Episode Book

EPISODE #5824

Herod's Four Walls: Why Only One Became the Kotel

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SYNOPSIS

Herod's retaining walls went up as one project, fifteen feet thick, and they're still standing. So why did only the Western Wall become the Kotel? We walk all four sides of the Temple Mount platform — the Iron Age stones in the Eastern Wall, the monumental pilgrim steps along the Southern Wall, the Northern Wall that's now buried inside Mamluk buildings — and then dig into the surprising religious history: a possible case of mistaken identity in the Midrash, a sixteenth-century earthquake, and a question of simple proximity.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Quick question before we get into anything else. If you were going to build one of the most famous structures in the world, and you had all four sides of it, and only one of those four sides ended up being the place where millions of people come to pray, what happened to the other three?



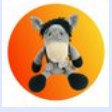
Herman

That's the episode.



Corn

That's Daniel's question. He wrote in and pointed out that we've talked before about the Western Wall as part of Herod's retaining wall system, and then he asked the obvious next thing: if the Temple Mount is roughly a rectangle, there had to be a retaining wall on every side. So what happened to the eastern, the southern, and the northern walls? How much of them is still there, what can we still see of Herod's engineering on each of them, and then the harder question: why did the Western Wall specifically become the holy site in Judaism? Is there something inherently special about that wall's location, or is its status mostly a product of circumstance, tradition, and where Jews happened to be allowed to pray over the centuries?



Herman

Both halves of that are good. The archaeology half is interesting because the answer to "what happened to them" is different for each of the four walls. And the second half, the religious history, is a real question with a real answer that surprises people.



Corn

So we're going to walk around the platform. Side by side, all four sides, and then figure out why one of them won.



Herman

All four walls went up as part of the same project, and three of them are still standing, and only one of them became the Kotel. So what we're doing is two things at once. First, the physical story: what does each wall look like now, what's left of the original masonry, what



Herman (continued)

got built over or through or against it. Second, the human story: how a retaining wall becomes a sacred site.



Corn

Give me the shape of the rectangle first.



Herman

Herod took the Hasmonean platform and doubled it, extending north, west, and south. The retaining walls he built are fifteen feet thick and they are still standing today. That's the baseline. The eastern wall is the exception to the whole story, because it is the oldest of the four visible walls, and its central section predates Herod entirely.



Corn

How much older are we talking?



Herman

Iron Age older. There are courses that Leen Ritmeyer identifies as Hezekiah-era ashlars, which puts them around seven hundred years before the common era. He compares them to sixth-century stones at the Temple of Eshmun and at Pasargadae, and Hershel Shanks wrote that most scholars think Ritmeyer is correct on that.



Corn

So one wall in the set is a thousand years older than the man who supposedly built "the walls."



Herman

Essentially, yes. Rulers of the day were extending or rebuilding an existing structure, not creating a new one. The dimensions are worth holding onto. The Western Wall runs four hundred eighty-eight meters. The Southern Wall is two hundred eighty-one meters, and Josephus equates its length to one furlong. The Eastern Wall is four hundred sixty-eight



Herman (continued)

meters. The Northern Wall is one thousand thirty-five feet.



Corn

So roughly comparable lengths on three of the four, and the eastern one carrying the oldest stone.



Herman

Let's start with the eastern wall, because it is the most complicated.



Corn

Four building stages, I think you said.



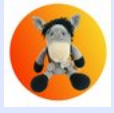
Herman

At least four. Hezekiah in the Iron Age, around seven hundred before the common era. Then Zerubbabel after the return from Babylon. Then the Hasmoneans. Then Herod. The wall we see today is a composite. There's a feature on it that basically tells you the whole story of the platform's expansion if you know what you're looking at.



Corn

The straight joint.



Herman

It's a vertical row of ashlars thirty-two meters north of the southeast corner, and it's the visible seam between the Hasmonean extension and the Herodian extension.



Corn

So the seam is where the platform grew. You can see the join.



Herman

The masonry on one side runs one way, the masonry on the other side runs another, and there's a clean vertical line where the two meet. That line is the receipt for the expansion. That's what tells you the platform used to end here, and then Herod pushed it further.



Corn

And the Golden Gate sits in that wall.



