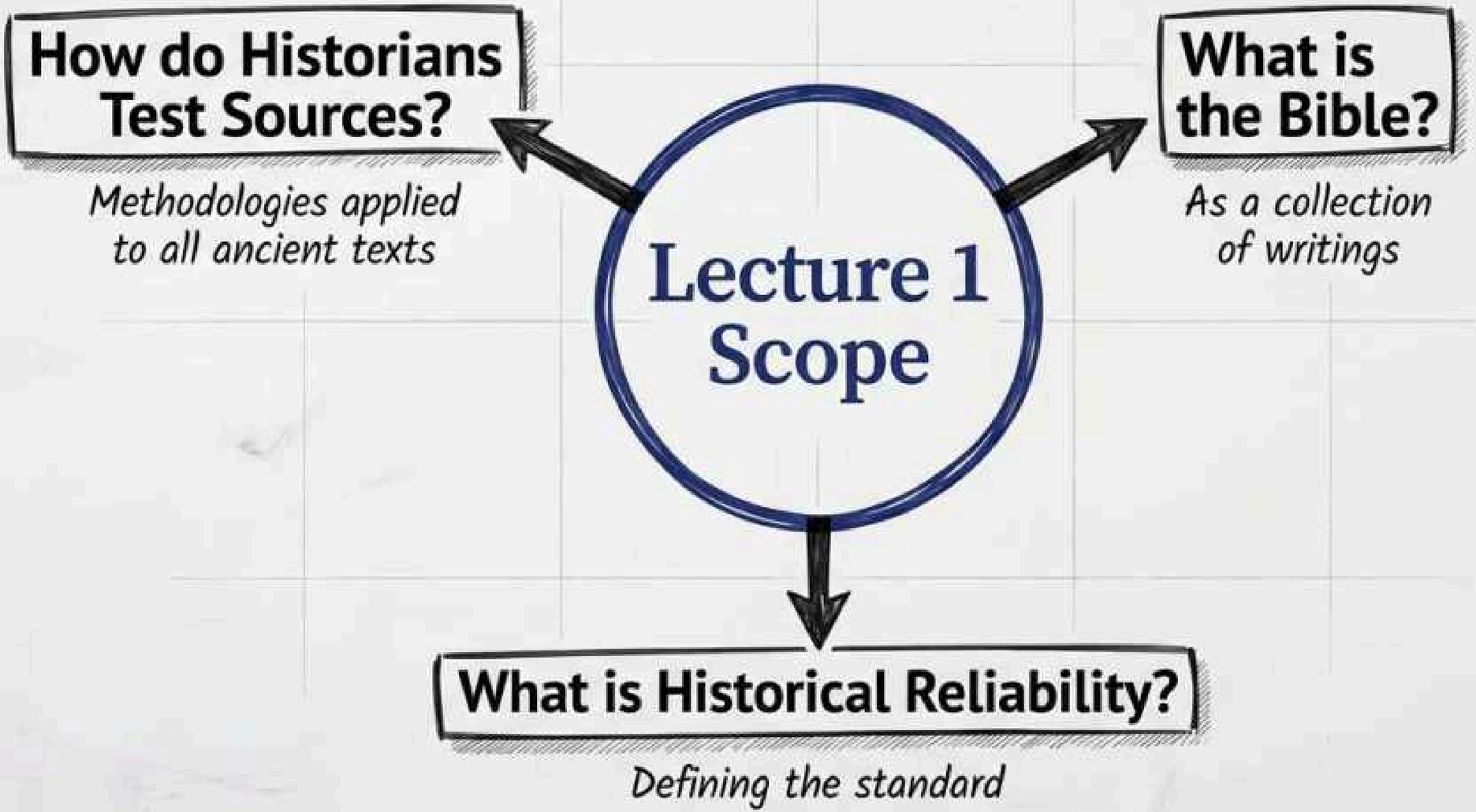
Testing the Texts: The Bible as History

An Introduction to Historical Reliability and Source Testing



REL 102 B: Lecture 1

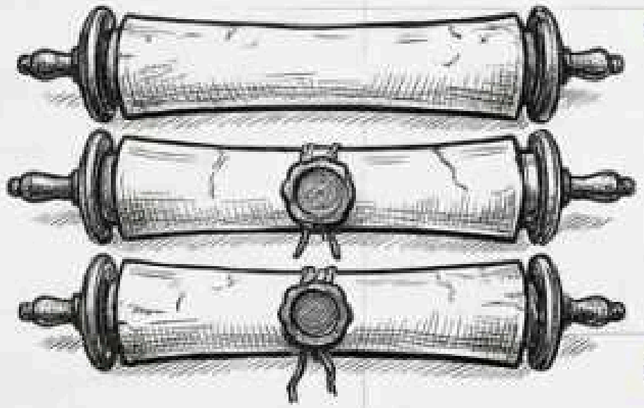
¶ 1.1


How do Historians Test Sources?
Methodologies applied to all ancient texts
What is the Bible?
As a collection of writings
Lecture 1 Scope
What is Historical Reliability?
Defining the standard

