Episode Book

EPISODE #6437

Samaritan Hebrew Kept the Letters but Lost the Sound

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SYNOPSIS

Samaritan Hebrew presents a striking historical paradox: its script directly preserves ancient Paleo-Hebrew letterforms, but its oral pronunciation has steadily evolved over millennia. Rather than serving as an unbroken phonological time capsule, the liturgical reading tradition was repeatedly reshaped by spoken Aramaic and Arabic. The historic guttural consonants largely collapsed, leaving behind distinctive elongated vowels, while centuries of scribal divergence produced thousands of textual variations between the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Masoretic Text.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

The letters on the page are one thing. The sound coming out of the reader is another. We were on this the other night, and Daniel's prompt is exactly that problem wearing a tallit.



Herman

That's a good image, actually.



Corn

So Daniel writes in about the Samaritan Passover on Mount Gerizim, which he attended a few years ago and describes as one of the most memorable things he's experienced. Hearing the Hebrew chanted there reminded him of the Yemenite pronunciation, which has always fascinated him. It felt ancient and biblical, in a way he calls wonderful. And his question follows the feeling: the Samaritan script is commonly regarded as the most direct descendant of Paleo-Hebrew, so it's tempting to assume the pronunciation is a time capsule too. Except, as he puts it, it turns out the pronunciation has changed in its own ways, losing most of the guttural sounds, for example. He wants to track the evolution, and how different Samaritan Hebrew actually is from Biblical Hebrew.



Herman

And he's right about the temptation, because the script really is that old-looking. I remember standing next to a Samaritan Torah scroll once — a facsimile, not the real thing — and the letters look like the ones on ancient coins. You can see it instantly.



Corn

So here's the frame for the episode. The script is a genuine time capsule. The pronunciation is not. Those two clocks run at completely different speeds, and the whole story of Samaritan Hebrew is the gap between them.



Herman

Let's define the thing first. Samaritan Hebrew is a reading tradition, not a spoken vernacular. It's what the Samaritans use liturgically to chant the Samaritan Pentateuch. As a daily spoken language it died around the second century of the common era, and it survives because a few hundred people still get up before dawn and read it aloud.



Corn

Nine hundred people, give or take, as of the last count. Split between Kiryat Luza on Mount Gerizim, just outside Nablus, and Holon, outside Tel Aviv.



Herman

Right, and the spoken languages today are Samaritan Arabic on the mountain and Modern Hebrew in Holon — evenly split by where you live, which is itself a strange little mirror of the community's position between Israelis and Palestinians. They've literally got one foot in each.



Corn

And we should correct the record here, because it's ours to correct. In an earlier episode on the Samaritans we described their reading as more guttural, preserved in stasis. That's backwards. The Samaritan tradition has actually lost most of its guttural sounds — it's one of the less guttural Hebrew traditions alive.



Herman

Which is the opposite of what your ear expects when you're standing on that mountain listening to it, and that mismatch is exactly what Daniel noticed. The chant sounds ancient, the letters look ancient, so you assume the consonants are ancient. They aren't. The pronunciation has been re-tuned, generation after generation, by whatever the community was speaking at the time — first Samaritan Aramaic, then the Samaritan dialect of Palestinian Arabic.



Corn

So the plan, roughly: the script first, and how the two traditions split. Then the sound, and what fell out of it. Then what the scholarship says the tradition actually preserves — because the answer is strange enough to be worth the wait.



Herman

Start with the script, because that's the part of the story that's real. The Samaritan alphabet is a direct descendant of Paleo-Hebrew — the script the kingdoms of Israel and Judah actually wrote in during the Iron Age. Not a cousin, not an imitation. The same line, carried forward.



Corn

And here's the part that trips people up, because I certainly assumed the opposite before we looked into this years ago: the Jewish square script isn't a descendant of Paleo-Hebrew at all.



Herman

Not at all. It's a stylized form of the Aramaic script — the rabbis called it Ashurit, the Assyrian script. From the third century before the common era, under the Persian and then Hellenistic world, Jews adopted the square Aramaic chancellery script and it became standard. The Samaritans kept the old letterforms. So the joke of history is that the community everyone thought of as the schismatics kept the original script, and the mainstream tradition switched to the imperial import.



