Episode Book

EPISODE #5494

How Ancient Jerusalem Outgrew Its Own Walls

PUBLISHED	23 September 2026 at 22:46 UTC
DURATION	22:08
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/ancient-jerusalem-walls-expansion/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:36 UTC

SYNOPSIS

The walls surrounding Jerusalem's Old City were built by Suleiman the Magnificent between 1537 and 1541 — yet the original Jerusalem sits outside them, uninhabited since medieval times. This episode traces the city's physical footprint across four millennia: from a twelve-acre Bronze Age ridge with one spring, to a 445-acre peak under Herod Agrippa's Third Wall, to the eleventh-century earthquake that permanently amputated the biblical city from the walled town. Then we follow the nineteenth-century breakout beyond the walls — the legal and social barriers that kept everyone inside, the Touro bequest that funded Mishkenot Sha'ananim, and how the first neighborhoods outside turned a compact walled city into the seed of the sprawling modern one.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's what Daniel sent us this week. He wants us to trace the physical footprint of Jerusalem across its whole history. Where the earliest city actually was, how big it was, what geography boxed it in. How it grew during the First and Second Temple periods, and how the boundaries shifted under the Romans, the Byzantines, the Islamic dynasties, the Crusaders, the Ottomans. And he flags one thing he thinks gets overlooked: today's Old City walls do not define ancient Jerusalem. He wants us to explain when those walls were actually built, and how the earlier city relates to what we now call the Old City.



Herman

Which is a much bigger correction than it sounds.



Corn

Then the second half. The nineteenth century, when Jerusalem finally broke out past the walls. He wants the story of Mishkenot Sha'ananim specifically. Why it was built, who was behind it, why living outside the walls seemed dangerous, what daily life was like for the first people who moved there. And then how the first neighborhoods outside the walls turned a compact walled city into the seed of the sprawling modern one.



Herman

And the frame he puts on the whole thing.



Corn

Right. He says the goal is to understand Jerusalem almost as a living organism. A city that keeps expanding, contracting, shifting its center of gravity, leaving successive versions of itself layered on top of and alongside each other. So let's start at the beginning. Literally the dirt. Where was the first Jerusalem?



Herman

The first Jerusalem is a narrow spur south of the Temple Mount. Today we call it the City of David. And the geography there is the whole story. You've got the Kidron Valley dropping away steeply on the east, the Tyropoeon Valley on the west, and one water source, the Gihon Spring, down in the Kidron.



Corn

That's a defended ridge with a spring. Which is the entire checklist for a Bronze Age settlement.



Herman

It's the checklist. And that's what you find. The earliest permanent building remains are Early Bronze Age, third millennium BCE, rectangular structures with benches built into the walls. Standard Canaanite urban forms. By the Middle Bronze Age, as early as the eighteenth century BCE, there's a massive wall around the place. A thirty-meter stretch of it was exposed above the Kidron.



Corn

How big is the whole thing at that point?



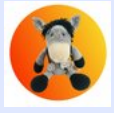
Herman

Small. Hillel Geva's study in Tel Aviv in 2014 is the minimalist position, and he puts the pre-Israelite city from the eighteenth to the eleventh century BCE at eleven to twelve acres. Population five hundred to seven hundred at most.



Corn

Five hundred people.



Herman

That's the city. That's Jerusalem.



Corn

I want to sit on that for a second, because we throw the word around like it means something enormous, and the original is smaller than a suburban shopping center.



Herman

And it stays that size for a long time. Then there's the moat.



Corn

The moat is the part I want people to hear.



Herman

Announced in December 2023. A rock-cut moat separating the City of David ridge from the Temple Mount and the Ophel to the north. Nearly a hundred feet wide. At least twenty feet deep. Quarrying it meant removing something on the order of half a million cubic feet of stone.



Corn

With iron tools.



Herman

With iron tools, and it's in use by at least the ninth century BCE. That's not a ditch. That's a statement of institutional capacity.



