Episode Book

EPISODE #5493

Jerusalem Before Sukkot: Reconstructing the Pilgrim City

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SYNOPSIS

Imagine Jerusalem in the days before Sukkot during the Second Temple period — not as a pilgrim, but as a resident watching your city triple in size. Drawing on archaeology and ancient Jewish and rabbinic sources, this episode reconstructs the physical transformation of Jerusalem: the stepped pilgrimage roads, the Pool of Siloam, the mikva'ot, the Temple Mount bazaar, the dove-raising installations, and the housing question that may explain the sukkah itself. We distinguish carefully between what the evidence shows and what has to be inferred, and we sit with the mundane human experience that religious texts often leave out.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A resident of Jerusalem wakes up in the days before Sukkot and the city is already a different animal. The roads are filling with people who don't live there. Livestock is being driven in through gates that normally see a fraction of the traffic. And there's smoke on the air that wasn't there last week.



Herman

And that's before the festival has even started.



Corn

Which is the thing Daniel wants us to sit with. He wrote in and asked us to imagine going back to Jerusalem in the days immediately before Sukkot during the Second Temple period, and to reconstruct what that transformation would actually have felt like to somebody who lived there. Not to a pilgrim. To a resident.



Herman

The person who has to live in the city while it triples.



Corn

And he asks a specific set of questions. What would a resident have seen happening in the streets? Where did all the arriving pilgrims and their animals actually go? Where did they sleep, eat, buy supplies, obtain sacrifices, perform ritual purification? What happened to markets, roads, water supplies, public spaces as the city filled up?



Herman

And then the festival itself.



Corn

Then the festival itself, from the perspective of an ordinary resident. The crowds, the processions, the Temple activity, the sacrifices, the music, the shofar and trumpet blasts, the temporary booths, the smells, the noise, day and night. And he's explicit about the method he wants. Use archaeology together with ancient Jewish and rabbinic sources, and distinguish clearly between what we actually know and what has to be reconstructed. Because the aim, in his words, is to recover the mundane human experience that religious texts often leave out.



Herman

That last part is the whole episode, honestly.



Corn

It is. So we're going to run three evidence streams in parallel. Archaeology for the physical infrastructure. Literary sources for the ritual and the texture. And then flag our reconstruction every time we cross from one into the other. The gap between the record and the inference is not a problem to be papered over. It's the payoff.



Herman

Let's start with the city itself. The machine that had to absorb all these people.



Corn

Sukkot is the right lens for this, isn't it? Of all the festivals.



Herman

It's the preeminent one of the Second Temple period. So central that the sources sometimes just call it the Festival. He-chag. No qualifier. When you said "the Festival" in that period, you meant Sukkot.



Corn

Which tells you something about how the year was structured in people's heads.



Herman

It tells you everything. Passover and Shavuot mattered enormously, but Sukkot was the one that drew the biggest crowds and ran the longest. Eight days of celebration, plus the pilgrimage travel on either end. And it's the one where the Torah commands you to live in booths, which means the festival literally changes the housing stock of the city.



Corn

So let's establish the scale problem first, because everything else depends on it.



Herman

The permanent population of Jerusalem in the late Second Temple period is debated. Estimates vary widely. But the festival-time crowds are commonly put at somewhere between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand pilgrims. And I want to flag that number as an estimate, not a census. It's inferred from the sacrificial numbers, from the geography, from literary descriptions. It's contested.



Corn

But even the low end of that range is a city being asked to absorb more than its own population in the space of a week or two.



Herman

Philo of Alexandria gives the literary version of it. He writes about countless multitudes from countless cities coming, some over land, some by sea, from east and west and north and south at every feast. And then he says something lovely. He says they take the temple for their port as a general haven and safe refuge from the bustle and great turmoil of life.



Corn

"Their port." Like the Temple is a harbor.



