Episode Book

EPISODE #6634

Ancient Israelite Men Went Bareheaded

PUBLISHED	16 November 2026 at 16:06 UTC
DURATION	27:09
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/kippah-origins-ancient-israel-67056/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Dorothy, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	z-ai/glm-5.3
VOICES	omnivoice
PIPELINE	V5.34
SOURCES	14 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	16 November 2026 at 22:22 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Children's Bibles often picture Moses and David in skullcaps, but ordinary men in ancient Israel actually walked around bareheaded. Drawing on Simcha Gross's 2025 research, this episode traces how Jewish male head covering shifted from situational cloak-wrapping in Roman Palestine to constant covering with a sudara in Sasanian Babylonia. From the biblical high priest's mitznefet to the Beta Israel community outside the Babylonian Talmud's orbit, the evidence shows the kippah is a medieval-to-modern development.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Every children's Bible I have ever leafed through has the same quiet scandal in it. There is Moses on Mount Sinai, there is David with his sling, and there they are, on every head, what look suspiciously like small knitted skullcaps. This week the prompt came from Hannah, which is a nice change of pace for the household, and her question is basically: is any of that real? She wants to know what Jewish men and women actually wore on their heads in biblical and Second Temple times, whether the kippah is a later rabbinic development projected backwards onto the ancient world, and how much of ancient head covering was specifically Jewish versus just what everybody in the Near East was doing anyway. Men and women separately, evidence weighed.



Herman

Herman Poppleberry here, and I will say up front, this is one of those topics where the scholarship got rattled recently, which is the fun kind. There is a twenty twenty-five article by Simcha Gross in the Jewish Quarterly Review, "From Togas to Turbans," that basically takes the whole question of where the kippah comes from and shakes it until the comfortable story falls out of its pockets.



Corn

And I want to be clear about why I like this one, before we even start. It is not just a trivia question. It is a question about how we imagine the past, and specifically about how we imagine the past as a costume department. Somebody draws Moses, and they have to decide what to put on his head, and the decision they make smuggles in six centuries of theology that has no business being in the second millennium BCE.



Herman

That is exactly the mechanism. The illustrator is not lying. The illustrator is inheriting. And the inheritance feels so natural that nobody thinks to check the receipt.



Corn

So let's start with the men, because the evidence there is surprisingly clear. Surprisingly late, too.



Herman

The first thing to get straight is that the kippah is not an ancient Israelite garment. It is medieval to modern. And the rabbinic texts people cite as its origin do not actually say what they are claimed to say. Gross states it flatly: "It is well established that head coverings did not constitute part of the regular male wardrobe in ancient Israel." Ordinary men, biblical period, Second Temple period, walking around bareheaded.



Corn

Bareheaded. So the default picture in my head, the one where every Israelite man has something on his head, is wrong twice over. Wrong that they covered, and wrong about the thing they weren't covering with.



Herman

Right, and I want to sit on that "wrong twice over" for a second, because it is a useful diagnostic. If you had asked me to sketch an ordinary farmer in the hill country of Judah, I would have drawn him in a headscarf without even thinking about it. And the reason I would have is not evidence. It is that every illustration I have ever seen of him already made the decision for me. The picture comes first and the evidence never gets a turn.



Corn

It is the ancient-world equivalent of drawing a Roman senator in a necktie. Nobody would do that, because we have a mental firewall about Roman dress. But the firewall does not extend to biblical figures, because for a lot of people those illustrations are the only images of ancient Israel they have ever absorbed.



Herman

And here is the part I find elegant. The one unambiguous, mandated, status-specific male head covering in the whole biblical corpus is the high priest's. The mitznefet, the turban, with the gold frontplate, the tzitz, engraved Holy to the Lord. Christine Palmer wrote a study of priestly apparel, and her line is that "sacral apparel transforms a man into a priest by transferring him from the realm of the common into the realm of the holy." The head covering marks him as set apart. It is not everyday Jewish identity on his head. It is the opposite. It is the one man in Israel whose head is doing something different from everyone else's.



Corn

The most covered head in the country was the exception, not the uniform.