Corn

A switching-loyalty story where the loyalists turn out to be the ones everybody excommunicated.



Herman

And it wasn't a clean break even then. Paleo-Hebrew didn't vanish from Jewish use — it carried on on Jewish coinage, the Bar Kokhba coins, and in certain sacred contexts. And both Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic scripts show up among the Samaritans in this period too. Messy, gradual, both directions.



Corn

But the dating of the actual Samaritan script is contested, and this is where it gets good for me, because I love a case where the archaeology overrules the textbook.



Herman

Textbooks used to say the Samaritan script diverged from Paleo-Hebrew in the late Hasmonean or early Roman period — a nice political story, script follows schism. More recent epigraphic work pushes the crystallization much later, to around the fourth century of the common era. The evidence is inscriptions, mosaic texts, and inscribed pottery lamps from Late Antiquity onward.



Corn

Which changes what the chain is a chain of. If the script only takes its final shape in the fourth century, then what's unbroken is the letterforms, not some continuous scribal institution going back to the First Temple. The letters are old. The writing system as a maintained institution is late.



Herman

That's the fair reading, and I'd add that it doesn't make the script any less a descendant of Paleo-Hebrew — the descent is about the shapes. It just means "descendant" and "fossil" aren't the same claim. A living thing can descend from an old thing and still be mostly young.



Corn

Now the divergence of the traditions themselves — when do we have a definitely separate Samaritan Hebrew?



Herman

Only by the first century before the common era, as far as the evidence goes. The roots are likely older, but at that point they're not yet distinctly Samaritan — they'd just be northern. And the early history is poorly documented, which is the polite scholarly way of saying we're guessing. The dialect didn't survive long as a literary language either; by the first century of the common era it was already being pushed out by Samaritan Aramaic.



Corn

There's also the textual layer, which Daniel's asking about without quite saying so. The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Masoretic Text differ in something like six thousand places.



Herman

Around six thousand, yes. Most are spelling and grammar, the kind of thing you'd expect from two copying traditions that stopped talking to each other. But some are serious — the big one being the uniquely Samaritan commandment to build an altar on Mount Gerizim, which is inserted right into the Ten Commandments in their version.



Corn

Six thousand differences, and the community was down to about a hundred people at one point. That's a copying tradition with a margin of error I respect.



Herman

The part I find surprising is that of those six thousand variations, nearly two thousand agree with the Septuagint, the Greek translation. And some are shared with the Latin Vulgate. And at Qumran there are Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts of what scholars call a pre-Samaritan text type — meaning the Samaritan text wasn't a sectarian rewrite from nowhere, it's a branch of an older textual family.



Corn

Which is exactly why both sides accused the other of forgery. You have a third-century rabbi, Eliezer ben Jose, telling the scribes of the Samaritans — he calls them Cutheans — "you falsified the Torah while not improving it at all."



Herman

And the Samaritans ran the same play back. There's a medieval Samaritan Arabic Book of Joshua that stages a debate before Nebuchadnezzar, of all people, where Sanballat convinces the king that the Jews falsified their Torah specifically to hide the sanctity of Mount Gerizim. Both communities, with a straight face, accusing the other of exactly what the other was accusing them.



Corn

Everyone's doctoring the document, and everyone's copy agrees with somebody else's.



Herman

My favorite snapshot of the script surviving is Nachmanides, thirteenth century, in Acre. Someone shows a silver coin to the local Samaritans — the Cutheans — and he reports they read it immediately, because it was written in the Hebrew script that remained current among them. That's a medieval eyewitness confirming Samaritans were still fluently reading Paleo-Hebrew letterforms while the Jewish world had been on square script for over a millennium.



Corn

Then the Europeans arrive and misjudge everything.



Herman

A manuscript bought by Pietro Della Valle in Damascus in sixteen sixteen, published in the West in sixteen thirty-one — the first time Europe saw the Samaritan alphabet. It set off an enormous theological fight about whether their Pentateuch was older than the Masoretic Text. That copy is now in the national library of France.