biblia (Greek) = Little Books -> A Library

¶ 1.2

Jewish Tanakh



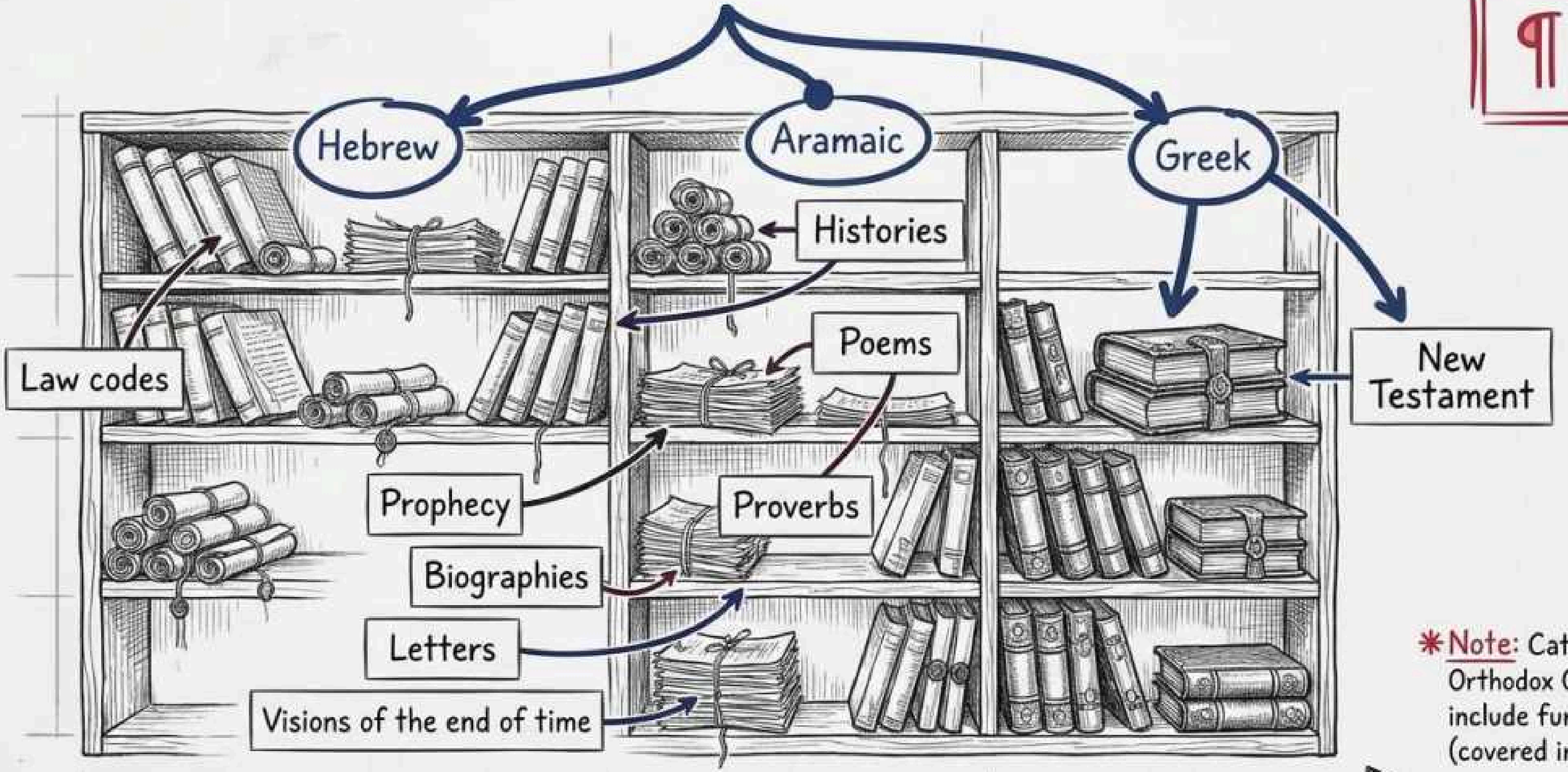
Law + Prophets + Writings = 24 Books

Protestant Christian



39 Books (Old Testament) + 27 Books (New Testament) = 66 Books

¶ 1.3



*Note: Catholic & Orthodox Old Testaments include further books (covered in Lecture 3).