Herman

A harbor. And that's a Diaspora Jew writing about a city he may never have visited, so we hold it loosely. But Josephus gives us the why. He frames pilgrimage as a deliberate social cohesion mechanism. He says the point is that they not be ignorant of one another, being compatriots and sharing in the same practices, and that this happens through intermingling, instilling a memory of them through sight and association.



Corn

So the crowds aren't a side effect. They're the design.



Herman

And here's the detail that convinced me this was worth an episode. A third-century Greek orator named Menander Rhetor, a pagan, writing centuries after the Temple was destroyed, still remembered that the largest multitudes are to be found at the festival of the Hebrews living in Syria Palaestina, gathered in very large numbers from most nations.



Corn

A non-Jewish observer, generations later, still using it as his benchmark for a crowd.



Herman

His benchmark. That's how far the reputation traveled.



Corn

So the city has to absorb this. What did it actually build to do it?



Herman

Start with the Temple Mount itself, because it's the anchor. Herod doubled the platform to roughly fourteen and a half hectares. Thirty-six acres. It was the largest religious sanctuary in the ancient world.



Corn

Fourteen and a half hectares of sacred real estate.



Herman

And it's not empty space. The Royal Stoa on the southern end was a basilica that Josephus called more worthy of mention than any other structure under the sun. A hall of columns with a hundred and sixty-two columns in four rows.



Corn

A hundred and sixty-two columns. Somebody counted.



Herman

Somebody counted, and the number survived. And then the Court of the Gentiles, which is the part people get wrong. It wasn't a quiet contemplative space. It functioned as a bazaar. Vendors selling sacrificial animals, food, souvenirs. Money changers converting Greek and Roman currency into Tyrian shekels, because that was the currency acceptable for Temple use.



Corn

So the outer court of the holiest site in the Jewish world was, functionally, a market with a currency exchange.



Herman

It was. And that's the setting of the cleansing of the Temple in the Gospels. That's not an ordinary day being interrupted. That's a festival-crowd scene. The vendors were there because the pilgrims were there.



Corn

Which reframes the whole incident.



Herman

It does. Now, the roads. This is where the archaeology gets exciting. The Hasmoneans built wide stepped roads specifically to control massive crowds and guide them toward the Temple gates. This isn't inference. You can walk on them.



Corn

The city's urban design was shaped by pilgrimage traffic.



Herman

Shaped by it. And then the Pilgrimage Road, excavated in the City of David by Reich and Shukron. A stepped street, stone-paved, running from the Pool of Siloam up to the Temple Mount. It is literally the pilgrim route, and we have it.



Corn

Named by archaeologists, not by the sources.



Herman

Named by archaeologists because that's what the physical evidence says it was for. And then Robinson's Arch and the Huldah Gates on the southern wall. Grand entrances, built for mass throughput. The southern wall was explicitly designed as a monumental entrance.



Corn

So you arrive at the pool, you purify, you walk up a purpose-built stepped road, and you enter through gates built to move a city.



Herman

That's the sequence. And the water is the linchpin of the whole thing.



Corn

Talk about Siloam.



Herman

The Pool of Siloam is the strongest archaeological anchor we have for the pilgrim experience. The Jerusalem Talmud, in tractate Hagigah, names it as the starting point for pilgrims who ascended on foot to the Temple. And it was used for ritual purification before entering the Temple enclosure.



Corn

So the physical pool and the textual tradition agree.



Herman

They agree. The Second Temple period pool was rediscovered in two thousand four by Reich and Shukron. It's about sixty-nine meters wide. Steps on at least three sides. And here's the detail I love. It's a soft trapezoid shape, and the stepped design is interpreted as accommodating varying water levels, so immersion remained possible as the pool drained through the festival.



Corn

They engineered the pool for the fact that it would be drunk dry by pilgrims.



Herman

They engineered the pool for the festival. And coins of Alexander Jannaeus embedded in the plaster give a secure earliest date, so we know when it was built, roughly, and we know it was in use.



Corn

Sixty-nine meters. Steps on three sides. That's not a puddle. That's a facility.