Herman

That is a nice compression of it, actually. And it is worth stressing how pointed that exception is. The text goes out of its way to describe the priestly headgear in loving detail, the gold, the engraving, the linen. If head covering were the default, all that description would be redundant. You do not ceremonially describe a man putting on the thing every shepherd is already wearing.



Corn

Like publishing a manual on how to put on socks.



Herman

The sock manual of the Book of Exodus. And then you get to the rabbinic texts, and this is where Gross's intervention really bites. There is a passage in Kiddushin, in the Babylonian Talmud, from around four hundred fifty CE, that gets cited constantly as an origin story for the kippah. Rav Huna sees the young sage Rav Hamnuna arrive with no head covering, and he rebukes him for it.



Corn

Go on. What is the rebuke?



Herman

That is the joke. Hamnuna's excuse is "I am not married." And Huna's remedy is "get married." Not "cover your head." The whole exchange is about marriage and scholarly dignity, a young unmarried scholar not having the standing yet. It has been recruited into a kippah-origins narrative it simply does not support. Gross's whole complaint is that these texts keep getting read backwards, as if they were steps on a staircase leading inevitably to the skullcap, when each one is actually about something else entirely.



Corn

So the founding document of the kippah is a story about a mother-in-law's expectations.



Herman

It really is more about matchmaking than millinery. And I think the reason the misreading survives is that the scene is vivid. A rebuke, an excuse, a head with nothing on it. It looks like the thing. It has the props of the thing. But the dialogue is doing entirely different work.



Corn

It is like finding a Renaissance painting of a man holding a small rectangular object near his ear and concluding the Renaissance had mobile phones. The object is in the frame. The object is not doing the job you assume.



Herman

That is the disease in miniature. And the geography is where it gets fascinating for me, because the change is driven by empire, not theology. Same rabbinic movement, two different worlds. In Roman Palestine, the dominant mode was wrapping. You used the cloak you were already wearing, you pulled part of it up over your head at particular ritual moments, and Gross's phrasing is that wrapping "was the chief way to acknowledge the divine presence in particular ritual settings, consistent with the Roman conventions and practices of the period." A Roman would have recognized the gesture. It was situational. You covered for the moment, then you went back to your bare head and your lunch.



Corn

Meaning a Palestinian rabbi's head covering had more in common with a Roman pulling his toga over his head before a sacrifice than with anything you would see on King David Street today.



Herman

And I want to underline the practicality of it, because it is easy to miss. There was no second garment. There was no drawer at home with the head covering in it. The covering was your cloak, the same rectangle of cloth that was keeping you warm an hour earlier and would be your blanket that night. The head covering did not exist as a category of object.



Corn

Which is why an archaeologist digging up a Palestinian rabbi's house from that period would find nothing to find. The evidence is invisible not because it perished but because it was never a separate thing.



Herman

Then you cross into Sasanian Babylonia, and everything changes. Stand-alone coverings appear, a real garment called the sudara, an actual headpiece rather than a repurposed cloak. Wrapping gets displaced, bareheadedness becomes shameful, and constant covering emerges. Covering all the time, not just in ritual moments, and being embarrassed to be seen without it.



Corn

And the Bavli is the Babylonian one.



Herman

The Babylonian Talmud, yes. And the Bavli is the Talmud that became normative for basically all of later Judaism. So the instinct that a Jewish man should always, always have his head covered, which feels like the most ancient instinct in the world, looks like a Babylonian inheritance. It came in through the Sasanian front door wearing Persian fashion, and stayed because the book it rode in on won.



Corn

The most traditional thing on a Jewish man's head is Persian office wear.



Herman

Persian-influenced dress culture, channeled through a Talmud, yes. And there is a mechanism worth naming there, because it is not mysterious. When your community lives inside an empire where every respectable man covers his head, going bareheaded starts to look like an admission, and the rabbis are not immune to the room they are standing in. The custom does not descend from Sinai. It seeps in from the street.



Corn

And then gets sanctified afterward, once nobody remembers the street.



Herman

That is the standard life cycle of a custom. And then the timeline of the kippah itself, as an object. The near-universal use of a distinct skullcap is roughly thirteenth century onward. The yarmulke as a widespread, distinctive, recognizable marker of Jewish identity, that is late nineteenth, early twentieth century. Dan Rabinowitz wrote a piece in Hakirah where he says flatly, "It is still an open question when this custom started. The Torah makes no statement on this issue." And Eric Silverman, an anthropologist, puts it even more bluntly: "When it comes to the Jewish law, or what devout Jews called halakha, the rules about head covering are actually non-existent for the vast majority of Jewish history."



