Episode Book

EPISODE #5630

Josephus: The Priest Who Wrote From Rome's Side

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SYNOPSIS

Yosef ben Mattityahu — Josephus — was a Jerusalem aristocrat, a general in the Galilee revolt, and a man who survived a cave at Yodfat to become a client of the Flavian emperors. He wrote the Jewish War, the Antiquities, the Life, and Against Apion, and he remains the only surviving first-century Jewish author writing at length about first-century Jewish life. This episode traces his biography, his four surviving works, and the central tension: the man who gives us the most detail about ancient Judaism is also the man we have to fact-check hardest about himself.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's what Daniel sent in this week. He wants to talk about Josephus. The actual man, not just the texts. And he makes a point up front that I think is worth sitting with: so much of what we think we know about how Judaism was actually practiced in ancient Israel runs through this one guy. Not only as a source, but as a lens. So Daniel wants to know who he was, and why his observations have been so useful to historians and biblical scholars trying to reconstruct what life was actually like in that period.



Herman

And the honest answer to "why has he been so useful" is partly that he's the only one who left us this much. We have one surviving first-century Jewish author writing at length about first-century Jewish life, and he happens to have been a priest, a general, and a man who spent his last decades on a Roman pension.



Corn

A Roman pension. That's the part that makes people uncomfortable.



Herman

It's the part that makes him interesting. You don't get the detail without the pension. Those two things are welded together.



Corn

So start with the name. Because even the name is a story.



Herman

Yosef ben Mattityahu. Born in Jerusalem around the year thirty-seven of the common era. His father Matthias was a priest of the first of the twenty-four priestly courses, the course of Jehoiarib. His mother claimed Hasmonean royal descent. So this is not a random man. This is the Jerusalem aristocracy, priestly and royal blood both, writing about the collapse of the world he grew up in.



Corn

Which is why the defection stings the way it does. If he'd been a nobody from the Galilee, nobody would have cared.



Herman

Right. He's a man of the elite who ends up on the Roman side of the wall while the Temple burns. And then he writes the history of it.



Corn

The Life is where he gives us his own resume. And it's a strange resume.



Herman

He says he sampled all three of the Jewish philosophies, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, by the time he was sixteen. Then he spent three years in the desert with a hermit named Bannus. Then he joined the Pharisees at nineteen.



Corn

Sixteen years old, and he'd already run through three schools of thought and moved on to a hermit.



Herman

Jona Lendering, who runs the Livius site and has written a lot on Josephus, calls the chronology simply impossible. And he points out that in the War and the Antiquities, Josephus shows a profound dislike of the Pharisees. So the claim in the Life that he was one of them reads like retrospective positioning.



Corn

Positioning for who?



Herman

For his Roman readers, partly. It makes him look like a man who had examined everything and chosen carefully. And it makes him look like a Pharisee at a moment when, after the destruction, the Pharisees are the ones who are going to become the continuity.



Corn

That's a very generous reading of a very convenient biography.



Herman

It's the reading that fits the evidence. He's writing his own life at the end, defending his conduct in Galilee against a rival historian named Justus of Tiberias. The Life is not a memoir. It's a legal brief.



Corn

So the man who gives us the most detailed account of first-century Judaism is also the man we have to fact-check hardest about himself.



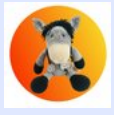
Herman

That's the whole tension of Josephus. It never goes away. You learn to live with it.



Corn

Take us to Rome. Because there's a trip before the war.



Herman

Sixty-four of the common era. He goes to Rome to negotiate the release of some imprisoned Jewish priests. And he succeeds. He gets help from Poppaea, who was Nero's wife at the time.



Corn

A Jerusalem priest walking into Nero's court and getting a favor done.



Herman

And it's the kind of detail that tells you how plugged in he was. This is a man with access. Two years later he's back in Jerusalem, and the revolt breaks out, and he's appointed military governor of Galilee.



Corn

At what, twenty-nine?



Herman

Around thirty. And he says he trained sixty-five thousand troops. That number is one of the ones to hold loosely.



Corn

Hold loosely. Noted.



Herman

The numbers are where he's weakest. Distances are wrong, group sizes contradict each other between the War and the Antiquities, the genealogies and population figures get improbable. So you take the shape and you leave the digits.



Corn

What does he actually do in Galilee?



Herman

He organizes. He fortifies towns. He feuds, badly, with a rival commander named John of Gischala, who is going to become one of the men running the defense of Jerusalem during the siege. And then the Romans come, and he ends up in a place called Yodfat, or Jotapata, under a six-week siege.