Herman

Northern third of the eastern wall. It's been sealed since 1541. The present gate structure is dated either to late Byzantine, around five hundred twenty under Justinian, or to the early Umayyad period, seventh to eighth century. There's some scholarly disagreement on which.



Corn

And there's a Jewish tradition attached to it.



Herman

A strong one. The Shekhinah used to appear through the eastern gate and will appear again when the Messiah comes. That's from Ezekiel, chapter forty-four. And Jews prayed at that gate for mercy in medieval times, partly because during the Crusader period they were barred from the city where the Western Wall is.



Corn

Which is interesting on its own. The gate had its own tradition, and a reason to be prayed at.



Herman

It did. And a Muslim cemetery runs along the southern stretch of that wall, which is itself a tradition, though a different one.



Corn

Southern wall next.



Herman

Nine hundred twenty-two feet, two hundred eighty-one meters, built by Herod as he expanded south onto the Ophel. It has the Double and Triple Gates, which together are what people usually call the Huldah Gates. It also has the monumental pilgrim steps, and those are worth dwelling on.



Corn

The numbers on those are what struck me.



Herman

Risers are seven to ten inches. Treads are twelve to thirty-five inches deep. That's an extremely shallow, wide step. It's not a staircase for climbing quickly. It's designed so that a very large number of people moving slowly, in festival mode, can move over it without anyone falling or stampeding. It's mass-pilgrimage infrastructure.



Corn

Seven inches of rise is basically a gentle ramp with a lip on it.



Herman

It's close to that, yes. And the Royal Stoa stood on top of the Southern Wall. That was the colonnaded structure along the southern edge of the platform.



Corn

And the gates themselves survive?



Herman

The Double Gate's interior ceilings survive and they are Herodian. Carved vines, rosettes, geometric patterns. The Triple Gate's present form is not Herodian; only the doorjamb of the left-hand arch is. So the Double Gate is the one where you can actually see Herod's work intact, on the interior, and it's beautiful.



Corn

And there was a bulge.



Herman

There was a bulge in the wall in the twenty-first century, blamed on unauthorized construction work for the el-Marwani Mosque underneath. It was repaired by Jordan. The repair itself was criticized as an eyesore because the stones didn't match.



Corn

Better an eyesore than a collapse.



Herman

That's roughly where the engineers landed, yes.



Corn

Northern wall.



Herman

This is the one nobody writes about. There is no dedicated page for it anywhere. The northern wall is one thousand thirty-five feet long. Its most fortified feature was the Antonia Fortress at the northwest corner.



Corn

Which was a Roman garrison, basically sitting on the corner of the platform.



Herman

Built to guard and watch the mount. Josephus describes it as erected upon a rock of fifty cubits in height and on a great precipice. The reason I said nobody writes about it is that if you go looking for the northern wall as a still-standing, free, exposed retaining wall, you won't find it. It's buried under later construction.



Corn

Buried, not gone.



Herman

Buried. Remains of a four-meter-thick wall and Herodian-style ashlars are still visible inside Mamluk buildings at the northwest corner of the Haram. And if you take those remains and you look at the footprint, you get an Antonia of roughly a hundred twelve by forty meters. That's Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's reconstruction.



Corn

So the northern wall is the one where "survival" means "it's inside a building now."



Herman

And there was a large reservoir there too, the Pool of Israel, at the northeast.



Corn

And then the Western Wall, which we've covered before, but the numbers help.



Herman

Four hundred eighty-eight meters long, started around nineteen before the common era. At the prayer plaza the total height from foundation is about thirty-two meters with nineteen of that above ground. Forty-five stone courses in total, twenty-eight above ground and seventeen below.



Corn

And the size of some of those stones is the show-stopper.



Herman

Most of the blocks weigh two to eight tons. There's one extraordinary stone near Wilson's Arch that measures thirteen and a half meters long and weighs somewhere between two hundred fifty and three hundred tonnes. Single stone. Multiple tons would be impressive on its own. That one is multiple tens of tonnes.



Corn

So the picture at the end of the walk is this. Eastern wall, oldest, mixed-period, visible. Southern wall, Herodian, monumental, visible. Northern wall, Herodian, buried. Western wall, Herodian and partially visible, and the only one that became a prayer site.



Herman

That's exactly the setup for the second half of the question.



Corn

Which is the interesting half anyway.