Corn

And Guillaume Postel, in the fifteen thirties, wrote that because their version had no vowels, they read it in an utterly corrupt manner.



Herman

Which is a wonderful example of confident wrongness, because the Samaritans had a fully maintained oral reading tradition — the vowels lived in the readers, not on the page. Postel mistook an unwritten transmission for a missing one.



Corn

The man faulted a memory system for not being ink.



Herman

Meanwhile Jerome, centuries earlier, had it basically right — he noted the Samaritans write the Pentateuch in the same number of letters but differ in shape and serifs. That's a fourth-century observer doing better epigraphy than a sixteenth-century one, which Corn will tell you is the normal direction of travel.



Corn

It usually is. So the script is a time capsule — but what about the sound? That's where the story goes the other way.



Herman

Completely the other way. The phonology of Samaritan Hebrew today is very similar to Samaritan Arabic, because a reading tradition is re-tuned by the community's everyday speech every generation, whether anyone intends it or not. The succession was: ancient Hebrew as a spoken language, then Samaritan Aramaic — which itself died as a spoken language somewhere between the tenth and twelfth centuries — then the Samaritan variety of Palestinian Arabic.



Corn

And each handoff left fingerprints. The gutturals are the headline. Walk me through what actually happened to them.



Herman

The laryngeals — aleph, he, chet, ayin — have collapsed into a glottal stop or nothing, everywhere. There's one narrow exception: before certain a-vowels, chet and ayin sometimes survive as a pharyngeal. But as a system, the four-way guttural distinction is gone. Aleph, he, chet, ayin — four letters, one sound, and often not even that.



Corn

So the sound Daniel heard as deeply ancient is, phonologically, the least guttural Hebrew in the room.



Herman

In that respect, yes. And there's a lovely mechanism in how it happened — the gutturals didn't just vanish, they left compensation behind. Vowel length is phonemic in Samaritan Hebrew, and long vowels are usually the residue of elided guttural consonants. So you get a minimal pair: rav with a short vowel means great, rav with a long vowel — from rechav, wide — means wide. The chet is gone from the word but you can still hear where it used to be. It's a fossil in the vowel.



Corn

The consonant left a shadow on the vowel. That's almost leaf medicine — the cure is gone but the effect persists.



Herman

I'm not touching that comparison, Corn.



Corn

Why the gutturals went, though — is that settled?



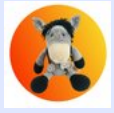
Herman

The mechanism I'd be careful about is cause. There's thesis work — not a settled consensus, I want to be clear — suggesting the four guttural phonemes began merging under Aramaic influence, because Aramaic was the community's primary language at the relevant time. And the loss of stop-fricative alternation in the letters bet, gimmel, dalet, kaf, peh, tav likely comes later, from Arabic influence. The twist is that Arabic is an emphatic-rich language, so Arabic likely reinforced the emphatic consonants rather than eroding them.



Corn

Which is the counterintuitive preservation. Because the emphatics survived.



Herman

That's my favorite fact in this whole episode. Samaritan Hebrew kept the emphatic tav and tzadi — the heavy, pharyngealized versions — and that's a striking contrast with nearly every Jewish tradition, where the emphatics were lost. So if you ask "who preserved more, Samaritans or the Jewish traditions," the question has no single answer. It depends which consonant you ask about. Samaritan Hebrew lost the gutturals but kept the emphatics. Ashkenazi Hebrew, and to a large extent Israeli Hebrew, lost the emphatics — and much of it lost or weakened the gutturals too.



Corn

So the Samaritan tradition is the only one still carrying the emphatics, and one of the ones that dropped the gutturals. Neither side holds the full ancient sound system.



Herman

Neither side ever does. There's more oddness in the consonants, by the way. The letter vav shifted to a b sound everywhere — except the conjunction vav, the word and, which is still pronounced w. And the sin — the lateral samech-sound, the // — merged with shin in Samaritan Hebrew, unlike every other contemporary Hebrew tradition, where it's pronounced as an ordinary s.