Corn

And this is where the famous story is.



Herman

This is where it gets ugly. The town falls in sixty-seven. Josephus and forty companions hide in a cave. And they agree that they will not be taken alive by the Romans. They'll kill each other. They draw lots. And somehow, when the killing is done, the two men left standing are Josephus and one other, and Josephus talks the other man into surrendering with him.



Corn

Forty men go into a cave. Two come out. And one of them is the man telling the story.



Herman

That's the shape of it. Mary Smallwood, who did the Penguin translation of the Jewish War, says he was guilty of shocking duplicity at Jotapata, saving himself by the sacrifice of his companions.



Corn

That's not a modern revisionist talking. That's his own translator.



Herman

That's his own translator, in the introduction to his own book.



Corn

There's a mathematics problem named after this, isn't there?



Herman

There is. The Josephus problem. It's a counting-out puzzle about where you need to stand in a circle so you're the last one left. It comes directly from this story. So a man's survival in a cave became a problem set in computer science.



Corn

That's the most Josephus thing I can imagine. Even his betrayals have a legacy.



Herman

And then he's brought before Vespasian. And he does the thing that saves his life. He tells Vespasian that Vespasian is going to become emperor.



Corn

Which at that moment is a lunatic thing to say. Vespasian is a general in the middle of a war, and Nero is on the throne.



Herman

Nero is on the throne, and within about two years Nero is dead, and there's a civil war, and Vespasian is emperor. So Josephus's prophecy comes true. He's freed. He takes the family name, Flavius. He gets Roman citizenship. And he spends the rest of his life as a client of the Flavian house.



Corn

And then he goes back to Jerusalem. With Titus.



Herman

As a translator and a negotiator, during the siege. He stands outside the walls of his own city and calls to the people inside to surrender, while the Romans are building the siege works.



Corn

I want to sit on that for a second. Not because it's a moral question, but because it's the actual position he's writing from. Everything we have from him is written by a man who watched his own city destroyed from the Roman side of the wall.



Herman

And that's why he's useful. It's also why he's suspect. Both at once, and you can't separate them.



Corn

Alright. So what did he actually write? Give me the shelf.



Herman

Four works survive. The Jewish War, seven volumes, around seventy-five. The Jewish Antiquities, twenty volumes, around ninety-three or ninety-four. The Life, which is his autobiography, around ninety-four to ninety-nine. And Against Apion, two volumes, around ninety-seven, which is a defense of Judaism against Greek and Roman critics.



Corn

Start with the War. Because that one has a strange publication history.



Herman

It does. He wrote it first in Aramaic, for the Jewish communities in Mesopotamia, and then reworked it in Greek. It runs from the Maccabean revolt, one sixty-seven to one sixty before the common era, all the way through the Great Revolt to seventy, and it ends at Masada.



Corn

And the thesis of the War?



Herman

The thesis is that the revolt was the work of unrepresentative, over-zealous fanatics. The Zealots, the Sicarii. And he goes further. He suggests that God was on the Roman side. That the destruction was a judgment.



Corn

That's a hell of a thing to write under a Flavian patronage.



Herman

It is. And it's the reason the War reads the way it does. It's a book that explains, to a Roman audience, why Rome won and why that was just.



Corn

Now the Antiquities. Twenty volumes. What's in it?



Herman

Everything. It runs from creation to just before the revolt. Books one through eleven are essentially a paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible, or the Septuagint. And then the later books pull on Hellenistic sources. First Maccabees, the Letter of Aristeas, Nicolaus of Damascus.



Corn

Say more about him, because he keeps coming up.



Herman

He was Herod's court historian. And for the Herodian and Hasmonean material, he's Josephus's main source. So a huge amount of what we think of as Josephus's account of Herod is actually Nicolaus, filtered through Josephus.



Corn

So when we say "Josephus tells us," we sometimes mean "Nicolaus tells us, and Josephus is the only pipe it came down."



Herman

Lendering puts it as, his value as a historian is as great as his sources. Which is a compliment and a warning in the same sentence.



Corn

And then the Life, which is the brief. And Against Apion, which is the other brief.



Herman

Against Apion is the case for Judaism's antiquity. There was a whole genre of Greek and Roman writers arguing that the Jews were a recent, derivative, slightly ridiculous people, and Apion was one of them. Josephus answers him. It's the first real apologetic.