Corn

You don't dig that unless somebody can organize labor and feed it for years.



Herman

Which is why it complicates the picture of Jerusalem as a backwater. Something up there had the authority to commission that.



Corn

So when does it actually start growing?



Herman

David's city doesn't change the earlier borders. Solomon expands north to include the Temple Mount, and that takes the city to about forty acres. Then in the mid-eighth century BCE the Western Hill gets added, more than a hundred acres. By the end of the First Temple period, destroyed in 586 BCE, the walled city is a hundred and sixty acres, with settlement spilling north outside the walls. Peak population around eight thousand.



Corn

And the standard explanation for that jump has always been refugees.



Herman

The Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 721 BCE, people fleeing south, Jerusalem absorbs them. That's the textbook version. And a 2024 radiocarbon study in PNAS complicates it hard.



Corn

This is the one with the hundred-plus dates.



Herman

Over a hundred radiocarbon dates from four excavation areas in the City of David. And the argument is that the growth starts under King Jehoash, around 836 to 796 BCE. That's a century before Assyria falls on the north. So the expansion isn't primarily a refugee story. It's internal Judean demographic growth, plus political and economic consolidation.



Corn

Yuval Gadot's line on this.



Herman

He says most researchers linked Jerusalem's growth to the west to the period of King Hezekiah, and the new research teaches that the expansion is a result of internal Judean demographic growth and the establishment of political and economic systems. And the same study re-dates the eastern-slope wall to around 750 BCE, under Uzziah, not Hezekiah.



Corn

Which quietly relocates a piece of the biblical narrative. Not demolishes it. Relocates it.



Herman

It shifts who gets credit for the wall. And it shifts the mechanism from crisis absorption to ordinary growth.



Corn

Then the Babylonians arrive.



Herman

586 BCE. And the city contracts violently. The Persian-period city is confined back to the spur, roughly forty acres. Geva puts the population around a thousand. Finkelstein puts it at four hundred to five hundred.



Corn

Back to the Bronze Age footprint, basically.



Herman

Nearly. It takes the Hasmoneans, 150 to 50 BCE, to get renewal and expansion going again, and the population back to about eight thousand. Then Herod and his successors, and this is where Jerusalem hits its ceiling.



Corn

Josephus's three walls.



Herman

The First Wall is Hasmonean. The Second Wall is Herod's, running between today's Jaffa Gate and the Temple Mount. The Third Wall is begun by Herod Agrippa, who rules 41 to 44 CE, and it's completed at the outbreak of the First Jewish-Roman War. And the GIS work Joseph Spiezer published in 2023 shows the Third Wall brings Jerusalem to its peak historical footprint. About eighteen hundred dunams. Roughly four hundred and forty-five acres.



Corn

Four hundred and forty-five acres is the high-water mark. Ever.



Herman

Ever. And here's the detail I love. The Third Wall encloses the Bezetha quarter, which is sparsely built. It's an agricultural zone, a place where festival pilgrims camp. They walled in the camping ground.



Corn

They walled in the overflow parking.



Herman

And then in 70 CE the Romans take it apart. The walls come down, the city lies in ruins for about sixty years, and it's without walls for more than two centuries.



Corn

So the walled city is not a permanent condition. It's an on-and-off thing.



Herman

Hadrian refounds it after 130 CE as Aelia Capitolina, a pagan city, and at first it has no wall at all. A new wall goes up probably under Diocletian, 289 to around 300, and then it's extensively renewed by the Empress Aelia Eudocia, 443 to 460. And Aelia is laid out mostly within the lines of what later becomes the Ottoman walls.



Corn

Which is where the confusion starts, I think. People hear Aelia and Ottoman and assume continuity.



Herman

There's continuity of line, not of stone. Then the Byzantine period, Christian Jerusalem peaks under Justinian in the sixth century, the Nea Church, the Cardo. Geva estimates the population around fifteen thousand. And then 1033 CE.



