Episode Book

EPISODE #6434

How the Talmud Eclipsed the Hebrew Bible

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SYNOPSIS

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE made biblical sacrifice impossible, early rabbis codified the Oral Torah to ensure the tradition survived. Exploring work by Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg and B. Barry Levy, this discussion examines how the rabbinic fence around the text eventually displaced raw scripture study, how canonical book orders reshape meaning, and why prophetic texts like the Book of Daniel gained massive prominence in Christian theology while being relegated to miscellany in Jewish practice.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel wanted to learn about the Book of Daniel, found a film he loved, and then noticed the company that made it was Christian. And it's been sitting wrong with him ever since.



Herman

That's the whole prompt in miniature, really. He says he feels genuine admiration for how well Christians know the text, the later prophets especially, the end-times material, and he's completely respectful about it. But then he looks at his own tradition, which is fixated on halacha and Talmud and oral law, and he asks, quoting him, "it feels to me as though we've almost pushed aside the written text." How did that happen, has anyone actually said anything about it, and have we lost touch with the original tradition?



Corn

And before anyone braces themselves, he's a Jewish person who has read the Talmud. This is an inside question. He's asking his own house why the furniture got rearranged.



Herman

I like that framing, because the answer is not that the furniture got rearranged. The answer is that the house burned down and somebody rebuilt it, and the rebuilding is the thing we now live in.



Corn

See, this is why we don't let you open. Stay with that, because that's the whole first half of the episode.



Corn

The question behind Daniel's question is bigger than it looks. It's not "why don't Jews read the Bible." It's how did the people of the Book become the people of the Talmud, and is that a loss, or is it the reason there's still a people at all?



Herman

And the thing I want to say up front is that Daniel's instinct has a pedigree. This is not a modern ache invented by one guy who watched a Christian documentary. Profiat Duran was complaining about scholarly disdain for biblical studies around fourteen fourteen. The Karaites were making a version of this argument a thousand years ago. B. Barry Levy, who taught Bible at McGill for decades, says books like Daniel are, his phrase, "all but hidden from the Jewish public."



Corn

A Jewish professor of Bible, saying Jews don't know the Bible. That's not an outsider's jab either.



Herman

No, it's an audit. So the arc for today: first the catastrophe that made oral law the load-bearing wall, then what the rabbis actually thought about the written text itself, which is stranger and more interesting than people assume, then why Christians read the same books so differently, and finally what, if anything, was actually lost.



Corn

And to understand how the Talmud got to the center, you start with the day the center fell apart. The year seventy.



Herman

Seventy CE, the Romans destroy the Second Temple, and everything that defined Judaism up to that point stops being possible. The whole biblical system, the bulk of the law in the Torah, is Temple sacrifice and priestly behavior. That's the machinery. Titus flattens Jerusalem, and the machinery is gone. No sacrifices, no functioning priesthood, no center.



Corn

And a religion whose core text is an instruction manual for a building that no longer exists has a problem.



Herman

An enormous problem. Plus the social upheaval, courts, norms, all of it upended. The scholars of the Mishnah, which is Judah ha-Nasi compiling around two hundred to two hundred twenty CE, then the Jerusalem Talmud around three hundred to three hundred fifty, then the Babylonian Talmud, roughly four fifty to five hundred, probably finished mid-sixth century. Sixty-three tractates. That's the flurry.



Corn

Three compilations in about three hundred years. That's not a flurry, that's an industry.



Herman

It's an emergency response that turned into a civilization. And here's the doctrinal engine underneath it. Mishnah Avot, chapter one, verse one. Moses received Torah at Sinai and handed it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, elders to prophets, prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. And the Men of the Great Assembly said three things, the third of which is "make a fence round the Torah."



Corn

A fence. Not a doorway, not a welcome mat. A fence.



