



POSEN LIBRARY VOLUME 1:  
ANCIENT ISRAEL FROM ITS BEGINNINGS THROUGH 332 BCE

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Jack H Skirball Campus in Los Angeles and, your host.

JH: Welcome to this edition of The College Commons Podcast, and in particular, our ongoing series with The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization. We welcome Dr. Alison L. Joseph, who is senior editor of The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization. Her first book, *Portrait of the Kings*, received the 2016 Manfred Lautenschlaeger Award for Theological Promise. She's also the co-editor of *Reading Other Peoples' Texts: Social Identity and Reception of Authoritative Traditions*, which came out in 2020. Her research interests include gender in the Hebrew Bible, the Bible in pop culture, and feminist historiography. Alison Joseph, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast.

Alison Joseph: Thanks so much for having me.

JH: I'd like to begin at the beginning because we're talking about Volume One of the Posen Library, which is ancient Israel from its beginnings through 332 BC. I wanna point out that the volume includes not just Biblical sources but also extra Biblical material in order to provide a more complete picture of the culture and the civilization of ancient Israel. I'd like to start off by asking if you can give us an example of some of this extra Biblical material that might provide precisely some of that color and insight into the reality of ancient Israel.

AJ: One of the great things we have in this volume is the collection of not just including extra Biblical material, but that we've collected it all by genre. So, we have a section of the book that is about legal texts and it talks all about the laws that we have in the Torah and outside the Torah, but we also have a number of extra Biblical legal texts. So, one that we have is a legal complaint from... [Hebrew]

AJ: Which is a place... It's probably somewhere between Tel Aviv and Ashdod, and it

dates to the end of the seventh century BCE, so somewhere, I don't know, 625 to 600. And this letter is reminiscent of laws and practices that we see in the Bible, most notably in Exodus 22, where there's a law that says if you owe a debt or something and you take your neighbor's garment as a pledge or some kind of collateral, you have to give it back to him at the end of the day because it's his only clothing and so, it's gonna get cold at night. And so, the law was looking out for people that even if you had to give collateral, the person who's holding the collateral has to give it back to you at night.

AJ: So, we have this letter and it's written on an ostrakon, which is a piece of pottery that maybe was broken off and is re-used to write something, and it's an appeal to some municipal leader, and it says, "Your servant had measured his harvest and stored it and everybody can testify that I did it, but that guy didn't give me back my garment." And so, I'll just read briefly from the letter, "I call out to the governor to return the garment to his servant so, grant mercy that you return the garment to your servant and do not confound me." And so here we have an example of this law from Exodus in practice, and we never really know. The laws that we have in the Bible, that was the law, but we don't know, were people really following them or, are these laws that somebody tried to impose so they said, "Oh, we're making this the law because we want everybody to do it," or it's some kind of ideal situation.

AJ: And here, we have this extra Biblical text which confirms that people were actually doing this and that this was the real practice, and it's kind of impossible for us to know just by reading the Biblical texts, what were people really doing. And by taking this Biblical material, especially when it's parallel or in contrast with what we see in the Biblical law, we get a better understanding of, "Oh, yeah. They were really doing that." We worried about what would happen if you had to give your garment as collateral and then, you didn't have it at night and it got cold. So, that's really an exciting thing that's happening in this volume, bringing the extra Biblical material in.

JH: It enlivens our notion of ethics because, as you said, it proves that it's not just a morality in the sky of value or religious value or civilizational value, but it's actually some kind of ethical practice that is expected, in this case, in ancient Israel. There's some real religious and cultural power in that but I wanna move to the ways in which this volume might challenge some of our perceptions of religion. In fact, the editor-in-chief who also joined us on this podcast, Deborah Dash Moore, is quoted as saying, "The Posen Library challenges the primacy of religion as the dominant mode of Jewish life and culture for over centuries." So, she's talking about, I think, the dimensionality of the Jewish experience, which isn't just religious. From an historical perspective, this position is very enriching but sometimes, from a religious perspective, it poses challenges to our sense of what Judaism or ancient Israel or religion itself really is or was. So, can you give us some examples of the ways in which some of these texts might force us to rethink about Israelite religion?