Corn

So in everyone else's mouth that consonant became an s, and in theirs it became a sh. Two different simplifications of a sound nobody kept.



Herman

And there's the case of peh shifting to f, and the preposition bet, meaning in, which shows up as av — evidence that at least some of those letters did originally have the fricative forms in Samaritan Hebrew and lost them, rather than never having them.



Corn

And here's a voicemail that came in, which is almost suspiciously on point. Take a listen.

B

Beryl

Hello, it's Beryl here, calling from the front seat of my car outside the big Morrison's in Leeds, waiting for my husband to come out with the shopping. I've been listening while I wait, and I wanted to say how much I enjoyed hearing about the Samaritan Passover, because my auntie Joan went to the Holy Land in two thousand and one and brought me back a little olive wood camel, and she said the chanting she heard sounded ever so old, like something out of the Bible, which I suppose it was.

B

Beryl

Anyway, my question is this, and I hope it's not a silly one, but when you say the Samaritan Hebrew has lost its guttural sounds, does that mean it's easier to sing? Because I've always found the throaty bits the hardest in the hymns at our chapel, and I wondered if they just dropped them so the congregation could join in more comfortably.



Herman

Beryl, that's not a silly question at all, and the answer is basically no — nobody dropped anything on purpose. The gutturals eroded because the community's spoken languages, Aramaic and then Arabic, didn't maintain the full four-way distinction in the readers' mouths. It's drift, not a decision.



Corn

Though she's on to something real — if you're chanting a long liturgy in a hot climate before dawn, the language will happily coast downhill. The throaty bits go first everywhere. Ask any Israeli saying ayin.



Herman

And that's the honest version for Beryl: the thing she finds hardest in her chapel hymns is one of the first things to erode in a living reading tradition. She noticed the right sound, she just gave it a committee.



Corn

Now, how different is Samaritan Hebrew from Biblical Hebrew overall, as a reading tradition? Because this is where the scholarship has a proper verdict.



Herman

The verdict is Ze'ev Ben-Haim's, and it's one of those massive quiet achievements — five volumes published between nineteen fifty-seven and nineteen seventy-seven on the Hebrew and Aramaic traditions of the Samaritans. And his finding, which is the view that prevails today, is that modern Samaritan Hebrew is not very different from the Hebrew spoken by other local groups in the Second Temple period, before Middle Aramaic displaced it.



Corn

Not a First Temple fossil, but not late corruption either.



Herman

Neither. It's an ordinary Second Temple-era Palestinian pronunciation that happens to have been carried forward liturgically by a tiny community while everyone else's pronunciation moved on differently. Which makes it about the closest thing we have to a control sample — an independent line of what Hebrew sounded like before the Masoretes wrote anything down.



Corn

There's the regional argument, which I know you love. Rendsburg.



Herman

Gary Rendsburg made the case in twenty twenty-one that Samaritan Hebrew belongs to a complex of northern dialects — alongside Israelian Hebrew and the inscriptions from the north of the country. And the giveaway feature is diphthong contraction. Where the Masoretic tradition says mavet for death, the Samaritan reading says mot. Where it says bayit — well, bet — for house, the Samaritan says bit. Zayit, olive, comes out zit.



Corn

Mot, bit, zit.



Herman

Exactly the contraction pattern you'd expect if the reading sits in the northern dialect family, the same family you see in northern inscriptions. And that changes what the tradition is evidence of — it's not just a sectarian inheritance, it's a regional one. The split between the communities has a dialect map underneath it.



Corn

Which leads us to Daniel's Yemenite impression, and I want to handle this carefully, because it's his experience and it's real — the resonance he heard is not nothing. But as far as I know nobody has published a direct comparison of the two traditions.



Herman

I haven't seen one either. What the general literature on reading traditions gives you is this: Yemenite Hebrew preserves both the gutturals and the emphatics — it's famously the most conservative Jewish tradition. Samaritan Hebrew preserves the emphatics but lost the gutturals. So on paper they're quite different systems, different regional inheritances, neither descended from the other.



Corn

What did Daniel actually hear?