Corn

The earthquake.



Herman

The earthquake destroys Eudocia's walls. The Fatimids rebuild them, but they leave out the southernmost parts. Mount Zion and the City of David are outside the new line. And that southern line survives to this day.



Corn

Say that again, because that's the hinge of the whole episode.



Herman

The Fatimid rebuild after 1033 draws the southern wall north of Mount Zion and the City of David. Everything south of that line is outside the city from then on. The biblical city is on the wrong side of the wall permanently.



Corn

So the original Jerusalem gets amputated in the eleventh century and never reattached.



Herman

Never. Then 1099, the Crusader siege. 1187, Saladin takes it back. 1202 to 1212, al-Mu'azzam Isa rebuilds the walls. And then in 1219 he tears them down himself, because he's afraid the Crusaders will benefit from them if they come back.



Corn

He demolished his own fortifications.



Herman

And the city has no walls for roughly three centuries. Think about that. Jerusalem, the walled city, is wall-less for longer than the United States has existed.



Corn

What finally puts them back?



Herman

Suleiman the Magnificent. 1537 to 1541. And those are the walls standing today. Four thousand and eighteen meters long, averaging twelve meters high, two and a half meters thick, thirty-four watchtowers, seven main gates. They enclose about one square kilometer.



Corn

One square kilometer, against a peak footprint of four hundred and forty-five acres.



Herman

The Ottoman walls enclose a fraction of what the Third Wall enclosed. And they exclude the City of David entirely. The original Jerusalem sits outside them, and it stays uninhabited from medieval times onward.



Corn

So the "Old City" is not old Jerusalem. The Old City is a sixteenth-century enclosure that happens to contain some very old things.



Herman

That's the correction Daniel wanted made. The walls are Ottoman. They're four and a half centuries old. They are not the walls of David or Solomon or Herod.



Corn

Which raises the question of why the mistake is so sticky.



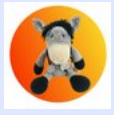
Herman

Because the walls are the most visually dominant thing in the city. You stand on the Mount of Olives and the walls are the city. Everything inside them feels like the ancient core, everything outside feels modern. And the actual ancient core is outside, down the slope, and it looks like a hillside.



Corn

It looks like dirt.



Herman

It looks like dirt with some excavation squares in it. That's the whole problem. The oldest part of Jerusalem doesn't announce itself.



Corn

So that's the ancient footprint. Now jump forward. Nineteenth century. Until 1860, almost everyone in Jerusalem lives inside the Old City.



Herman

By mid-century you've got roughly fifteen thousand Jews, Muslims and Christians crowded inside the walls. Tiny, dilapidated houses, garbage, poverty. The city is compact, overcrowded, and completely confined.



Corn

And the confinement isn't just physical. It's legal and it's social.



Herman

There's a Turkish law forbidding building near the walls. Beyond the gates, which close at sunset and open at sunrise, you've got Bedouin marauders, thieves, wild animals. And if you move out you cut yourself off from your synagogue, your school, your market. Everything that makes life work is inside.



Corn

So the first move outward is not a real-estate decision. It's closer to an expedition.



Herman

Which is why the person who does it is Moses Montefiore. British-Jewish banker, philanthropist, 1784 to 1885. In 1855 he buys about ten acres for a thousand pounds from the Jerusalem governor, Ahmed Aga Dizdar.



Corn

And the money isn't his.



Herman

The money comes from the estate of Judah Touro of New Orleans. A bequest reported variously as fifty or sixty thousand dollars, with Gershom Kursheedt as executor. The original plan is a hospital. Then the Rothschilds build a hospital, so Montefiore and Kursheedt pivot to an almshouse. A hospice for the poor.



Corn

The governor's line when he sells the land.



Herman

From Montefiore's diaries. He says, you are my friend, my brother, the apple of my eye. Take possession of it at once. I would not sell it to any person for thousands of pounds, but to you I give it without any money.