¶ 1.4

Single Library

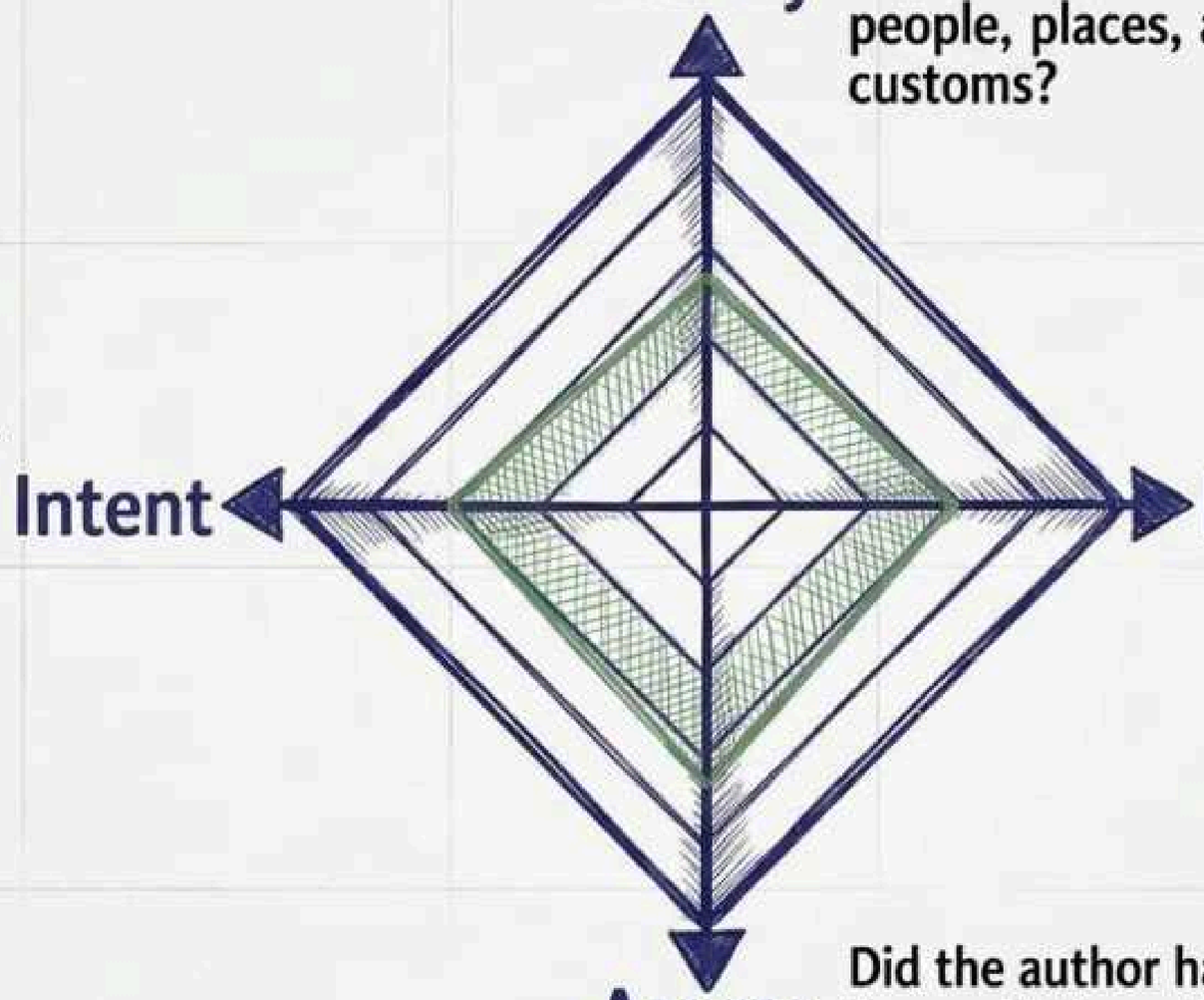
Diverse Books

Diverse Passages
- A genealogy
- A psalm
- A law
- A letter

No Single Verdict.

A fair answer regarding historical reliability cannot be a blanket statement; it must be given piece by piece, analyzing the specific demands of each individual text.

¶ 1.5



Reality Reports real events, people, places, and customs?

Intent What was the author trying to do? (Inform, persuade, honor a hero, teach).

Proximity Stood close in time/geography to what it describes?

Access Did the author have access to good information?

The Historian's Axiom: No ancient source is perfectly reliable, and none is worthless.

¶ 1.6

The Biblical Texts



Secular Ancient Historians (e.g., Herodotus, Livy)

Context: Herodotus and Livy recorded legends and invented speeches to fit characters—yet modern historians still use them carefully.

The Bible Treatment = Not Automatic Trust ∩ Not Automatic Suspicion

¶ 1.7

Historical Testing

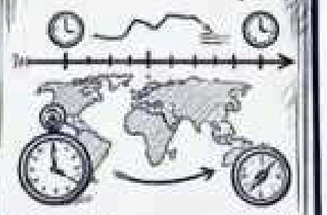
Copying



Was the text copied accurately so we read what was actually written?

Lecture 2

Proximity



Was it composed near the events it describes?

Lecture 3

Corroboration



Does what it says agree with other evidence?