Corn

So the shelf is: a war history, a universal history, a self-defense, and an apology. Four genres, and he's doing a different job in each one.



Herman

And that matters for how you read him. The Josephus of the War is not the Josephus of the Antiquities. He'll cover the same events in both, and the second version is never a simple revision. It's a fresh rephrasing of the same underlying sources, with different conclusions.



Corn

Same evidence, different conclusion.



Herman

And the Biblical Archaeology Society makes the point that in antiquity that was a skill. Drawing different conclusions from the same evidence was a mark of critical acumen. It was valued. It's disdained by post-enlightenment historians, but it was not seen as cheating at the time.



Corn

That's a useful reframe. Because we read him like a modern historian and then get annoyed that he isn't one.



Herman

He isn't one. He's an ancient historian. And the rules were different.



Corn

Alright. The usefulness question. Why do biblical scholars in particular lean on him so hard?



Herman

Because of what he's the only witness to. He's our most important witness to Jewish life and history at the close of the biblical period. That's Marek Dospěl at the Biblical Archaeology Society, and it's the standard view. He's the primary source for the chain of high priests in the Second Temple period. He's the primary source for the three sects, the Essenes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, in War book two.



Corn

And the New Testament background stuff.



Herman

He gives us the only first-century, non-Christian, independent references to John the Baptist, to Jesus, and to James, the brother of Jesus who was called Christ. Those are in the Antiquities. For anyone working on Christian origins, that's not optional material.



Corn

So he's load-bearing for two separate fields.



Herman

For three, really. Second Temple Judaism, Christian origins, and Roman provincial administration in the east. And he describes things nobody else bothered to. The linen curtain at a house entrance. The Sabbath noon meal. Polygamy as a practice. The priestly clothing. The Temple structure and furnishings. Herod's fortresses. The topography of Judea and Galilee.



Corn

The mundane stuff.



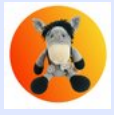
Herman

The mundane stuff is the gold. Anyone can write about battles. He's the one who tells you what a house looked like.



Corn

Let's do the archaeology, because that's where this gets concrete. Herodium.



Herman

Ehud Netzer spent thirty-five years excavating Herodium, working from Josephus's descriptions, and in two thousand seven he announced he'd found what he took to be Herod's tomb. The New York Times covered it. And then in two thousand thirteen, Joseph Patrich and Benjamin Arubas published a challenge to the identification.



Corn

So the archaeology both vindicates him and complicates him.



Herman

That's the pattern across the board. Partial corroboration. Masada, Herodium, Caesarea, Qumran, the southwestern corner of Jerusalem. And then specific mismatches. The Masada details don't line up with the archaeology in some particulars. The Temple-burning sequence is contradicted by Sulpicius Severus, who says Titus ordered it burned, where Josephus has it as an accident that Titus tried to prevent.



Corn

Why would he shape it that way?



Herman

Because Titus is his patron's son. If you're writing under Flavian patronage, the sack of the Temple is a delicate subject. You don't want the emperor's son on record as the man who ordered the destruction of the holiest building in the east.



Corn

So the shaping isn't random. It's directional. It goes where the money is.



Herman

It goes where the money is, and it goes where the survival is. He's a man who has already demonstrated, in a cave, what he'll do to stay alive.



Corn

Let's do the Testimonium. Because that's the passage everyone fights about.



Herman

The Testimonium Flavianum. Antiquities, book eighteen, roughly sections sixty-three and sixty-four. It's a short passage where Josephus mentions Jesus. And it's the most contested passage in the whole corpus.



Corn

What's the fight?



Herman

Three positions. Total authenticity. Total forgery. Or partial authenticity, which is where the consensus has settled since the late twentieth century. The idea being that there's an authentic, neutral kernel that Josephus wrote, and that Christian scribes later glossed it, adding the phrases that make it sound like Josephus was a believer.



Corn

Which phrases?



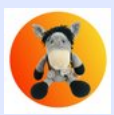
Herman

The line where the passage calls Jesus the Messiah, or says he was the Christ. A first-century Jew writing for Romans would not have written that. Paul Maier's line is that the case for total authenticity is hopeless for exactly that reason. But total forgery is hardly tenable either, because the passage is in every extant Greek manuscript we have.



Corn

So it's in all the manuscripts, and part of it can't be his.



Herman

Both of those things are true. And the amount of ink spilled is enormous. Louis Feldman counted at least eighty-seven scholarly articles on this one passage between nineteen thirty-seven and nineteen eighty.



