it's gone. The First Temple is unproven and it's the one the tradition is oriented around. There's something almost designed about that.



Herman

Designed is a strong word. But yes. The thing you can prove is the thing you don't need proved. The thing you can't prove is the thing the whole liturgy points at.



Corn

And the temple mount itself, you can't dig it. Which means the question is closed by politics, not by evidence.



Herman

The question is closed by politics. Which is worth saying plainly. The most contested square mile in the world is also the one place where the archaeology can't be done.



Hilbert

Four hundred and twelve.



Corn

What's four hundred and twelve.



Hilbert

The number of items in the inventory I did in two thousand eight. I was contracted to catalogue a private collection. Mostly nineteenth-century Holy Land travel books, some maps, a few coins. Four hundred and twelve items. I counted them twice because the first count came out four hundred and eleven and I didn't trust it.



Herman

And the point is the count.



Hilbert

The point is I know what four hundred and twelve looks like. Because I've counted it. And I've read enough of those nineteenth-century travel books to know what people thought they were looking at when they stood on the Mount. They weren't doing archaeology. They were doing confirmation. They went looking for the thing they already believed and they found it, every time. The books are full of it.



Corn

So the genre was settled before the evidence was.



Hilbert

The genre was settled. And the reason I mention it is your man said the method can't do the thing he's asking it to do. He's right. But there's a version of this that's worse than he thinks. The people who did the digging in the eighteen hundreds weren't neutral. They were looking for the temple. And when they didn't find it, they kept looking, and they wrote books about how they were about to find it.



Herman

That's a problem with the practitioners, not the method.



Hilbert

It's a problem with the practitioners. The method is fine. The method would have told them to stop. They didn't stop.



Corn

The honest version of the field is the one that took a hundred years to arrive.



Hilbert

A hundred years and a lot of travel books. I kept one. The four hundred and twelfth item was a first edition from eighteen sixty-one. Nice binding. Wrong about everything.



Corn

Wrong about everything but worth keeping.



Hilbert

Worth keeping. It's a good example of how a person can be completely wrong and still useful. You just have to know which parts to ignore.



Herman

Which is exactly what Grabbe's saying about the biblical text.



Hilbert

Exactly what he's saying. The text is a source. It's not a witness. There's a difference.



Corn

The text is a source, not a witness. That's the sentence.



Herman

It's the sentence that resolves Daniel's question. A witness tells you what happened. A source tells you what somebody thought happened and why they wanted you to think it.



Corn

Which means the believer and the secular reader can both use it. They just use it differently.



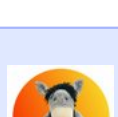
Hilbert

They use it differently and they get different things out of it. That's not a problem. That's what a source is for.



Corn

The cutting-room floor item, and then we'll close. The burned beams from the Babylonian destruction. That's the freshest thing in the whole ledger. Actual charred wood from the fire the text describes, sitting in the ground under the city, waiting for somebody to date it properly.



Herman

It doesn't prove the temple. It proves the fire. Which is the pattern one more time. The event is attested. The interpretation is the part that stays open.



Corn

The event is attested, the interpretation stays open. That's a good place to leave it. And it's the honest version of the whole field. The archaeology keeps handing you the small true thing and refusing to hand you the big one.



Herman

Which is what a method is supposed to do. It's supposed to refuse.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, for the inventory count and the eighteen sixty-one travel book.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.