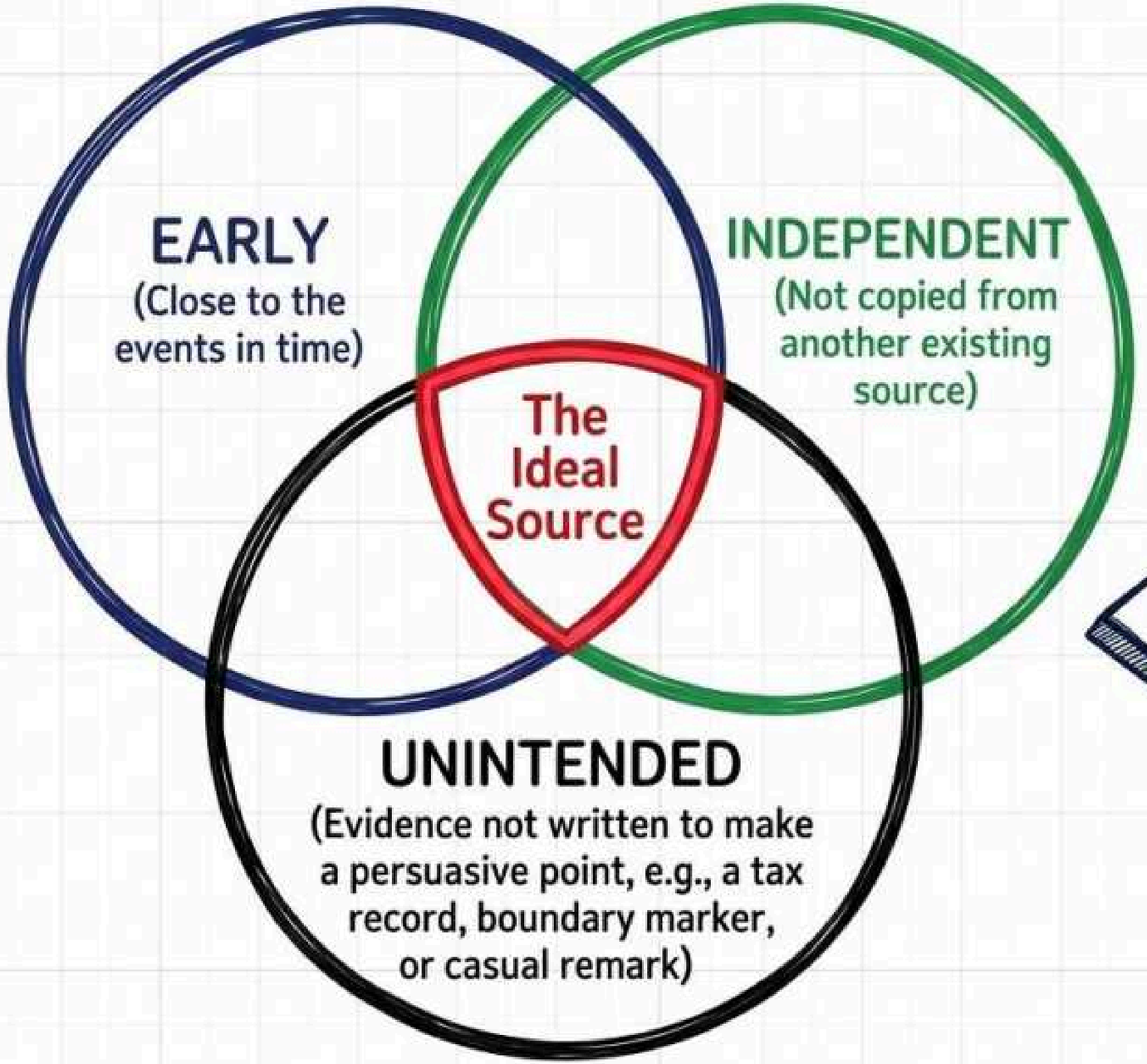
Lectures 4 & 5

¶ 1.8

	Textual Evidence	Material/Contextual Evidence
Internal to the Bible	Written sources inside the Bible.	
External to the Bible	Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman records.	Archaeology (buildings, pottery, tombs, inscriptions) & Study of ancient languages, geography, customs.

Strong Conclusions = $\sum$ (Multiple Evidence Types at Once)

¶ 1.9



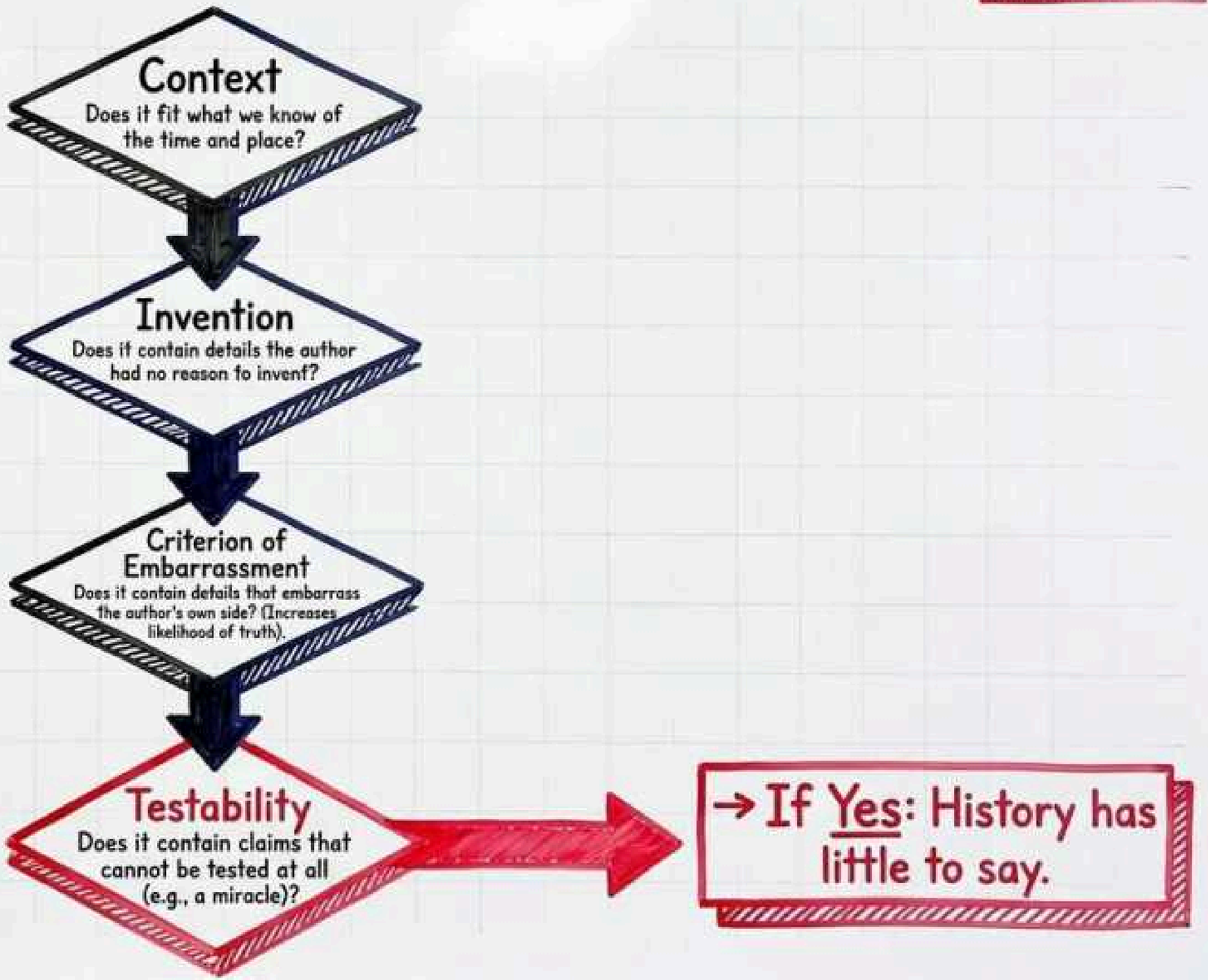
Several independent sources that agree

>>

One source repeated many times.

The Likelihood Filter

¶ 1.10



¶ 1.11

Domain of History

- ✓ Deals with ordinary causes
- ✓ Relies on evidence anyone can inspect
- ✓ Can say what people reported and when