Herman

So the archaeology says all four sides are part of the same sacred complex, built by the same project, standing for the same two thousand years. And the religious history says only one of them became the Kotel. Which means the question switches from "what survived" to "why this one."



Corn

And the answer starts with a textual confusion.



Herman

It does. The National Library of Israel published a piece by Amit Naor that lays this out. The famous Midrash, the one that says the divine presence has never departed from the Western Wall, most likely referred to the western wall of the Temple building itself. Not the retaining wall. The building. The side of the Temple structure that was closest to the Holy of Holies.



Corn

And the Temple building's western wall lasted after the Roman destruction.



Herman

It survived the fire. It was still standing for centuries after. It was only destroyed by the end of the seventh century at the latest, around the time the Dome of the Rock was built. So when the sages said "the Western Wall," the wall they were pointing at may not be the wall we point at today.



Corn

That's not trivial. That reframes the entire tradition.



Herman

It's disputed. Both the National Library and Encyclopaedia Judaica flag it as a dispute, not a settled fact. But it is a real scholarly question, and the National Library is fairly clear that the likely referent was the building's wall, not the retaining wall.



Corn

So then why the retaining wall?



Herman

The National Library gives two reasons. One is the wall's proximity to where the Holy of Holies is presumed to have stood. Even if the sages meant the building, the retaining wall on the west side is the closest surviving surface to that spot. The other is more prosaic. In the mid-fifteenth century, Jews moved from Mount Zion to what is now the Jewish Quarter. That put them physically close to the western retaining wall. Proximity made it the preferred place to pray.



Corn

And then something cleared the space.



Herman

A sixteenth-century earthquake. Encyclopaedia Judaica is blunt about it: it is only from the sixteenth century that Jews began praying at the present location, and that is clear from the available sources. Nahmanides in twelve sixty-seven doesn't mention the Western Wall. Estori ha-Parhi in the fourteenth century doesn't mention it. Fifteenth-century Jewish sources don't mention it.



Corn

That's a long silence.



Herman

There's an even more specific document. The eleventh-century Cairo Genizah "prayer at the gates" text places Jewish prayer farther north, opposite the Holy of Holies, in front of what's now called Warren's Gate. Not at the Western Wall.



Corn

So the Genizah tells you where people were actually praying, and it isn't where we assume.



Herman

Correct.



Corn

And Nadav Shragai at the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs pulled this all together.



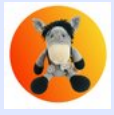
Herman

He did. And his framing is useful. After the Temple's destruction, over the seven hundred years that followed, Jews prayed in four places. On the Temple Mount itself, on the Mount of Olives, at the foot of the eastern wall, and later at the southern wall, where the main entrance and exit gates were, including the Huldah Gate.



Corn

So there were four acceptable prayer sites, and the Western Wall wasn't necessarily one of the four.



Herman

It wasn't the focus of any of the four, no. And Shragai cites Dan Bahat's research on the 1546 earthquake. That earthquake stopped the Jordan River from flowing for three days. It hit Jaffa with a tsunami. In Jerusalem it collapsed a row of buildings that were leaning against the Western Wall. Those buildings had been in the way. When they came down, the prayer alley opened up.



Corn

A seismic event cleared the prayer space.



Herman

You can argue about how much was causation and how much was opportunism, but the physical space to gather at the wall in the way we picture today did not really exist in the form it does now until then.



Corn

Shragai also notes that a synagogue inside the tunnels, the Cave synagogue, was Jerusalem's central synagogue before the Crusaders took the city in 1099.



Herman

Yes, which shows you that the wall has been used continuously in some form, deep inside, even when the surface was blocked. The Roman and later rulers didn't always let Jews pray at the plaza. But the tunnels underneath the residential buildings allowed access to the wall lower down.



Corn

And the sanctity claims themselves are strong.



Herman

They are. Midrash Tanhuma says the Shechinah never moved from the Western Wall of the Temple. Bamidbar Rabbah says the Western Wall of the Temple is never destroyed, the Shechinah in the West. Shragai notes there's a dispute over which Western Wall those sources meant. But he also notes there's no dispute that after the destruction, over time, the Jewish people consecrated the Western retaining wall.



Corn

Which is a fair distinction. You can have a dispute about the referent and still have agreement about the outcome.



Herman

Right. The outcome is that the retaining wall became the site.