Corn

That's a land transfer with a hug in the middle of it.



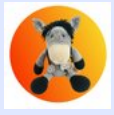
Herman

And there's a practical reason it's cheap. Nobody wants it. It's outside the wall.



Corn

What actually gets built?



Herman

1859 to 1860. Designed by William A. Smith of Ramsgate. Sixteen apartments, two rooms and a kitchen each. An Ashkenazi synagogue and a Sephardi synagogue. A mikveh. A hand-pump well shipped from England. Garden plots. And the Montefiore Windmill, built in 1857 to bring down the price of flour. Total cost, six thousand pounds sterling.



Corn

A windmill, two synagogues, and a well from England.



Herman

And a stone perimeter wall with iron gates locked at night. Iron bars on the doors and windows.



Corn

So the first thing built outside the walls is a smaller set of walls.



Herman

That's the part people miss. The leap beyond the walls is not a leap into openness. It's a compound. It's a fortified village with better plumbing.



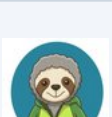
Corn

And people didn't want to live in it.



Herman

They had to be paid to move in. That's the inversion. The first residents of the new Jerusalem had to be bribed to leave the safety of the old one. And even then, in the early years, a lot of them lived there during the day and walked back into the Old City at night.



Corn

They commuted to their own house.



Herman

And the danger wasn't theoretical. One resident was murdered on the road from the Old City. Another was killed chasing marauders.



Corn

The guard.



Herman

January 1873. Aaron Hershler, a guard at the compound, was shot twelve times defending his family's home from raiders out of Silwan. He died on the fifth of January. The IDF later recognized him as the first national martyr of the Jewish-Arab conflict.



Corn

Twelve times and he was still defending the house.



Herman

And the compound stays isolated for more than three decades. In 1875 they finally make a small opening in the city walls so sick people can be brought to the Old City hospital at night. In 1898 the gates are kept open day and night for the first time.



Corn

What breaks the deadlock?



Herman

An epidemic in 1866. It breaks out in the Old City and doesn't reach Mishkenot. After that the buildings are fully occupied.



Corn

That's the whole argument for suburbs in one event. The place outside the wall was the place that didn't get sick.



Herman

And it's worth saying the philanthropists were disappointed. They expected the residents to become economically independent quickly and they didn't. The original tenants refused to leave, and their descendants were still living there in 1948. The utopian planning met human stubbornness and lost.



Corn

Which is the more interesting outcome.



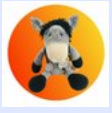
Herman

Then the neighborhoods come thick and fast. And the first structures outside the walls aren't Jewish at all. They're foreign, semi-autonomous walled compounds. Kerem Avraham, the British consul James Finn, 1855. The Bishop Gobat School on Mount Zion, 1853. The Schneller Orphanage, 1855 to 1861. The Russian Compound, 1860 to 1864.



Corn

So the first wave out is consulates and missions.



Herman

Then Jewish neighborhoods. Mahane Israel in 1867, built by and for Maghrebi Jews. Nahalat Shiv'a in 1869, a cooperative of seven families, and Yosef Rivlin won the right to build first. Mea Shearim, 1874 to 1875, planned by Conrad Schick, gates locked nightly, and the first quarter in Jerusalem with street lights. Three hundred homes by 1900.



Corn

Street lights before plumbing, presumably.



Herman

Almost certainly. Then the Nachlaot cluster, Mishkenot Yisrael in 1875, Mazkeret Moshe and Ohel Moshe in 1882. The German Colony, the Templers, 1873. The Bukharan Quarter in 1891, laid out with wide European-style streets. Yemin Moshe, 1892 to 1894, right next to Mishkenot.



Corn

And the Arab families?



Herman

The affluent Muslim families, the Husseinis, Nashashibis, Nusseibehs, Dajanis, are the first Arabs to build outside the walls. The al-Husseini villa, built 1865 to 1876, later becomes the American Colony Hotel.