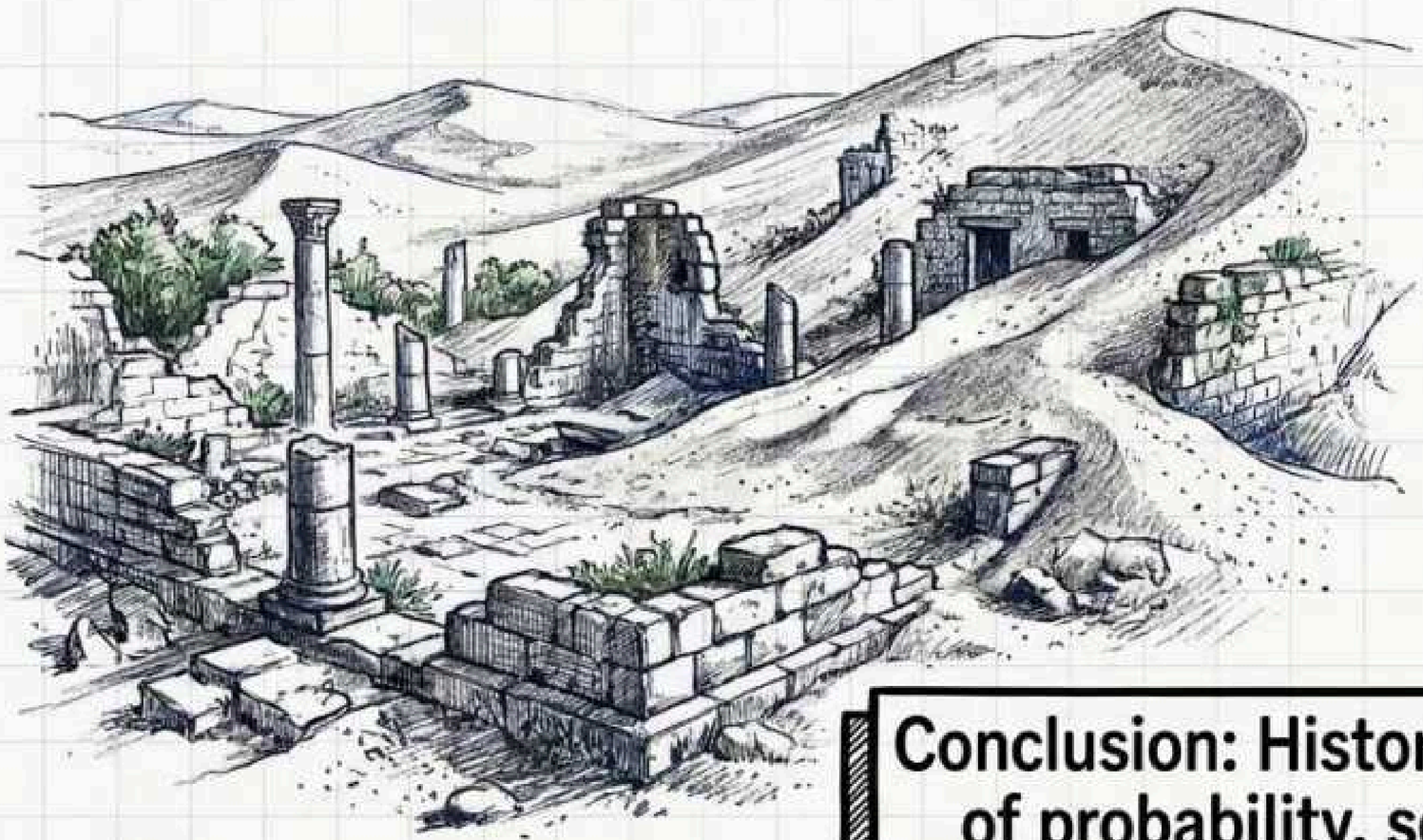
Domain of Theology

- ✓ Deals with miracles (by definition, not the ordinary course of events)
- ✓ Untestable by historical method
- ✓ Focuses on what God did

History can neither confirm nor refute a miracle.
Fair-minded people on all sides accept this limit.

¶ 1.12

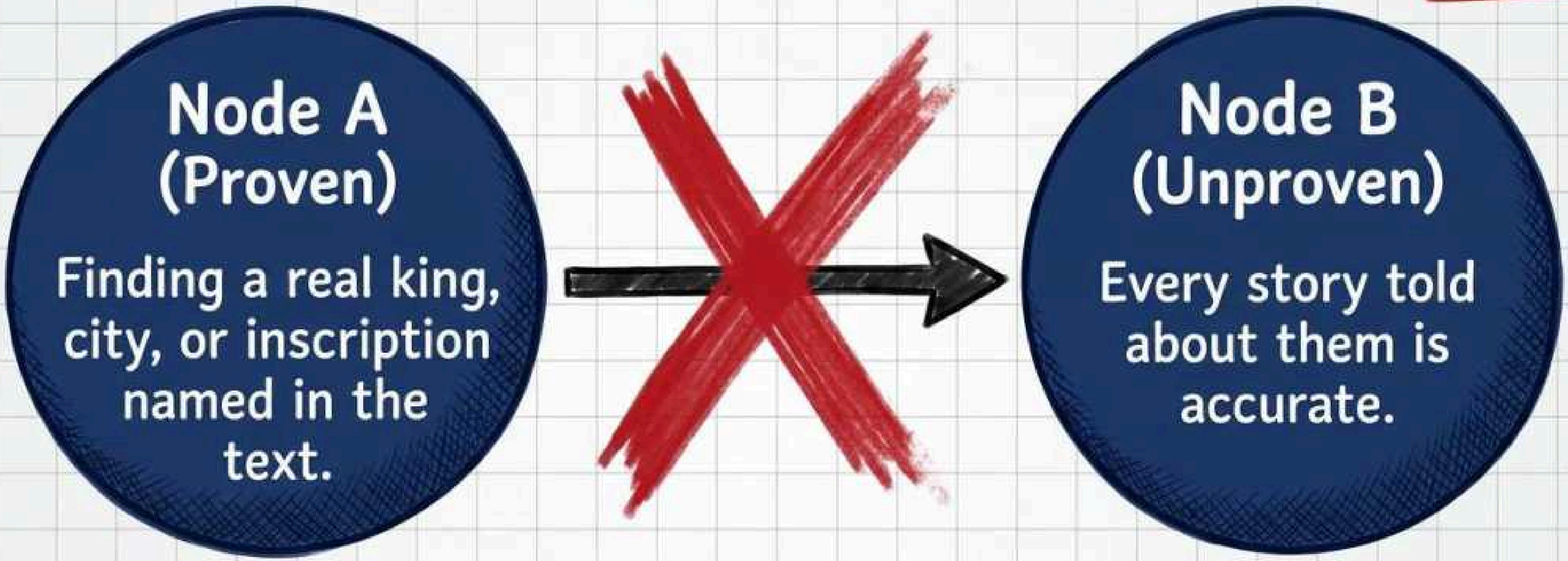
Absence of Evidence ≠ Evidence of Absence



Most of the ancient world left no surviving trace. A small village, a short reign, a private conversation, or a poor person's life may never appear in the record.