Corn

And the other walls, before the Western Wall took over, had their own traditions.



Herman

The Golden Gate's messianic tradition is the strongest example. That's on the eastern wall. And Jews prayed there specifically during the Crusader period, because they were barred from the city where the Western Wall is. The gate had the pedigree. It just didn't win.



Corn

And the Bordeaux Pilgrim.



Herman

Three hundred thirty-three common era. The Bordeaux Pilgrim describes Jews ascending the Mount once a year to weep and mourn over one stone that remained from their Temple and to anoint it with oil. Possibly the Foundation Stone. Possibly not the Western Wall at all. Either way, it shows that Jewish mourning practice in late antiquity attached itself to a stone, and that stone wasn't necessarily where the Western Wall is.



Corn

So you have genuine competition. The Golden Gate on the east, the Huldah Gates on the south, the Foundation Stone as a candidate, prayer at Warren's Gate up north. And the Western Wall wins.



Herman

The Western Wall wins.



Corn

Which is to say, the answer to "why the Western Wall" is not inherent to the wall's location as a retaining wall. It's the product of proximity to the presumed Holy of Holies, plus a textual tradition that may have originally referred to a different wall, plus a fifteenth-century demographic shift, plus a sixteenth-century earthquake that cleared the space.



Herman

That's the full answer.



Corn

And that also answers the second half of Daniel's question, which is why the other walls didn't get comparable significance.



Herman

They had their own traditions. They lost out to circumstance. The Golden Gate had scriptural pedigree and it's dead-ended behind a sealed gate and a cemetery. The southern wall had the main entry gates and pilgrimage traffic and it's now an archaeological site beside a museum. The northern wall had the Antonia and the Pool of Israel, and it's under Mamluk buildings. The Western Wall had the right latitudinal argument about the Holy of Holies and it got physically cleared at the right moment.



Corn

The Northern Wall has the least documentation, which is its own kind of finding.



Herman

It really is. You can find whole treatments of the eastern and southern walls. The northern wall doesn't have a dedicated page. It's the one where the Roman garrison stood and the Pool of Israel sat and there were four-meter-thick walls buried inside Mamluk buildings, and you don't hear about it because you can't see it.



Corn

Which brings us into the modern political layer.



Herman

Shragai uses the phrase "Islamization" of the Western Wall's identity. The same stones are the Jewish Kotel and the Muslim Buraq Wall. The tradition on the Muslim side that the Prophet Muhammad tethered his winged steed at the wall is late-medieval. The political conflict over the wall in the twentieth century, particularly the 1929 riots, killed a hundred thirty-three Jews and a hundred sixteen Arabs.



Corn

And Raed Salah in two thousand.



Herman

You have no right to even one stone from the blessed al-Aqsa Mosque. The Western Wall of al-Aqsa is a part of the blessed al-Aqsa. That's his framing, and it goes further than any classical Islamic source on the wall.



Corn

Right. So a religious-status question became a national conflict in the twentieth century, and that conflict is not settling.



Herman

It's not.



Corn

Here's the thing that struck me while you were laying that out. Sacred geography is not fixed. It moves. Which is discomfiting, but it's true.



Herman

It moves with demographics, with access, with earthquakes. The Western Wall's status as the holiest Jewish prayer site is roughly five hundred years old in its present form. That's a lot of years, but it's not ancient on the scale of the wall itself, which has been standing for two thousand.



Corn

So the wall is old and its status is young, and the status of the other walls is either held in reserve or buried or sealed off.



Herman

That's the shape of it.



Corn

One more thing before we wrap the formal part. I keep coming back to a detail from earlier. Nineteen meters of the Western Wall is above ground, seventeen courses are below ground.



Herman

Twenty-eight courses above, seventeen below.



Corn

Half the wall is under the surface, and most people who go there to pray have no idea.



Herman

Most don't. The tunnels expose some of it. The prayer plaza only shows the top.



Corn

The prayer section is fifty-seven meters out of four hundred eighty-eight. Which is roughly one-eighth of the wall.



Herman

Around twelve percent of the length. The rest is either buried under the Muslim Quarter or exposed in archaeological park sections near Robinson's Arch.



Corn

The most famous wall in Judaism is mostly out of sight.



Herman

The section people come to pray at is a small slice, chosen partly by where the earthquake cleared the buildings.