Herman

Right, and the metaphor is doing exactly what it says. The structure is protective and it's built around the text, at a distance from the text. And the two-Torah doctrine that comes with it: Moses received two torot at Sinai. The written one, Torah she-be-Khetav, and the oral one, Torah she-be-al Peh, which explains the written one and which the rabbis are the custodians of. That claim is the foundation of rabbinic authority.



Corn

Now here's the part that has always struck me as almost unbearably ironic. The Oral Torah, by the tradition's own account, was not supposed to be written down.



Herman

Forbidden to write it down. And then after the destruction of the Temple, they decided to write it anyway, "for the sake of preservation." Those are the tradition's own words for its own emergency.



Corn

So the oral law became a book. To survive.



Herman

And then the book that was written to protect the Bible eclipsed the Bible it was protecting. The Mishnah was supposed to be the fence, and within a few centuries the fence had become the estate.



Corn

I want that on a plaque somewhere.

L

Larry

Friends, are you tired of the oral law floating around unwritten, unprotected, and frankly unmonetized? Then you need Fence Around the Torah, the subscription box that delivers one hand selected fence directly to your door every single month, because nothing says preservation like a fence, and nothing says fence like a monthly fee.

L

Larry

Choose your tier: the Mishnah tier gets you one small fence, the Talmud tier gets you sixty three tractates of fencing in a handsome box, and the Prophets tier, our premium offering, gets you the prophets themselves, hidden from the Jewish public, all but, absolutely, guaranteed. Cancel any time, which is to say never, our cancellation department is a fence, and you cannot get past it.



Corn

He just said "eclipsed the Bible." That was my line. Two minutes ago.



Herman

Word for word, "all but hidden from the Jewish public," that's Levy's phrase, I said it in the intro. Corn, I don't love this.



Corn

Anyway. The rabbis wrote the thing down to save it, and then saved it so well nobody could find it.



Herman

What makes it more interesting than a simple story of replacement is the rabbinic attitude to the written Bible itself, because it's ambivalent. There's a book by Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg, it came out from Princeton in twenty twenty three, called The Closed Book. Her line is that early rabbinic authorities "liked the idea of the Bible but were less enthusiastic about the actual biblical text itself."



Corn

That's a sentence you don't expect about the people of the Book.



Herman

And she backs it with material that's strange. Rabbinic tales where the biblical text is repeatedly lost and reconstructed, remade into a makeshift approximation of the divine message. A whole genre where a close encounter with the actual text ends in literal death, she has a chapter on it. And legal limits that discouraged what she calls informational reading, regulated when you could read it, and restricted how vernacular copies circulated.



Corn

Hang on. Informational reading, meaning reading it to find out what it says.



Herman

Reading it like a source rather than performing it or studying it through the received interpretation. Discouraged.



Corn

So not only did the fence go up around the text. Reading the text raw was treated as mildly hazardous.



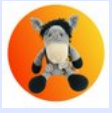
Herman

And the ranking was eventually stated openly. Lawrence Schiffman's line: "By the Amoraic period, the rabbis were openly asserting the superiority of the oral law... Scripture had been displaced by Talmud." Levy again, Talmud study outranked Bible study "both quantititatively and qualitatively" in late antiquity, the medieval period, and after.



Corn

Which answers Daniel's "how did that come to be" more directly than he might expect. Not a conspiracy, not a power grab by mustache-twirling rabbis.



Herman

An emergency measure, repeated for centuries, hardening into a hierarchy. And I'd add what Isaac Kalimi argues, that halacha became load-bearing in exile precisely because it maintained identity without a land or a Temple, and because it could flex. Law you can argue about travels well.



Corn

There's a detail from Wollenberg I want to land, because it's the whole thing compressed. Her book opens with a story about a student who quoted Talmudic passages in a class. Bava Batra, Sanhedrin. Passages saying Joshua finished writing the Torah, that Moses



Corn (continued)

wrote Job, that Ezra changed the script of the Torah when he brought it back.



Herman

The student quoted the Talmud.