AJ: I guess I would say there are several different ways to answer that question, the first thing, which I think is important about this volume is that it's not a religious reading of the Biblical text, that we have this volume as part of the anthology that is demonstrating Jewish culture and civilization from the beginning, all the way to the 21st century. And I know that's what you spoke with Deborah Dash Moore about, and so the goal is not to show any specific religious perspective, this is what you're supposed to do, even the presentation I was talking about the section on laws, it's not a proscriptive, but rather it's... We've collected the laws, and we are showing them to you, in hopefully a new light. So in that way, it has, I would say, a more historical perspective that it's coming from... This volume goes from the second millennium to 332 BCE. And so 332 BCE is the time of the Alexander's conquest of Palestine. And so we sort of go from the beginning of time, or the beginning of when we knew about Israelites or something, until the beginning of Hellenism are all in this book, and this is also the period in which almost the entirety of the Hebrew Bible was written and compiled.

JH: And if I may interrupt, just for our listeners, the agenda to whom Dr. Joseph referred as Alexander the Great, who effectively brought Hellenistic, which is to say a Greek inflected culture to the entire far eastern edge of the Mediterranean and into the Near East. Sorry to interrupt, I just wanna locate the history.

AJ: No, and certainly this idea of almost the entire known world coming under the Greek Empire becomes a new thing, that we have these great empires as the ancient Near East is previous to this, but they don't conquer the whole world from Macedonia to India. And so that really changes the Jewish experience, so I think what's kind of maybe controversial, even as why are we starting with this pre-Hellenistic period. When we get into the next volume, so hopefully you'll have us back when Volume Two comes out. That's when we start to see a Judaism that looks much more like the way Judaism has developed, and we understand Judaism in the modern period, and what we see in the Biblical period is that it would really not be precise to even call these people Jews, they are ancient Israelites, it's only at the very end of this time period that we can really even call the people that we're talking about Jews, but at the same time, how can you not start the history of Jewish culture and civilization without the Bible and without ancient Israel? Because it's really from that people and that text that the rest of Judaism developed.

AJ: So I think that there really is this tension of why are we starting here? This is Volume One, when we're looking at this whole trajectory of 3000 years of Jewish history.

JH: So we're really talking about the historical eye being directed towards a tradition which has all kinds of religious claims on it and the inherent tension, and so for the historian, for the specialist, it may be controversial to start there because as you said, from a strictly historical perspective, it's not clear that ancient Israel is really what we would call Jewish, but from the Jewish perspective of the lived both communitarian and religious experience of being Jewish, it's controversial that it should be controversial.

AJ: That perspective is really, it's a, I guess, a retrospective. The history of Judaism is claiming ancient Israel and claiming this Biblical period as its origin, and for non-specialists... Yes, they would be very surprised to hear me say, oh, this is controversial. Why are we starting here? But I think it is significant to recognize that as well as the goal of the anthology is a collection of primary sources, so the original sources that are from whatever period the volume covers, and so what we've done throughout the series is really try to present these primary sources without a lot of intervention, we have editorial introductions in the beginning of sections to offer some contextualizing information, but we really do want the entries themselves to stand on their own. So now we're starting with this very interpretive approach in that we are claiming the story in the production of ancient Israel for the beginning of Jewish culture and civilization.

JH: What might be surprising to the Jewish or non-Jewish reader that they walk away with in terms of their sense of ancient Israel that perhaps they didn't expect.

AJ: So one of the things that is surprising, but also quite amazing about both the volume in print as well as what you'll be able to access online, or that we have really a lot of images, and these are images of all sorts of different artifacts, mostly from ancient Israel, and they give us a better portrait of daily life than we would get just from the Biblical literature. Here's some pots people were using, and we have a number of cosmetic implements and all sorts of different things, but we also have a bunch of different figurines so little statues that are a few inches long.

AJ: We have a number of different kind of altars that maybe were found in various archeological sites. We don't exactly know how these things were used, but the archaeologists's best speculation would be that maybe these things, these figurines or these small altars were used in ways that conflict with the Ten Commandments. Don't create idols, don't pray to other gods, don't do any of these things, and so we don't exactly know how they were used, but we have them and I think it's certainly interesting to see that this was also a part of the culture of ancient Israel, but maybe will be shocking and enraging to some people.

JH: As a general approach, I think it's fair to say that monotheistic religions, particularly Islam, Judaism and Christianity, adopt a kind of self-congratulatory posture of having either brought into the world or adopted something like ethical monotheism, and the self-congratulation comes from the position that this ethical monotheism was a rupture from the otherwise heedless hedonistic pagan cultures around them. Does your volume put the final nail in the coffin on that self-congratulatory approach? Does it at least call it into question?