Herman

It's a facility. And then the mikva'ot. Ritual baths are everywhere in the archaeology of this city. Excavations along the southern wall found numerous mikvehs for the ritual purification of worshippers. And the Hasmonean state even built mikva'ot directly beside rural wine and oil presses, so produce could be processed in purity from the moment of harvest.



Corn

Wait. They built ritual baths out in the countryside next to the presses?



Herman

Next to the presses. Which tells you purity infrastructure was a system, not an afterthought. It reached from the Temple all the way back to the olive grove.



Corn

That's a supply chain with a theology attached.



Herman

That's exactly what it is. Now, where did everyone sleep?



Corn

This is the question I find hardest to picture.



Herman

Sources describe pilgrims staying anywhere from a few days to several weeks. Diaspora Jews arriving by sea landed at Jaffa, joined caravans for a three-day journey to Jerusalem, and secured lodgings in one of the many hotels or hostelries.



Corn

Three days on the road, then you need a bed.



Herman

You need a bed. And here's the theory I find most compelling. One scholarly line holds that the sukkot themselves originated as the shelters pilgrims built when they came to the festivals at cultic sanctuaries. In other words, the sukkah is, in part, a pilgrimage-housing institution.



Corn

The festival's signature ritual object is a fossil of ancient festival accommodation.



Herman

That's the theory. And I want to be careful. It's a theory, not a settled fact. But it reframes the whole commandment. You're not just commemorating the wilderness. You're re-enacting the housing you'd have needed if you'd made the pilgrimage yourself.



Corn

Which would have been most of the people in the city, at some point in their lives.



Herman

Most of them. Now, the caveat. The sources tell us lodgings existed. They do not tell us their density, their price, or how crowded they got. The vivid picture of every rooftop, courtyard, and hillside covered in booths is inference from the population numbers plus the biblical command. Plausible. But reconstruction.



Corn

Flag it and move on.



Herman

Now, food. And this is where the archaeology gives us something rare. Thousands of fish bones were found in the area Reich and Shukron identify as the Shiloah Pool.



Corn

Fish bones.



Herman

Fish bones. Which is a tangible trace of what people actually ate at the site. Not what a text says they should eat. What they ate. Somebody sat there and ate fish, and the bones survived two thousand years.



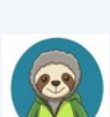
Corn

That's the most human detail in the whole research pile.



Herman

It is. And then the animals. The Court of the Gentiles bazaar supplied sacrificial animals on site, but the supply chain reached deep into the countryside. Archaeologists have found large dove-raising installations, columbaria, on rural estates, built to satisfy the massive daily demand for bird sacrifices brought by visitors.



Corn

So there are purpose-built dove factories feeding the Temple.



Herman

Purpose-built dove factories. And that's just the birds. Sukkot's sacrificial load was enormous. The Mussaf offerings prescribed in Numbers require bulls declining from thirteen on day one to seven on day seven. Seventy bulls total. Plus rams, lambs, and goats. And that's on top of the regular daily offerings and every individual pilgrim's freewill and thanksgiving sacrifices.



Corn

So hundreds of animals per day.



Herman

Hundreds per day, with priests working in organized batches. The Mishnah describes the Passover system as three shifts, with blood collected and poured at the altar base. You'd need something similar for Sukkot.



Corn

And the sensory implication of that is inescapable.



Herman

It is. A city with that volume of slaughter, plus the burning of offerings on the altar, would have had a pervasive sensory signature. Smoke, blood, and the lowing and bleating of animals. Not a metaphor. The actual smell of the city during the festival.



Corn

So the resident's experience of the festival begins with the sound of livestock and the smell of smoke before they've even set foot near the Temple.



Herman

Before they've set foot near it. The city tells you what's happening whether you go or not.



Corn

That's the infrastructure. Now let's walk through the festival itself. From the first trumpet blast to the last night of dancing.