Corn

Quoted the Talmud. And a campus rabbi had her course blacklisted as heretical. The heresy was chazal. The rabbi didn't recognize his own tradition's text because it said things about the text of the Torah that nobody in that world encounters the Torah saying, because the only way anyone meets the Torah is through the fence.



Herman

And the punchline of her whole introduction is her asking whether our understanding of the Written Torah is really so distant from the rabbis' concept of the Bible, and answering, "The short answer is: yes."



Corn

Yes, meaning it is that distant. We've forgotten that the rabbis were comfortable with a messier, more human text than the one we imagine they believed in.



Herman

The rabbi in that anecdote was defending a Bible the rabbis never actually defended. He was defending the fence's idea of the field.



Corn

Okay. So the oral law became a book, and the book became the center. That explains the Talmud's gravity. It still doesn't explain why the Christian film on Daniel was better than anything we make. For that you have to look at how the same books are bound.



Herman

This is structural, not accidental. John Barton made this point well: Christians read the Old Testament as a story that finds its completion in the New Testament. Paradise lost and Paradise regained. The prophets become the promise of coming redemption, which leads naturally into the Gospels. For Jews there is no grand narrative in the Hebrew Bible, in his words, more a collection of individual stories, sayings and teachings. And the prophetic books don't come last so as to lead into the New Testament, they follow the Torah as commentary on it.



Corn

So the Christians bound the prophets where the plot needs them.



Herman

Canonically arranged that way in many editions, yes. Isaiah sitting right before the Gospels, where the prophecies get fulfilled. The binding is doing theology.



Corn

And Daniel?



Herman

Daniel is the perfect test case, and Daniel should feel this one personally. In the Tanakh, Daniel is in the Ketuvim, the Writings. Not among the Prophets at all. It's filed with Psalms and Proverbs. Yet Daniel chapter seven, verses thirteen and fourteen, the "one like a human being" coming with the clouds of heaven, that is the engine of the entire Christian end-times imagination. Daniel is the book Levy names among those "all but hidden from the Jewish public." The book producing the most Christian-readable imagery in the whole canon, and in the Jewish ordering it isn't even a prophet.



Corn

We shelved the apocalypse under miscellany.



Herman

Barton also quotes Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, which I find wonderful: where Christians see the Bible as a story about God, humanity and salvation, Jews read it as being about God, people and land. Different books, almost. Barton says it's almost as though they recognized two different Bibles.



Corn

So Christian fluency with the prophets isn't a neutral achievement. They know Daniel well because Daniel, read through their key, is about them. The Son of Man, the kingdoms falling, the resurrection at the end of chapter twelve. It's the trailer for their sequel.



Herman

And a Jewish reader following the rabbinic path arrives at Daniel through Talmudic citations, without the christological payoff, and without the canonical spotlight. The admiration Daniel feels and the neglect that bothers him are the same fact seen from two sides. If you take the Christian reading key away, the fluency drops too. They travel together.



Corn

Which reframes the question. It's not "why are they better at our book." It's "why does their book have a plot and ours has a legal code."



Herman

Though I want to defend the legal code for a second, because I'm going to predict Corn's next move.



Corn

Go on then, predict it.



Herman

You're going to say the plot is what makes texts survive outside their home, and law is what makes a home survive outside its land. And you're going to present that as a dichotomy, and I'm going to say it's both at once. There. Saved you the turn.



Corn

I was going to say something like that, yes, except better worded. But fine. The dichotomy stands anyway, because Daniel asked whether we've lost touch, and to answer that honestly you have to face the counter-tradition. The people who agreed with him, eleven centuries ago.



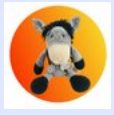
Herman

The Karaites. Name from mikra, scripture. They emerged in the ninth-century Islamic Middle East, they rejected the two-Torah doctrine, and they accepted only the Written Torah. And their sharpest pen, Salmon ben Yeruham, active in Jerusalem roughly nine forty to nine sixty, wrote a book whose title is Sefer Milhamot YHWH, the Wars of the Lord, arguing that if the Oral Law was meant to be oral, writing it down was a contradiction.