Corn

Non-existent. Not disputed, not lenient. Non-existent.



Herman

For most of Jewish history there was simply no rule to break. Which reframes every argument you have ever heard about it.



Corn

Hmm. Here is what I want to test, though, because there is a control group sitting right there. A community of Jews who never passed through the Babylonian Talmud at all. If constant covering is a Bavli inheritance, they should not have it.



Herman

Corn, I was hoping you would go there, because the Ethiopian Jewish community is exactly that natural experiment. Beta Israel, completely outside the Bavli's orbit for the entire rabbinic period. Sharon Shalom documented their practice, and the finding is almost uncomfortably neat. Only the kesim, the priests, covered their heads. The covering was white, and they began wearing it during their student years. Beyond the priests, persons of high social status sometimes covered, "but this was not obligatory." The respected community leaders, the shmaglotz, did so as a sign of honor. And then, quote, "the ordinary community members do not follow this practice." Most of the community did not cover at all.



Corn

Priests and honored elders covered, everyone else bareheaded, and Shalom's own gloss is that it was "cultural more than religious."



Herman

Which is arguably closer to the ancient Israelite picture than anything the Bavli produced. Priestly and status-based covering, ordinary men bareheaded. Two communities that never spoke to each other, arriving at the same shape, because both of them predate the Babylonian turn.



Corn

And I notice the student years detail. The priests started wearing it during their training, before they had the office. So the covering was doing the same work the Bavli ascribes to Rav Hamnuna's head, marking a scholar in formation, a man on his way up. Different continent, different millennium, same logic of rank.



Herman

That is a good catch, and it strengthens the convergence rather than weakening it. The covering tracks standing, and standing begins before it is conferred. That is the closest thing this field has to a lab result. Well, that's a good place to pause. I think we have a caller on the line.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother. Time for my grim fact.

D

Dorothy

A community that never had the Babylonian Talmud, the Ethiopian Jews, kept only their priests and respected elders covered, and the ordinary people went bareheaded. Isn't that nice.

D

Dorothy

Anyway, sweetheart, there's a casserole in the freezer with your name on it, and your laundry is still here. When are you coming to visit?



Corn

Mum, we covered that three minutes ago.



Herman

She is a fan of the show, that is what matters.



Corn

She is a fan of the freezer. Right, back to it, because there is a wrinkle here I like. The anachronism cuts both ways. Rabinowitz took apart a prooftext people use for the opposite conclusion.



Herman

Yes, and it is a lovely demolition. Exodus describes the Israelites leaving Egypt with a "yad ramah," a high hand, and the Targum renders it "reish gelay." Some people read that as "bareheaded," so there is your ancient proof that Jews went out of Egypt with nothing on their heads. Except gelay means "bare" or "uplifted," and in context it means heads held high, not heads uncovered. The proof that they were all bareheaded is a misreading, the same way the proof that they were all covered is a misreading.



Corn

So the Talmudic sages left Egypt with excellent posture, and that is all we know.



Herman

That is all that text tells you. And the honest position is that the ancient evidence is thin enough that "they all covered" and "they all went bareheaded" are both overclaims. What you can actually say is situational and status-dependent. And I would add one legal footnote, because the medieval dispute is real. Rabbenu Yosef Karo and the Vilna Gaon,



Herman (continued)

centuries apart, came down on opposite sides of whether male head covering is obligatory at all. This was still being argued in the early modern period.



Corn

Two of the heaviest legal authorities in Jewish history, disagreeing about whether there is a rule. Same disease, different limb. We assume the visual world of antiquity matched ours, and it never does.



Herman

Now the women, and let me be careful here, because the evidence is thinner and I want us to be honest about that rather than paper over it. The starting point is a surprising one. The Torah never mandates women's head covering. Not once, not indirectly, not in the modesty passages. Erin Phillips puts it this way: "for both men and women, head and hair covering is never expressly mandated in the Torah. This story about the uncovering of a woman's hair is perhaps the closest we get."