Corn

So by the 1890s everyone with money is moving out.



Herman

And then the railway. The Jaffa-Jerusalem line opens on the twenty-sixth of September, 1892. It cuts the journey from three days to three hours.



Corn

Three days to three hours. That's the moment the city stops being a point and starts being a region.



Herman

By World War I, dozens of neighborhoods exist, mostly strung along Jaffa Road. The compact walled city has become the seed of a sprawling modern metropolis.



Corn

And two quotes that capture the mood. Edwin Sherman Wallace, the American consul, in 1898.



Herman

He writes, thus the new Jerusalem grows by accessions from every part of the globe.



Corn

And Herzl, same year.



Herman

Herzl visits in 1898 and writes, all that is not holy I shall clear away and I shall erect homes for the workers outside the city. The Old City with its Holy Places, I would enclose as in a box.



Corn

Enclose the Old City as in a box. That's the nineteenth-century imagination in one sentence. The old thing becomes an exhibit and the living city goes outside.



Hilbert

How many of them were there?



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

The compounds. The walled ones outside the walls. Late eighties, I did six months as a night watchman at one of them. Not Mishkenot. One of the others, an almshouse, same vintage, same idea. And the thing I kept wondering, walking the perimeter with a flashlight, was how many of them there actually were.



Herman

At the start, four or five. The Russian Compound, the Schneller place, Kerem Avraham, Gobat.



Hilbert

That's what I thought. Then you start counting the ones that came after and the number gets away from you. Because every one of them had iron gates and somebody had to lock them.



Corn

You were the somebody.



Hilbert

I was the somebody. Two rounds a night, check the gates, check the pump house. The pump was the problem. Hand pump, shipped in from England, and it broke constantly. Nobody tells you that part. Everyone wants to talk about the idealism and the romance of the first settlers. The actual job was keeping a pump running and a gate locked.



Herman

That's the honest version of it.



Hilbert

The residents. People say they were pioneers. Some of them were. A lot of them were paid to be there, and they stayed because leaving would have meant admitting it hadn't worked. That's not ideology. That's stubbornness. My grandmother's cousin was a guard at one of those compounds. Family still has the key.



Corn

You have a key?



Hilbert

I have a key. Heavy thing. Rusted through. Iron, from a gate like that one. I don't know which compound. I've had it for decades. It's the kind of thing you hold onto when you've spent nights on the other side of a wall.



Herman

Does it open anything?



Hilbert

Not that I've found.



Corn

You're carrying around a key to a gate you can't identify.



Hilbert

It's a good key. Anyway. I'm late for an appointment. I have to go.



Herman

The thing that made those places work wasn't the ideology. It was that the gates got locked every night and someone was responsible for them. That's a job, not a movement.



Corn

Which is the least romantic and most accurate account of how a city leaves its walls. Somebody has to be on the night shift.



Herman

There's one more thing worth flagging, because it cuts against everything we've said. Where the earliest city actually stood is not settled.



Corn

The City of David identification.



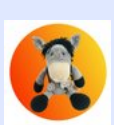
Herman

The Biblical Archaeology Society states it plainly. It remains unclear where exactly ancient Jerusalem was located. And in 2023 the Washington Post reported a find near the Temple Mount suggesting the City of David may have been a suburb of ancient Jerusalem rather than the whole city. Which directly contradicts the traditional identification.



Corn

The ridge we started the episode on might not be the whole story either.



Herman

It might be the edge of something bigger. The dirt hasn't finished talking.



Corn

The city keeps doing what it's always done. Expanding, contracting, moving its center of gravity. The Bronze Age ridge, the First Temple walls, the Second Temple peak, the Ottoman enclosure, the nineteenth-century neighborhoods. All of it still there, layered, underneath and alongside the modern city.



Herman

Still growing. Still layering.



Corn

That's the episode. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. If you enjoyed it, leave us a review and subscribe. You can find every episode at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.