Corn

That's a good argument. It's the tradition's own rule against the tradition's own practice.



Herman

It's clean, and Saadia Gaon, who was the towering rabbinic authority of the age, treated Karaism as dangerous heresy and campaigned against it hard. And that's the point I'd want Daniel to sit with. Rabbinic Judaism partly defines itself against this position. The Sadducees before them, the Karaites after. The critique Daniel is voicing is ancient, it was made by people who took it seriously enough to live by it, and it lost.



Corn

Which means his question isn't new. It's the losing side's question, still being asked by the winners.



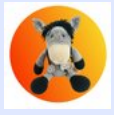
Herman

And has anyone commented on the imbalance? Six hundred years of commentary. Duran in fourteen fourteen lamenting the disdain for biblical studies. Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, writing in Tradition in nineteen ninety-nine, saying the yeshiva bakhur "knows the Bible only through its citations in the Talmud," and that this accurately depicts the average yeshiva student. TheTorah.com traces the neglect into the Talmud itself, to Kiddushin thirty a, and to Rashi's reading of a phrase as "keep your sons from Scripture." And Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch warns that peshuto shel mikra, the plain sense of the verse, may lead a student into heresy.



Corn

The plain sense of the verse is a spiritual hazard. You couldn't invent a better summary of the whole hierarchy if you tried.



Herman

Levy has the social edge of it too. Traditional Jews who give the Bible too much attention may be criticized, and if they follow its values independently of rabbinic channels, "they may be decried as heretics or, in some cases, treated like Karaites."



Corn

Treated like Karaites. There's a word that carries six hundred years of grudge in three syllables.



Herman

One rabbi reportedly lamented that Orthodoxy had abandoned Tanakh to the Maskilim, the secular enlightenment Jews. Handed the Bible over to the people they didn't trust, rather than teach it themselves.



Corn

That's the detail that makes the entire business ache, actually. Not that the text was hidden. That it was deliberately left on the other side of the fence, where the wrong people could reach it.



Herman

Now, the last part of Daniel's question. Have we lost touch with the original tradition? I want to answer it carefully, because the honest answer is yes and no, and the "no" matters.



Corn

Give me the no first.



Herman

The no is liturgical. The written text was never abandoned. It's read publicly every week, the whole Torah, every year, on a cycle, in every synagogue in the world. Daniel sits in the middle of Shabbat morning in many communities through the haftarot. The text is present constantly. What changed wasn't presence. It was the interpretive hierarchy.



Corn

The text is read the way a flag is flown. Honored, scheduled, never consulted.



Herman

Consulted only through Mishnah, Talmud, midrash. Judaism does not affirm sola scriptura, and never did. Jon Levenson wrote an essay in nineteen ninety-three, "Why Jews are not interested in Biblical Theology," arguing biblical theology is an inherently Christian, sectarian discipline. Benjamin Sommer adds that Jews prefer a multiplicity of meaning, where Protestants harmonize everything around a single center, a Mitte.



Corn

That's a real difference in temperament, not just curriculum. One tradition builds a fence, the other builds a spine.



Herman

Though I'd add, Corn, the Protestants building the spine have splintered into thousands of denominations arguing over what the spine says, so let's not envy too loudly.



Corn

Fair. So the loss Daniel feels is real, but it's a loss of a particular kind of fluency. Not the loss of the text.



Herman

Yes. The text is in the building. The ability to meet it face to face, without a commentator in between, that's what atrophied. Breuer's student doesn't lack the Bible. He lacks the unmediated Bible, and has been taught to be suspicious of it.



Corn

And Daniel's film. The Christian company makes the good Daniel film because, for them, Daniel is the second-most important book in their canon. For us he's miscellany.



Hilbert

Which of you said the fence became the estate?



Corn

I did. Why.