Herman

Start with sound, because sound is how the city kept time. The Place of Trumpeting inscription was found below the southwest corner of the Temple Mount. It marks where a priest stood to sound the trumpet to announce the Sabbath's approach and close. The Talmud corroborates it.



Corn

So we have a physical inscription telling us where a man stood to blow a horn.



Herman

We have the sign. The sign survived. And that's direct archaeological evidence that the city's daily and weekly time was marked by audible signals from the Temple. A resident didn't check a sundial. They heard the sacred calendar.



Corn

Priests with trumpets, Levites with lyres, flutes, cymbals.



Herman

And the shofar. The shofar and trumpet blasts were a defining sonic feature of festival days. This is a city where the day has a soundtrack, and the soundtrack comes from one building.



Corn

Now, the Four Species.



Herman

Each day, pilgrims and residents carried the Four Species. Lulav, the palm. Hadass, the myrtle. Aravah, the willow. And the etrog, the citron. And they shook them during the recitation of Psalm 118, the Hallel.



Corn

So you've got hundreds of thousands of people in a city, all holding the same four objects, all shaking them at the same moment in the liturgy.



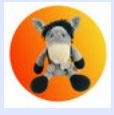
Herman

All at the same moment. The visual of that alone is worth the episode. And then the willow ceremony. Large willow branches were placed around the altar. Participants circled the altar once each day, and seven times on the seventh day, Hoshana Rabbah, reciting Psalm 118 and beating the branches.



Corn

Seven times on the seventh day.



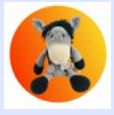
Herman

Seven times. And the Mishnah notes the willow ceremony overrode Shabbat. A rare and dramatic exception that the Boethusians objected to.



Corn

A ritual so important it suspended the Sabbath.



Herman

Suspended the Sabbath. Which tells you how the authorities ranked it. And then the water libation, which is the one I'd most want to see.



Corn

Walk us through it.



Herman

Water drawn from the Pool of Siloam, carried up through the Water Gate with trumpet fanfare, and poured by a priest at the altar each day. It symbolized the onset of the rainy season.



Corn

So the city takes its water supply, and the priests make a public spectacle of pouring it out at the altar.



Herman

They make a spectacle of it. And the procession from Siloam to the Temple is one of the most vivid, reconstructable public events of the festival. You can trace the route. You can stand at the pool. You can stand at the gate.



Corn

And then it gets dark.



Herman

And then it gets dark, and this is the showpiece. Simchat Beit HaShoeivah. The Water-Drawing Celebration. The Talmud calls it the most joyous event during the Second Temple period. And the line everyone quotes is this. One who never saw the Water-Drawing Celebration has never seen joy in his life.



Corn

"Has never seen joy in his life."



Herman

That's the claim. It ran eight days of non-stop celebration, beginning at the close of the first day of Sukkot after the afternoon offering, and lasting through the night until the morning offerings.



Corn

All night. Every night. For eight nights.



Herman

Every night. Temple workers built large wooden bleachers on the courtyard walls, with women separated on the higher levels and men below. A physical structure erected specifically for festival crowds.



Corn

So they're building temporary grandstands.



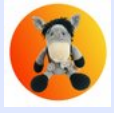
Herman

Temporary grandstands. And then enormous candelabras were lit, and their lanterns filled all of Jerusalem with light like day.



Corn

"Like day." So a resident on the far side of the city, who never goes near the Temple, sees the sky glowing.



Herman

Sees the precinct glowing all night. The city has a second sun for eight days. And the music. Priests with trumpets, Levites with lyres, flutes, and cymbals. And the spectacle. Distinguished elders with long white beards sang, danced wildly, performed acrobatic feats, and juggled.



Corn

Juggled.



Herman

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the president of the Sanhedrin, famously juggled eight flaming torches.



Corn

The chief justice of the highest court in the land, juggling fire, at two in the morning.