Conclusion: Historians must speak in degrees of probability, seldom in absolute proofs.

¶ 1.13

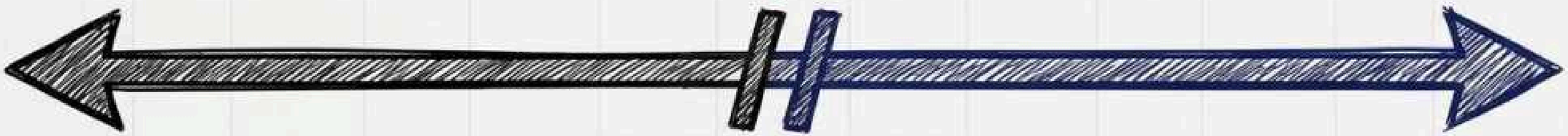


A source can be right about one thing and wrong about another. Finding real people/places proves the text knew the historical context, but historians must still test claims one at a time.

Our Approach

¶ 1.14

We will highlight when experts disagree.



Minimalists

(Treat narratives as unreliable unless outside evidence supports them)

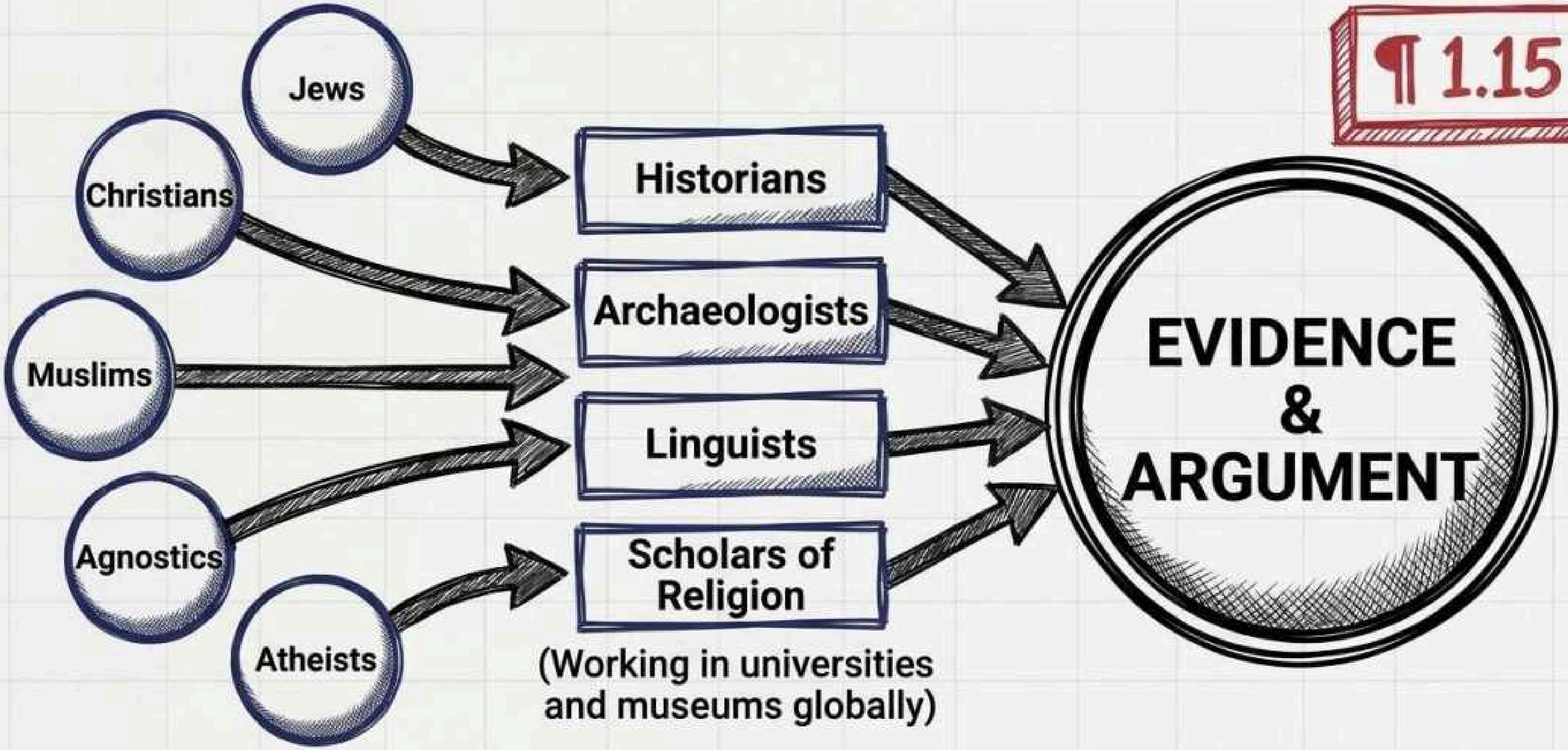
The Middle Method

(Most modern scholars work here: weighing each individual case on its specific merits)