Hilbert

I've been turning that over. My brother-in-law, Heshy, he's the one to ask about this, except don't trust him, he once told me Rashi invented cholent. He holds that the whole problem is the printing. The Talmud's fine, he says, it's the page. Once you put it on a page it stops being an argument and starts being an answer. Heshy's wrong about most things but I've been chewing on that one all afternoon.



Herman

Heshy's not entirely wrong, though I'd want to know how he squares the page with the original prohibition on writing it down at all.



Hilbert

He doesn't square anything, Herman. He argues. That's his whole method. You'd know that if you'd ever had Shabbat lunch with him, which I don't recommend, he takes forty minutes on the egg salad.



Hilbert

I tried learning Tanakh myself once, from one of those Christian study Bibles a man at work gave me. Cross-references on every page, footnotes pointing you to the Gospels. I got as far as the maps and stopped, because the maps are the honest part. Nobody's footnotes are doing anything on a map of the Dead Sea. It just sits there being true.



Corn

So your position is that the Christians should publish an atlas of the Hebrew Bible and nothing else.



Hilbert

They nearly did. I kept the book for the maps and I keep a Tanakh in my coat pocket, the pocket-sized Koren, been carrying it eleven years. Never read it. I like the weight of it in the pocket, the way it stops the coat flapping on the wind. Heshy calls that idolatry. I call it study.



Corn

Eleven years. That's longer than some marriages last with the coat.



Hilbert

The coat's had three linings in that time, the Tanakh's stayed in the same pocket through all of them, which is more than I can say for anything else I own.



Herman

The pocket Tanakh doing the work of the fence, in a way. Keeping the thing present without opening it.



Hilbert

I hadn't thought of it that way. Herman, one more thing. The reason I asked who said the fence thing. My great-uncle used to argue that Daniel isn't about the end times at all, it's about the brisket at a deli on Agrippas Street, the name of the place I won't say because they're still open and I still owe them for a Seder. He had the recipe on a napkin. I've got the napkin. No, you can't see it.



Corn

Naturally.



Hilbert

The napkin's in the drawer with the good string. Anyway, Heshy says hi, sort of. He said "tell those two animals they're half right." He wouldn't say which half.



Herman

Heshy's being generous, then, because that's a fifty percent improvement on his usual.



Corn

The one thing I want to keep from Hilbert's drawer is the maps line. The maps just sit there being true. That's the fluency Daniel's mourning, in a way. A page with no commentary on it.



Herman

So here's the misconception I'd want to kill before we go, because it's the one that distorts the whole question: that Jews abandoned the written Bible. You hear it from both directions, from Christians who mean it as a gentle jab and from Jews who mean it as self-criticism, and it's wrong in the same way both times. The text was never abandoned.



Herman (continued)

It's read every single week, on a cycle, everywhere. What changed is the hierarchy, who's allowed to explain whom. The Bible became the text that the Talmud explains, instead of the Talmud being a fence around the Bible.



Corn

And the mirror-image misconception, that Christian fluency is just superior knowledge. It's fluency with a key attached. They know Daniel because, for them, Daniel is reading a story they're inside. Remove the key and the fluency changes shape. Same fact, seen from the two sides Daniel is standing between.



Herman

The last piece, the part I keep circling. The Talmud was written down as an emergency measure after the Temple fell, forbidden to be written until the thing it protected was burning. That's the open question for us, I think. Every generation faces some rupture and reaches for its own emergency measure. Daniel's generation, ours, whatever's coming. You write down what you swore you'd keep oral, to save it.



Corn

The question you can't answer in advance is which book your grandchildren will end up reading instead of the one you were trying to save.



Herman

Our producer, as ever, is Hilbert Flumingtop. He's at the desk, the coat is on the hook, and no, we still haven't seen the napkin.



Corn

For more along these lines, there's episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show. This has been My Weird Prompts. If the show is worth twenty minutes of your week, a review wherever you listen helps other people find it, and you can find everything at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

See you tomorrow, everyone.



Corn

Tomorrow. And if anyone from the fence company calls, we know nothing.

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