Herman

At two in the morning, in front of the whole city. And the Levites stood on the steps leading to the Nicanor Gate, chanting the Songs of Ascent. Psalms 120 through 134.



Corn

So you've got the psalter being sung from a staircase, in shifts, all night.



Herman

All night. And families from Syria, Egypt, and Babylonia converged on the Temple Mount for this specifically. The Diaspora came for the night festival.



Corn

What about the welcome? What did the residents do?



Herman

This is the part I'd put at the center of the episode if I were writing it. The Mishnah Bikkurim describes the welcoming ceremony. It's technically about Shavuot, the first-fruits pilgrimage, but it's the best literary window we have into the ceremonial welcome pilgrims received, and it likely reflects a general pilgrimage ethos.



Corn

Read it.



Herman

An ox would go in front of them, his horns bedecked with gold and with an olive crown on its head. The flute would play before them. When they drew close to Jerusalem they would send messengers in advance. The governors and chiefs and treasurers would go out to greet them. And then this. All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them saying, our brothers, men of such and such a place, we welcome you in peace.



Corn

The artisans stand up.



Herman

The people who make things, the tradesmen, the craftsmen, they stop working and they stand, and they greet the pilgrims by name. By town. "Men of such and such a place."



Corn

That's a resident population actively, ritually receiving the influx. Receiving it.



Herman

Receiving it. And notice the music of arrival. The flute playing before them. The decorated animal. The civic choreography of a city bracing for influx and turning it into ceremony.



Corn

So the answer to Daniel's question about what a resident saw in the streets is partly this. They saw themselves, standing up, welcoming strangers by town.



Herman

That's the answer. And it's not the answer I expected when we started.



Corn

Now, the honest coda. What can't we know?



Herman

A lot. And I want to be specific about it, because the specificity is the point. We can't know the exact festival-time population. Three to four hundred thousand is an estimate, and contested. We can't know the sensory texture. The specific smells, the noise levels, the crowding, the sanitation conditions, the tempers, the prices.



Corn

The prices. Somebody was gouging somebody for a room.



Herman

Somebody was absolutely gouging somebody for a room, and we have no record of it. We can't know whether every resident built a sukkah, or where the poor or the sojourner slept. We can't know the precise route and choreography of the water procession. We can't know how the city handled waste, water rationing, and animal waste at peak density.



Corn

Animal waste at peak density. With hundreds of thousands of animals.



Herman

And we can't know the experience of women, children, the sick, and the poor. They're largely absent from the elite literary sources. The Mishnah and Talmud preserve genuine Temple-period traditions, but they were compiled after the year seventy and they sometimes idealize. Josephus and Philo are near-contemporary, but they're apologetic and prone to rhetorical inflation. The New Testament reflects first-century pilgrimage crowds, but it's theologically motivated.



Corn

And the archaeology?



Herman

The archaeology is the most neutral witness. And it consistently corroborates the scale of the infrastructure the texts describe. That's the strongest thing we can say. The texts describe a city built for crowds. The stones agree.



Corn

So the gap between what texts record and what bodies felt, that's where the episode lives.



Herman

That's where it lives. The sources tell us what happened. They don't tell us what it was like to be tired, and thirsty, and jostled, and standing in a crowd of four hundred thousand people, watching a man juggle fire, with smoke in your eyes.



Corn

You know, one more thing worth a line. Every seventh year, in the year after the sabbatical, there was the Hakhel assembly. All Israel, men, women, and children, gathered in the Temple courtyard on the first day of Chol HaMoed to hear the king read the Torah.



Herman

Which would have made certain Sukkot years even more crowded. A once-in-seven-years spike on top of the annual spike.



Corn

Imagine being a resident in a Hakhel year.



Hilbert

The exit's the problem. Everyone studies the entry. Nobody studies the exit.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

I spent most of seventy-four and seventy-five doing crowd flow work. A big sporting venue. Concrete bowl, sixty thousand seats, four gates. I had a clipboard and a stopwatch and I counted people through turnstiles for eighteen months. The entry we solved in a fortnight. The exit we never solved.