Corn

Eighty-seven articles. On a paragraph.



Herman

And the earliest surviving Greek manuscript that contains it is an eleventh-century codex in Milan. Ambrosianus three seventy. So we're not working from anything close to the original.



Corn

Walk me through the live positions, because Daniel will want the state of the question.



Herman

Two thousand twenty-two, G. J. Goldberg advances what's called the paraphrase model. His argument is that the passage is Josephus's own paraphrase of a Christian text that resembles Luke's Emmaus narrative. So it's not interpolation at all. It's Josephus working from a Christian source he had access to.



Corn

And the newer one?



Herman

Two thousand twenty-five, T. C. Schmidt publishes Josephus on Jesus, arguing the Testimonium is essentially authentic, and going further, arguing that Josephus personally knew informants who had been present at Jesus's trial.



Corn

That's a strong claim.



Herman

It's a strong claim, and it's contested. I'd hold it loosely. But the direction of travel in the scholarship is toward more authenticity, not less.



Corn

So the passage that everyone agrees is at least partly not his is still anchoring historical-Jesus work.



Herman

That's the live example of the whole principle. A contested source, used with care, still carrying weight. Because the alternative is no source at all.



Corn

Which brings us to the biases. Let's do them properly.



Herman

He wrote to teach lessons. That's the first thing. In the War, the lesson is that Judeans are peace-loving and civil, and that the revolt was the work of a fanatical minority. In the Antiquities, and in Against Apion, the lesson is that the Jews possess the highest form of culture in the world.



Corn

He's an ambassador. Every sentence is diplomacy.



Herman

Carl Ritter, writing in the eighteen forties, said Josephus is to be used with great care, that he was controlled by political motives, that his great purpose was to bring his people into honor with the Greeks and Romans, and that this purpose underlay every sentence and filled his history with distortions and exaggerations.



Corn

That's a hundred and eighty years ago and it still reads as fair.



Herman

It reads as fair because it is. And then the personal stuff. He was a defector writing under Flavian patronage. Joseph Raymond calls him the Jewish Benedict Arnold. Smallwood calls him conceited, guilty of shocking duplicity, self-serving.



Corn

And the inventions. Give me the inventions.



Herman

Miraculous springs flowing at Titus's arrival. A ballista ball carrying a fetus a hundred yards. A cow giving birth to a lamb in the Temple. Those are the ones the Biblical Archaeology Society flags.



Corn

A cow birthing a lamb in the Temple.



Herman

In the Temple. As a portent.



Corn

The man had a budget for omens and he spent it.



Herman

And then the numbers. Wrong distances. Contradictory group sizes between the two accounts. Improbable genealogies. Population figures that don't survive a second look.



Corn

So the honest summary is: he's indispensable and he's unreliable, and the two facts are the same fact.



Herman

The Biblical Archaeology Society has a line I like. If we could confront him with his error on the length of the Dead Sea, he would look at us incredulously and reply, but that's not what I was writing about.



Corn

Which is the whole thing in one sentence. He wasn't writing a survey. He was writing an argument.



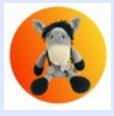
Herman

And that's why the modern reader has to do the work of separating what he's reporting from what he's arguing. The two are fused on the page.



Corn

There's one more angle I want to get to, which is how he was received. Because that's strange too.



Herman

It's very strange. The pagan authors basically ignored him. He was preserved by Christians, who valued him because he fills in the New Testament background. And he was shunned by Jews as a traitor, all the way until the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment in the nineteenth century.



Corn

Same text. Three communities. Three completely different readings.



Herman

And the Jewish re-engagement is recent. For most of the tradition, he was the man you didn't cite.



Corn

Which is a strange fate for a man who spent his whole life trying to be the one who explained his people to the outside world.



Herman

He got the outside world. He just didn't get the inside.



Corn

There's a detail I want to flag before we go further, which is the manuscript situation. Because it's worse than people assume.



Herman

It's much worse than people assume. There are around a hundred and twenty extant Greek manuscripts of Josephus. Thirty-three of them predate the fourteenth century. And there are around a hundred and seventy Latin translations, some of them going back to the sixth century.



Corn

So we're not reading Josephus. We're reading a chain of copies of copies.



Herman

We're reading a tradition. And the Brill translation and commentary project is nineteen projected volumes, of which nine had been published as of a couple of years ago. That's the scale of the scholarly effort.



Corn

Nine out of nineteen. And the man wrote four books.