Herman

My guess — and it's a guess — is register and chant. Both traditions are long-form liturgical chanting, both sound nothing like everyday Israeli Hebrew, and both carry that unbroken-chain feeling. When your baseline is modern spoken Hebrew, everything old reads as the same kind of old.



Corn

Two languages can both sound ancient without sounding like each other. Ancient is a genre to the modern ear.



Herman

It really is. Though to be fair to the ear, the emphatics overlap — the Yemenite reading and the Samaritan reading both carry those heavy emphatic consonants that nobody in Tel Aviv is producing, and that shared weight could easily read as the same sound when it's drifting up a mountain at you at sunset.



Herman

One more piece before we land this, because it corrects another assumption. The tradition isn't static — it was actively renewed. Starting in the thirteen hundreds there was a liturgical revival of Samaritan Hebrew, with new Hebrew piyyutim, hymns, being composed. So this isn't a museum recording being replayed. It's a living tradition that wrote new material in an old register, the way communities do.



Corn

A language that died as speech and then got new poems six hundred years ago. That's not a fossil, that's a resurrection with a work ethic.



Herman

That's the strangest and best thing about it.



Corn

Nine hundred people, one mountain, and the oldest script in continuous use on earth.



Hilbert

Preserved is the wrong word for it.



Hilbert

I catalogued inscribed lamps one summer for a private collector outside Afula, ninety-two or ninety-three. Late Antique Samaritan lamps, the type with the palm frond on the discus. The collector kept telling me the lettering was the real Hebrew, which I now know is a half-truth at best. He had it that the Samaritans heroically preserved the old script, like it was a duty. Corn, you've said something similar twice today.



Hilbert

The lamps told a different story. Household objects. Names, a blessing, nothing sacred about any of them. The same letterforms as the Pentateuch scrolls, on a lamp a man bought to light his stairs. You don't preserve a script by keeping it holy. You keep it by writing your shopping list in it, because it's the script you have.



Hilbert

I'll pull it down at the desk.



Hilbert

Anyway. The collector let me keep a broken one, the handle end, and it's been my paperweight for thirty-odd years. There are four letters on it that I've never been able to read, though I'm fairly sure the second one is a bet, and I've come round to the view that it says something about a donkey. A man named Shalom told me that in ninety-four, and I've had no reason to doubt him since.



Herman

A donkey named on a lamp in the Samaritan script — that's actually consistent with the epigraphy, ordinary names and blessings on those lamps. And it backs the fourth-century reading too, because the script shows up in exactly that mundane domestic layer. Living writing, not liturgical fossil.



Corn

The paperweight is the evidence, and nobody can read it.



Herman

Where does that leave the question, though — how different is Samaritan Hebrew from Biblical Hebrew?



Corn

My answer is that it's as different and as close as any Second Temple Palestinian pronunciation would be, worn smooth by Aramaic and Arabic — and that's the astonishing part. Not that it drifted. That a local accent from two thousand years ago is still audibly in the room.



Herman

That's the thing worth taking away. Nine hundred people in two places, and between them they're keeping alive both the script the Iron Age kingdoms wrote in and a genuine pre-Masoretic pronunciation. The letters are one clock, the sound is another, and anyone who reads one off the other is going to be wrong every time.



Corn

The open question I'd leave with — if this really is a Second Temple-era Palestinian pronunciation that survived independently, what else could it tell us about how Hebrew sounded before the Masoretes ever put a vowel on parchment? And what would we need to find, in a mosaic or a lamp or a letter, to check it further?



Herman

That's the one I'd watch. Every new inscription from Late Antiquity is a potential test of Ben-Haim's picture, and those lamps are still turning up in the ground.



Corn

Producer credit where it belongs — Hilbert Flumingtop, who has apparently been guarding a piece of the evidence as a paperweight for thirty years. For more along these lines, there's episode ten forty-eight, The Keepers; episode ten thirty-one, The Clothes of Language; and episode ten, How ASR Went From Frustration To … Whisper Magic. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed this one, everything's at my weird prompts dot com — the feed, the archive, and the related episodes on the Samaritans and on the evolution of the Hebrew and Aramaic scripts.



Herman

We'll be back soon. See you tomorrow.

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