AJ: I don't think it really does. In part, not because we're shying away from hard topics, but the approach of the entire project is not to create a kind of theological or ideological prescription for, this is how you should be Jewish, or this is what Jews do, or any of that. So I would say that it doesn't become the final nail in the coffin because we're not

pulling that out of the text, we're not taking that kind of interpretive approach that's saying that, "Oh, the Torah says this, but nobody did it" or "We think Judaism is so great because we have this system of ethical monotheism." We're not making any kind of valued statements like that or valued interpretations of what the texts are doing, rather we're presenting the Biblical text as well as the extra Biblical text and the artifacts to sort of show what the culture and civilization was of this period in ancient Israel.

[music]

JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu) for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching, and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu). Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes, but whatever you do, do not give us five stars unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast. Who do you think among the characters in the Bible are the earliest that actually lived as human beings and individuals, as far as we know? Is it King David or someone else?

AJ: It starts with the kings. We have very little evidence about the historicity of King David, if he lived, I would say maybe with the kings that follow David's son Solomon, so probably...

JH: After the division of the two kingdoms.

AJ: After the division of the kingdoms, so probably beginning around the 10th century. And the best ways that we can see that is through the comparison with the extra Biblical and foreign material. So for example, we have the Stele of Merneptah. Merneptah was an Egyptian Pharaoh who reigned at the very end of the 13th century BCE. And it mentioned something about Israel. We date it to 1208, sometimes it's dated 1205 that this inscription, this is the first mention of the existence of ancient Israel, and so that's a really significant text to highlight. The first time that some other people says, "Oh, here are Israelites, they're a group" we don't know how big they were, exactly where they were, what kind of power they had, any of those things, but we at least know that Merneptah acknowledges their existence. And I think that including that in this volume is a really important thing for the people we hope will be our readers, that that might not necessarily be something that they would necessarily have access to, otherwise.

JH: It gives contours to our sense of the civilization that we anchor ourselves to.

AJ: Right.

JH: Which is not just religious, it's also based in history, as you said. So I'd like to close out by asking you a personal favorite from among the sources, something that challenged you personally or that opened up new vistas for you that maybe you didn't expect.

AJ: So one of the things I love is some of the images of the artifacts can help us to know what's happening in a story. So for example, take the story of David and Goliath, this is one of the most famous stories in the Bible found in 1st Samuel 17. And you could ask little kids, they'll tell you, "Oh, David came with his slingshot and he shot the giant," and so I always imagine the story as David has like a Dennis the Menace type slingshot that...

[chuckle]

AJ: That "Y" stick with the rubber band? That's how I imagined the story. So in the text, next to where we have the text 1 Samuel 17 printed, we have a picture of sling stones. They were round rocks, maybe around the size of a golf ball, maybe a little bit bigger. And then you would have a sling that didn't look like that "Y" stick, but instead... It was maybe a... Kind of leather piece on a string that you would spin it over your head, I guess the way that you spin a lasso above you. And then you would release it. So here we have a picture of the sling stones. We have a reconstructed picture of what a sling would look like. And then we also have a close-up image from an Assyrian relief that shows slingers in battle. And you see these soldiers who have their hands above their head, and you could see the sling. So it gives you this perspective of... I've known this story from before I even knew the story of David and Goliath, and I always assumed it was sort of the way that I expected. But now I'm seeing what these things might have been, when it talks about David and his slingshot, and he has a little pouch with his five sling stones in it. And so it really gives... Even to things that are very familiar, a story like that, it really gives a new dimension.

JH: Dr. Alison Joseph, thank you so much for the pleasure of your conversation and learning with you. And please share with us the information that our listeners need to know so that they can get a hold of the volume, either in print or online.

AJ :The print volume, published by Yale University Press, will be available at the end of March from any of your regular online booksellers. And all of the content from this volume will be available in the Posen Digital Library at [www.posenlibrary.com](http://www.posenlibrary.com). It's available for free, you just need to register. And you'll find the Volume One material probably the first week of April, but you'll also find the content of the other four published volumes, which cover the period from 1750 to 2005. And as the anthology is completed, each volume will be added on. So right now, by April, we should have half of the anthology online and you'll be able to access all of that material for free.

JH: And I strongly recommend it. It's really a treasure trove and a pleasure to peruse. So

thank you very much.

AJ: Great to be here. Thank you.

[music]

JH: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons Podcast. Available wherever you listen to your podcasts or at the College Commons website, [collegecommons.huc.edu](http://collegecommons.huc.edu), where you can also stay tuned for future episodes.

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