Herman

Which is where I expected you to come out, honestly. You always end up at the "everything is contingent" beat on these.



Corn

I'll take that.



Hilbert

You've got the straight joint wrong.



Corn

How so.



Hilbert

You keep calling it a joint. It's a seam. A joint implies the two sides were fitted to each other. A seam is what you get when one wall is older and the other one was built up against it. Different thing. I spent a summer on a survey over there in the early seventies, and the foreman on the dig was a man named Yossi who also ran a falafel stand by the Dung Gate. He was very clear about the seam. He'd point at that line and he'd say: Hasmonean on this side, Herodian on that side. He said it like it was the most ordinary fact in the world.



Herman

Well, that's not quite how the archaeology works. The courses go in different directions, so...



Hilbert

I'm not arguing with your architecture, Herman. I'm telling you what the man said. He was a foreman. He knew what a seam looked like. And the seam was there. You can put your hand on it. You can feel the break between the two periods. We used to walk the eastern wall once a week just to look at it. I still have the trowel.



Corn

Of course you do.



Hilbert

It's in a box.



Herman

What box.



Hilbert

A wooden box. With a signed photo of Charles Warren. The archaeologist. He signed it for my great-grandfather. It's dated 1912.



Corn

Warren died in 1907.



Hilbert

That's what I'm told.



Corn

By whom?



Hilbert

The photo. It has the date on it.



Herman

The photo is signed by a man who had been dead five years when it was signed.



Hilbert

It's a very good photograph. My great-grandfather was very fond of it. He kept it in the box and I keep it in the box. The falafel at the Dung Gate was much better than the falafel at the Jaffa Gate, incidentally, in case either of you ever find yourselves down there.



Corn

Noted.



Hilbert

The Jaffa Gate falafel was fine if you were hungry. The Dung Gate falafel was a food. There's a difference. And whatever anybody tells you about the Golden Gate being sealed by the Muslims in fifteen forty-one, Yossi told me that was a mix-up between an Ottoman clerk and a mislabeled permit. The clerk thought he was sealing a gate up north. He sealed the wrong one. By the time anyone noticed, the paperwork said the gate was sealed, so it stayed sealed.



Herman

That is not in any source I've ever read.



Hilbert

Most sources don't go into the clerk.



Herman

Most sources don't mention there being a clerk.



Hilbert

It's a bad habit. They leave the clerk out of everything.



Corn

I'll give you the seam. The seam is the correct word.



Hilbert

Thank you.



Corn

I'll keep the joint to myself.



Corn

The misconception to go after at the end. When people say "the Western Wall is the last remnant of the Temple," that's wrong twice over.



Herman

Once for being the wrong structure. It's a retaining wall for the platform, not part of the Temple building. And once for being the wrong assumption about age of status. The veneration is roughly five hundred years old in its present form. Nahmanides doesn't mention it. Estori ha-Parhi doesn't mention it. Fifteenth-century sources don't mention it.



Corn

The Northern Wall is not destroyed.



Herman

It's buried. Remains of a four-meter-thick wall and Herodian masonry are visible inside Mamluk buildings at the northwest corner. If you know where to look, you can still see Herod's work on the northern side.



Corn

So "three walls and a mystery" is the summary.



Herman

Roughly.



Corn

One forward-looking thought before we go. If the holiest site in Judaism is a retaining wall that became a prayer site as a consequence of an earthquake, a demographic shift, and a possible textual misidentification, that changes how you think about sacred geography generally. It means the sacred can move. It means our certainties about why one place is holy and another is not are usually disguised historical accidents.



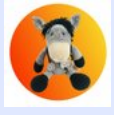
Herman

The other walls had their own traditions. Under different circumstances the Golden Gate could have been the Kotel. The Huldah Gates could have been. That's not an attack on anything. It's just what the record shows.



Corn

Thanks to our producer Hilbert Flumingtop, without whom the show would not get made, and who has now given us a new working definition of a seam.



Herman

I'm going to be thinking about that falafel ranking for a while.



Corn

For more along these lines, there's episode thirty-three oh six, What Is the Western Wall Really; episode thirty-three oh seven, Two Temples, One Mountain; and episode four eighty-one, Steel and Stone. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you're enjoying the show, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts. It helps other listeners find us.



Corn

Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot. We'll be back soon.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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