Maximalists

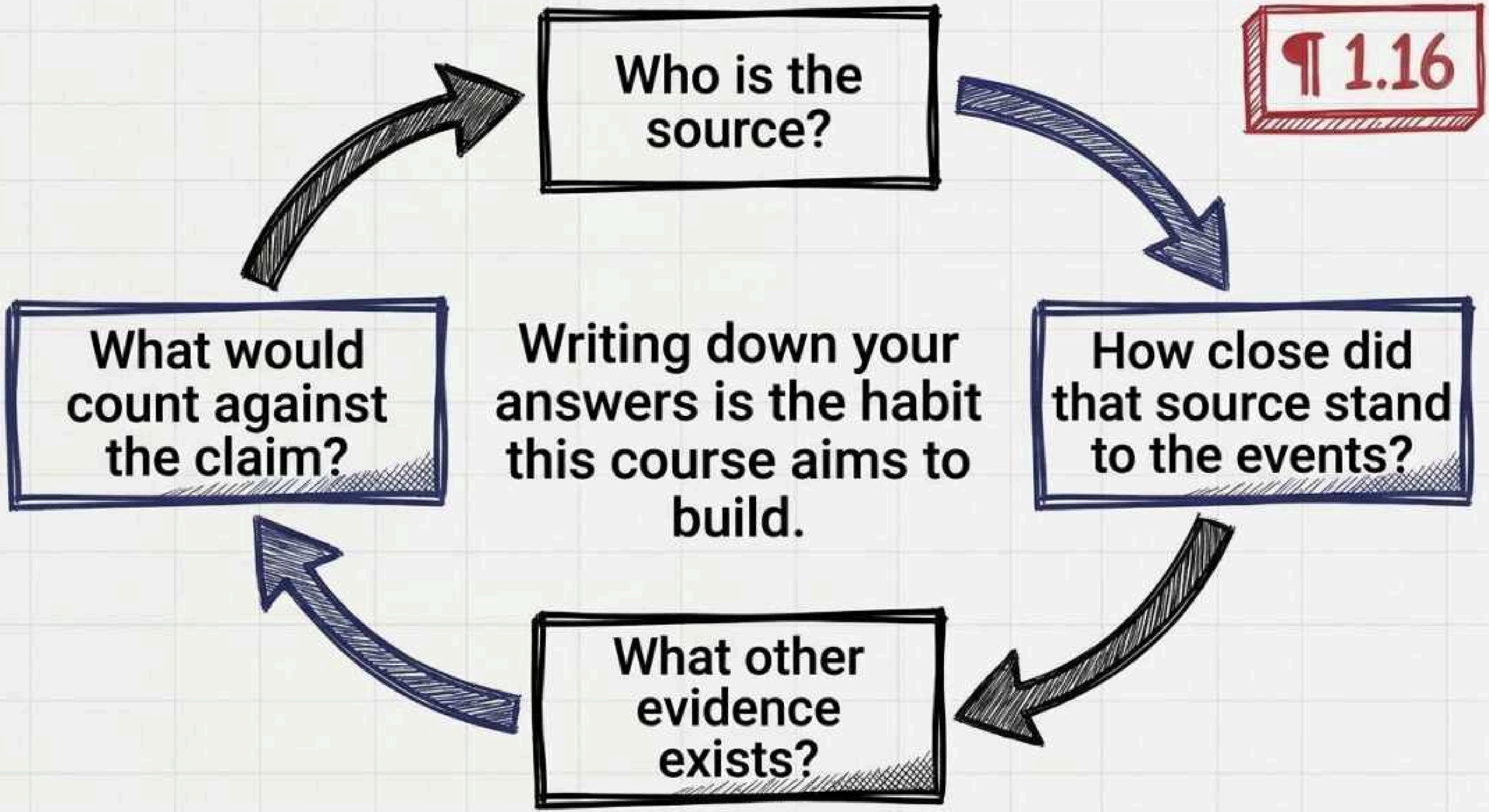
(Treat narratives as reliable unless outside evidence contradicts them)

¶ 1.15



The best work is judged purely by evidence and argument. It remains open to correction by anyone, regardless of their personal beliefs.

¶ 1.16


Who is the source?
How close did that source stand to the events?
What other evidence exists?
What would count against the claim?
Writing down your answers is the habit this course aims to build.

1) Silence in other sources is weak evidence.
2) However, one discovery does not automatically settle every other question.