Corn

The closest we get. Meaning there is one story that gets us partway there.



Herman

The sotah ritual, in Numbers. The suspected adulteress is brought to the priest, and the priest "uncovers the woman's hair" before the ordeal. And the logic of that only works as a ritual of shaming, of stripping away dignity, if covered hair is her normal state. You cannot ceremonially uncover a head that is already bare.



Corn

So the law never says "cover your hair," but one ritual trips over the assumption that married women did.



Herman

That is exactly the shape of it. A social norm presupposed by the text rather than legislated by it. And here is the question I keep turning over, Corn, and I want your read on it, because you are the one who notices when a rule is doing work the rule is not aware of. Does that gap, norm without mandate, tell us the covering was about marital status rather than piety? The uncovering marks her as temporarily outside her marriage, before the ordeal resolves whether she stays outside it. What does that suggest to you?



Corn

It suggests the covering was a sign reading "married," the same way a ring does now, and the modesty theology got attached to the sign later. The shame of the sotah's uncovering is not that men might see her hair. It is that she is being taken out of the category of married women in public. If it were about desire, the ritual would blindfold her, not expose her.



Herman

I think that is right, and it fits the wider Near Eastern picture, where married women's covering signaled status to everyone who saw it, across cultures that had no Torah between them. Assyrian reliefs, the whole Levantine dress world. Which answers part of Hannah's question directly: how much of this was specifically Jewish? On the women's side, the honest answer is that the norm looks like shared regional dress culture that Jewish women participated in, not a Jewish invention. The law did not create the custom. It codified it long after the custom existed.



Corn

Law is the last guest to arrive at a costume that was already finished.



Herman

And when the law does finally describe these objects in detail, look at the dates. Maimonides, in the Mishneh Torah, around eleven seventy-six, treats the woman's head covering as a manufactured artifact with enough structure to have purity rules attached. It has an "opening," a "base," and "strands that attach the head-covering to the woman's hair." A real constructed garment, tied on.



Corn

An opening, a base, and strands. That is a spec sheet. Maimonides is describing something he could have bought.



Herman

He is describing an object from daily life precisely because the purity law needs to know what counts as the vessel. And there is a detail I love in the next line. "When a head covering is torn, if it no longer can cover the greater portion of the hair on the woman's head, it is pure." The threshold is functional. Once it stops doing its covering job, it stops being the kind of object that can contract impurity.



Corn

So there was a ruling about at what point a torn head covering stops legally existing. Somebody had to bring that case. Some woman in Fustat with a ripped covering, somewhere around the twelfth century, is quietly responsible for a line of Maimonides.



Herman

And you can picture the chain of transmission, can you not. The woman knows the covering is torn and keeps wearing it, because coverings are not free and the tear is on the side nobody sees. The question of whether it still counts as a covering is not academic to her. It only becomes academic when it reaches a jurist in Fustat with clean ink.



Corn

The law is always answering somebody's actual morning.



Herman

And then by the sixteenth century, the Shulchan Arukh, Even HaEzer, has the covering as part of the bridal ensemble. "It is forbidden to gaze at the bride," says the main text, and Moses Isserles glosses: "However, it is permitted to gaze at her jewelry or head covering." Which tells you the bridal head covering is now ornamented, deliberately beautiful, a thing worth gazing at under a rule about not gazing at the bride herself.



Corn

The modesty garment became the exception clause to the modesty rule.



Herman

There is a recursion there, yes. But now the caveat, and I want to state it plainly rather than mumble it. Those are rabbinic sources from eleven seventy-six and fifteen sixty-three. They are not archaeological evidence from ancient Israel. And when I went looking for a dedicated material-culture study of ancient Israelite women's headgear, what did I wear on my head, what did the reliefs show, what survived in the ground... I could not find one. The women's side of this question, the visual, physical side, is a genuine gap. The women's evidence that does exist is almost entirely legal texts, written by men, centuries apart. We know the norm existed. We do not have the artifact.



Corn

Which is itself a finding, of a kind. The men's side has reliefs and coins and a whole recent study. The women's side has two legal paragraphs and a ritual. Half the population's headgear survives only as an assumption inside other people's documents.