Herman

He wrote four books and we've spent two centuries arguing about them.



Corn

Let me try the synthesis, and you tell me if I've got it wrong. The reason Josephus is so useful is the same reason he's so suspect. He had access. He was inside the priestly elite, he was inside the revolt's command, and then he was inside the Flavian court. Nobody else had all three.



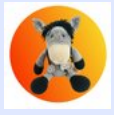
Herman

Nobody else had all three, and nobody else survived all three. The access is the value. The survival is the cost.



Corn

And the lens Daniel's talking about isn't just a filter. It's a lens with a curvature. It bends what it shows.



Herman

It bends it in specific directions. Toward Roman respectability. Toward the fanatic-minority explanation of the revolt. Toward the Flavian account of the Temple. And away from anything that would embarrass the house of Vespasian.



Corn

Which means the correct way to use him isn't to trust him or to dismiss him. It's to read him for the shape and cross-check the detail.



Herman

And to read both versions of the same event, side by side, because the difference between them is where his argument is.



Corn

The gap is the evidence. So Daniel asked why his observations have been so useful. And the answer is partly that he's the only one who wrote it down, and partly that he wrote it down from a position that let him see things nobody else could see. And the price of that position is that we can never take him at face value.



Herman

Which is not a reason to stop using him. It's a reason to use him the way he'd want to be used, which is carefully.



Corn

There's one thing I keep coming back to. He's the only source for Masada. The whole story, the speech, the lots, the mass suicide. One author, writing decades later, from Rome, with a track record of shaping material toward his patrons.



Herman

And the archaeology doesn't match in some particulars. That's the honest state of it.



Corn

The most famous story of Jewish resistance in the period rests on the testimony of the man who didn't resist.



Herman

It does. And that's not a reason to throw it out. It's a reason to know exactly what you're holding.



Corn

Hilbert.



Hilbert

I've been to Masada.



Corn

You've been to Masada.



Hilbert

Twice. Once in the late two thousands, once before that. The first time I walked up. The second time I took the cable car because my knee had gone.



Corn

What was it like?



Hilbert

Hot. Quieter than you'd think. You stand up there and you look down at the Roman camps, and they're still there. You can see the walls of them from the top. That's the part that gets you. Not the palace, not the storerooms. The camps. Because that tells you how long they were willing to wait.



Corn

How long were they willing to wait?



Hilbert

Months. They built a ramp. They built it out of earth and they hauled it up the side of the plateau, and it's still there too. You can walk on it. That's the thing about the Romans. They weren't in a hurry. They had a schedule and they kept to it.



Corn

The story itself. The speech, the lots.



Hilbert

I don't know about the speech. I wasn't there. But I'll tell you what I noticed, which is that everybody up there was talking about the story, and nobody was talking about the camps. And the camps are the part that's actually there.



Herman

Which is the same problem as Josephus. The physical evidence tells you one thing, the narrative tells you another, and they don't fully overlap.



Hilbert

The ramp is real. The camps are real. You can put your hand on the stones. The rest of it you take on somebody's word.



Corn

The somebody is the man who was standing on the other side of the wall.



Hilbert

Right. And I'd still go. It's worth the walk.



Corn

I want to land this on something Daniel will actually use. He asked who Josephus was and why he's been so useful. The who is a Jerusalem priest who became a Roman client and wrote four books. The why is that he's the only surviving first-century Jewish author who had inside access to the priesthood, the revolt, and the imperial court, and who wrote it all down at length.



Herman

The caveat is that the access is the bias. Every advantage he had as a witness is also a reason to distrust him on the specific points where his patrons had an interest.



Corn

Which is not a reason to discard him. It's a reason to read him the way the scholars do. Two versions side by side, archaeology as a partial check, and a clear eye on where the argument is doing the work of the reporting.



Herman

The honest note to end on is that we're still arguing about him. The Testimonium alone has produced eighty-seven articles and counting. The Brill commentary is nine volumes into nineteen. We have not settled Josephus, and I don't think we will.



Corn

Which is a strange kind of immortality for a man who spent his life trying to be understood.



Herman

He got the understanding. He just didn't get the agreement.



Corn

The forward-looking thought, then. The next time you read a reconstruction of first-century Jerusalem, ask which sentence came from Josephus, and then ask which sentence came from Nicolaus of Damascus, and then ask which sentence came from a source we no longer have at all. Because the answer is usually: all three, in the same paragraph.



Herman

That's the lens. It's not a window. It's a lens, and it's ground to somebody's prescription.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



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.