¶ 1.17

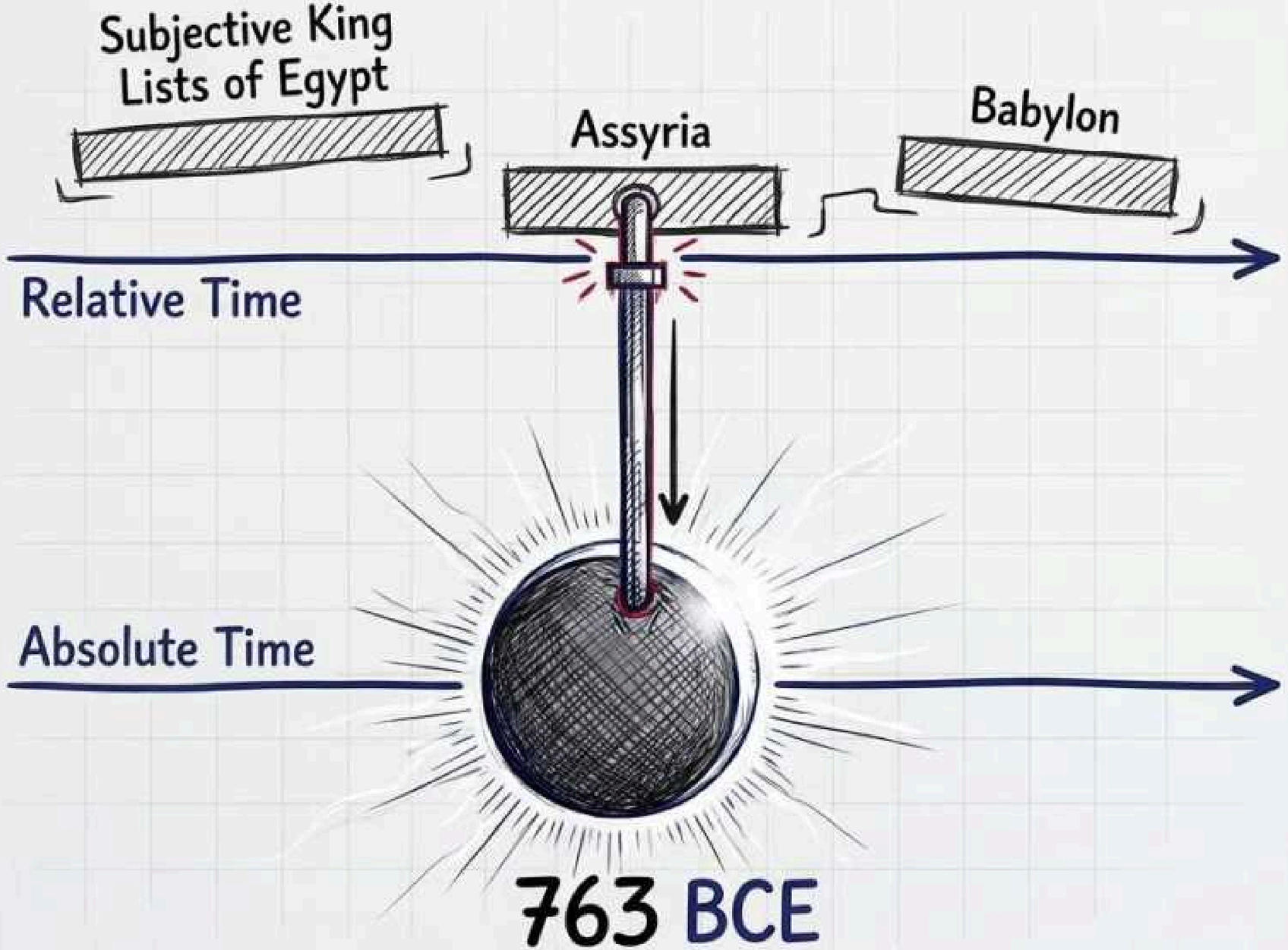
The Problem:
For a long time, the Hittite empire was known only from the Bible. Critics doubted they existed.



The Discovery:
In 1906, German archaeologist Hugo Winckler excavated Hattusa (modern and found tens of thousands of Hittite clay tablets.

1906

¶ 1.18



Ancient peoples counted years by kings' reigns.

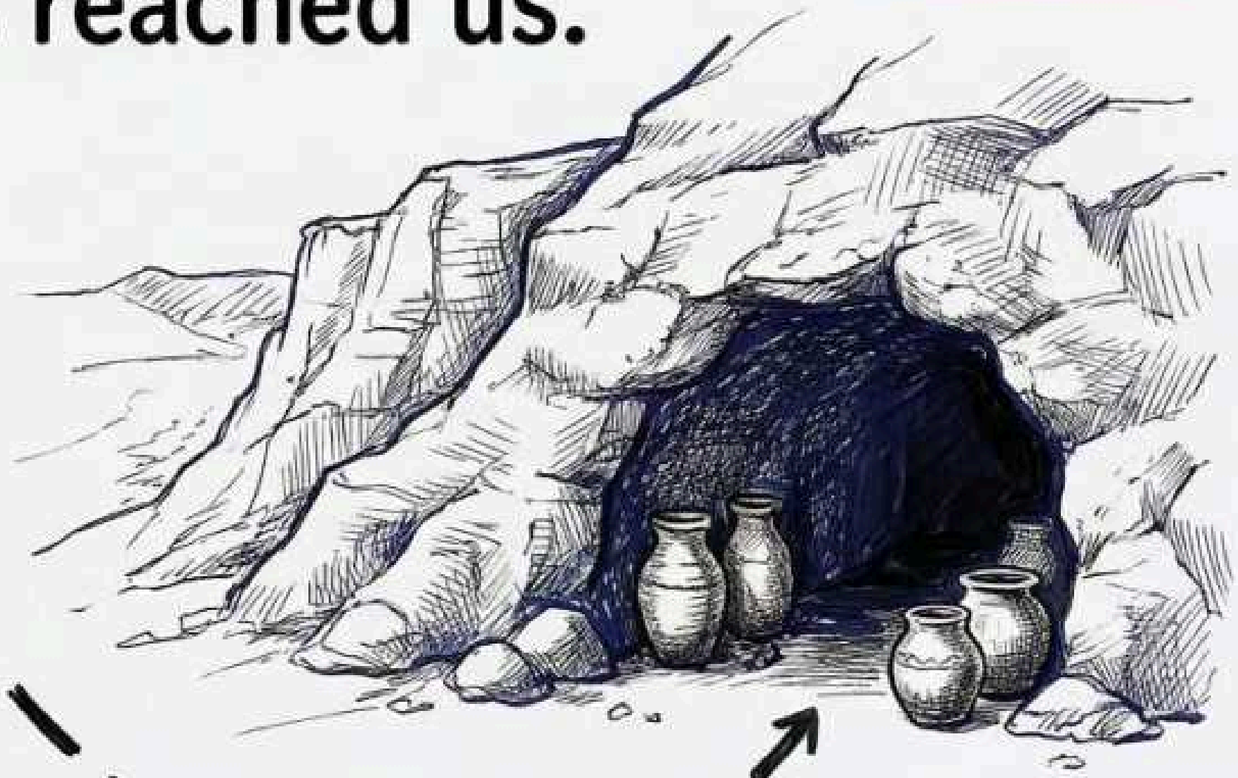
Assyrian records noted a solar eclipse in 763 BCE.

Astronomers calculated exactly when it happened, anchoring the entire chain of dates.

Outside records provide fixed points no later author could adjust.

¶ 1.19

Next Lecture:
How the words reached us.



- Answering the first pillar: Accurate Copying.
- Manuscripts and scribes.
- The discoveries in desert caves that changed the story forever.