Herman

And that is worth sitting with, because it shapes what Hannah can actually be told. If she wants pictures, we cannot give her pictures. We can give her the sotah's presupposition, the wider Near Eastern context, and those late spec sheets. What did those coverings look like in, say, the eighth century BCE? Honest answer: we are reasoning outward from neighbors and later sources, and we should say so.



Corn

Then reason outward with me for a second. The Near Eastern context you mentioned. Veiling practices in Assyria were actually legally stratified, if I remember, respectable married women covered, and there were rules about who could not. If Israelite practice sat in that world, then "did women cover" is the wrong question. The question is who could afford to signal respectability on her head.



Herman

That is a sharper framing than mine, and I think the answer is that covering likely tracked status, region, and occasion, exactly as it did for the men. Nobody in the ancient Near East had one uniform head policy, and Israelite women were not an exception to their own region. The widow, the field worker, the woman in a village in Judah versus a woman in a Jerusalem market, these were probably different heads, and the sources that survive flatten them into "the married woman."



Corn

Different heads. Leave it to a donkey to pluralize a skull.



Herman

Occupational habit. But pulling the two halves together, then. The men's evidence and the women's evidence tell the same story from opposite ends. For both sexes, the Torah is silent as law, social practice clearly existed anyway, and the later tradition turned custom into structure. Priestly headgear for a tiny male elite, covered hair as a married woman's norm, both situational, both status-bound, both continuous with the surrounding empires. Then the Bavli makes male covering constant, the medieval codes make female covering an object with spec sheets and ornament, and the modern period turns both into identity markers so distinctive that we cannot picture our own ancestors without them.



Corn

When you see an ancient Israelite in a children's Bible wearing a kippah, the mistake is not just the hat. It is the whole idea that there was a single ancient template called traditional Jewish dress that we drifted away from. The drift was the tradition.



Hilbert

A Christys' of London homburg, in black fur felt. Fourteen guineas, nineteen seventy-nine.



Corn

You priced a homburg.



Hilbert

I wanted one for a wedding in my wife's family. The shop was run by a man called Mr. Bass, who had measured the same heads for thirty years and did not care for any of them. He told me the felt came from rabbits in Bohemia, which I have since found no reason to doubt, and that a homburg is not a hat you buy, it is a hat you qualify for. Corn, you talked for some minutes there about status. He had the whole of it worked out from behind a counter in nineteen seventy-nine. Fourteen guineas was two weeks of the wages I was getting. I went home and thought about it, which is what I told him I would do, and he said that is what all of them say.



Herman

And you never qualified.



Hilbert

I never bought it. I wore my regular coat and stood at the back. My brother-in-law lent me a hat of his own for the photographs, which I had not asked him to do, and it did not suit me, but that was not the point of it. I have a rule that a lent hat goes back the same evening, brushed, whatever happened at the wedding. His was on the hall chair by ten o'clock.



Corn

Fourteen guineas. You still have the number.



Hilbert

I remember it better than the wedding. Mr. Bass knew what he was doing with those rabbits, whatever his opinions of his customers. Herman, when you were listing what Maimonides said about the strands and the base, that man had the same speech, only about brims.



Herman

The cutting-room floor, before we land. The thing that did not fit anywhere in the discussion but deserves air: this was not just a fashion story. The recent scholarship on head covering reads medicine, gender, mourning, and even theurgy on someone's head. The same object, in the same century, could be doing astrology for one community and grief for another. The head was a busy place.



Corn

One forward-looking thought before we go. Hilbert's hatter had it right, in his way. A homburg was a hat you had to qualify for, and for most of Jewish history that is exactly what a head covering was, something you earned, were born into, or put on for a moment. The constant, universal, every-head version is the recent invention. If you want the genuine open question, it is this: what would it take to recover the women's side from the ground? The men have their reliefs. The women are still waiting on their sherd.



Herman

Hannah, if you are listening, next time you buy something with a misleading label, keep them coming. Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, at the desk through all of it.



Corn

If you enjoyed this one, try episode twenty-three oh four, Walking to Jerusalem; episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; and episode ten thirty-one, The Clothes of Language. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed the episode, the archive lives at my weird prompts dot com, six thousand odd episodes deep and counting.



Herman

Rate us on Spotify if you get a moment. See you soon, everybody.

SOURCES

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