Herman

Because everyone leaves at once.



Hilbert

Everyone leaves at once, and they all want the same door they came in. So you get a funnel. Now you take the water libation. The priest pours the water, the trumpets go, the crowd on the Temple Mount starts to move. Where do they go? Down through the Huldah Gates. Two gates. Into a stepped street.



Corn

The Pilgrimage Road.



Hilbert

And it's beautiful, structurally. It's the most elegant answer to a problem I ever failed to solve. Sloped, stepped, walled, no side exits, no cross traffic. You cannot get lost. You cannot cut across. You can only go down.



Herman

Which is exactly what you want on the way in.



Hilbert

It's exactly what you want on the way in. On the way out, it's a chute. And you've got four hundred thousand people, and a good number of them are carrying a lulav in one hand and an etrog in the other, and some of them are carrying a child, and some of them are old. My brother-in-law did this work too, for a while. He says the same thing. The crowd is fine until it stops.



Corn

What happens when it stops?



Hilbert

Nothing dramatic. Somebody trips. Somebody's sandal comes off. Somebody turns around to look for their wife. And the pressure behind them doesn't know any of that. It keeps coming.



Herman

And the engineers didn't have fire codes.



Hilbert

They didn't have fire codes. I tried to model the Pilgrimage Road once. Throughput, gradient, width, dwell time at the bottom. I gave up. I couldn't get the numbers to behave, and I didn't trust the assumptions. A man with a clipboard in nineteen seventy-five couldn't do it. I don't know how they did it with a plumb line.



Corn

They had centuries of practice.



Hilbert

They had centuries of practice, and they had one thing I never had. Nobody was suing them.



Corn

There's something in that. The crush, the patience required, the exhaustion. That's the part the texts don't record.



Hilbert

The texts record the joy. Somebody else recorded the sandals.



Corn

Herman, the thing I keep circling back to is the fish bones.



Herman

Say more.



Corn

Thousands of fish bones near the pool. We've got the candelabras, we've got the juggling sages, we've got the psalms on the staircase. All of that is the festival as the sources want us to see it. And then there's a pile of fish bones, which is just somebody eating lunch.



Herman

Somebody eating lunch while they waited to go up.



Corn

That's the mundane experience Daniel asked for. The lunch.



Herman

And here's the thing that strikes me. We can reconstruct the architecture almost completely. We can walk the road. We can measure the pool. We can read where the priest stood to blow the trumpet. And the one thing we can't recover is the thing Daniel actually asked about. What it felt like to be tired in that city.



Corn

Which is the cutting-room floor detail for me, actually. Something we didn't get to. The dove columbaria.



Herman

The dove factories.



Corn

Because it's the same lesson. We've got the Temple, we've got the altar, we've got the seventy bulls. And then out in the countryside there's a guy who built a stone tower with hundreds of little niches in it, purely to raise birds for pilgrims he'd never meet.



Herman

A rural supplier, three days' walk from the customer.



Corn

And that's the festival too. The whole economy of it. The people who never came to Jerusalem at all, who just raised the birds.



Herman

Which is a good place to leave it, honestly. The festival wasn't only the city. It was everybody who fed the city.



Corn

The open question I'd leave with is this. How did the ordinary non-elite resident experience it? The women, the children, the poor, the sick. The people whose experience the sources didn't think to write down. What did the city smell like at peak density? How did people cope with the noise and the crowding?



Herman

The honest answer is we don't know. And that's not a failure of the episode. That's the finding.



Corn

The gap between what texts record and what bodies felt is where history becomes human. That's the whole aim here. To recover the mundane experience, and to admit that the reconstruction is the point.



Herman

Thanks as always to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces this show and who has, apparently, strong views on turnstiles.



Corn

Strong views on turnstiles. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. If you enjoyed this reconstruction of ancient Jerusalem, leave us a review and tell a friend.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.