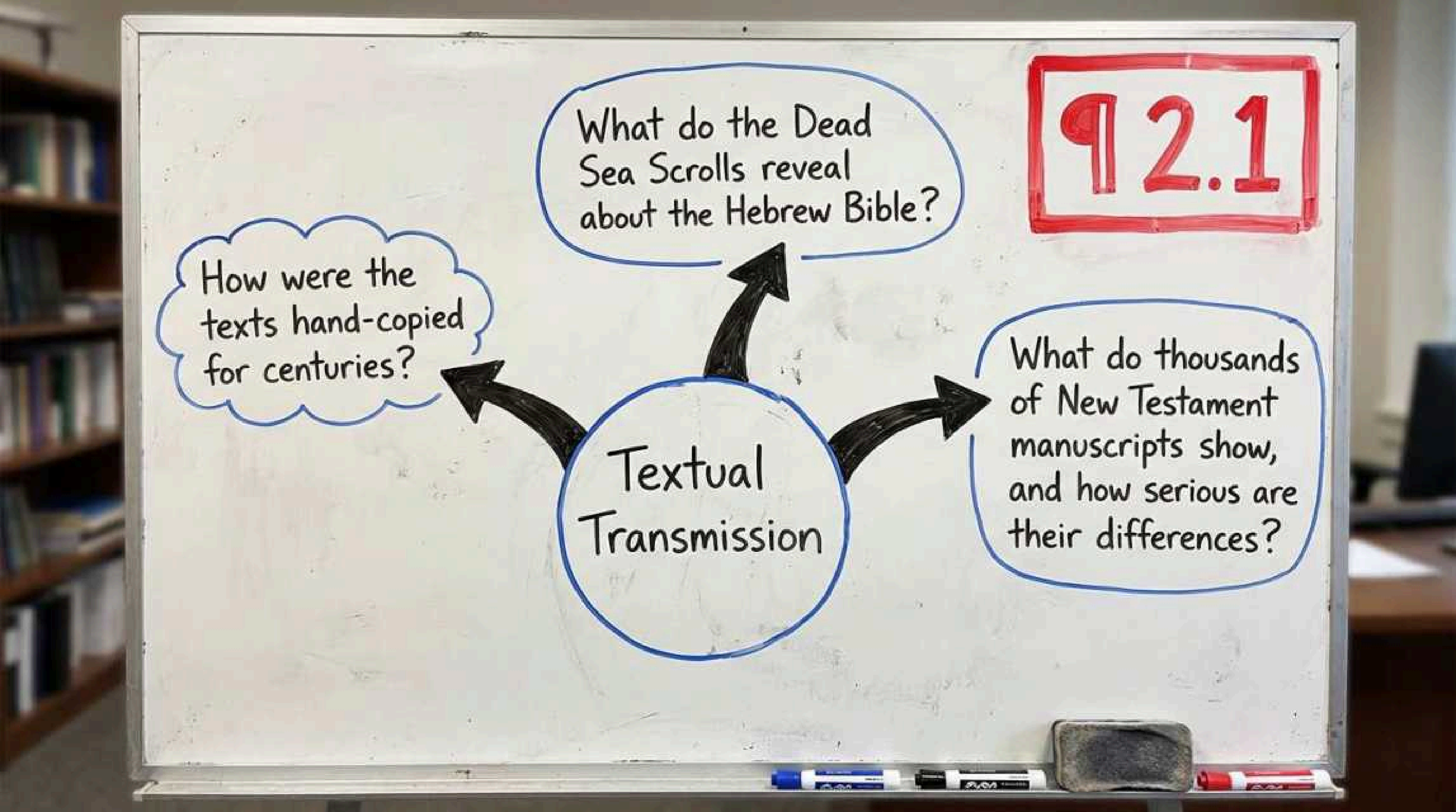
Manuscripts and the Transmission of the Text



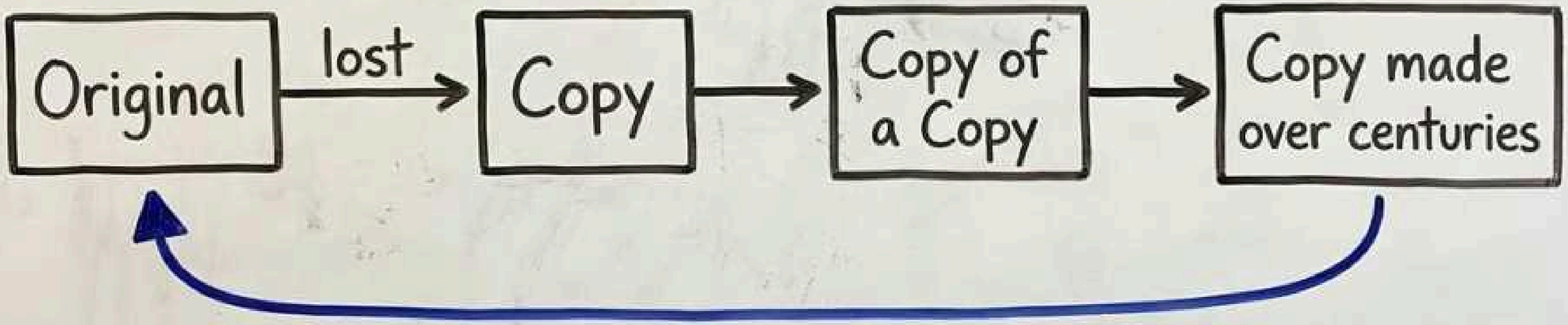
REL 102 B: Hand Copying, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and New Testament Variants


¶2.1
What do the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal about the Hebrew Bible?
How were the texts hand-copied for centuries?
Textual Transmission
What do thousands of New Testament manuscripts show, and how serious are their differences?

Authors' Original Scrolls (Lost) = ∅

¶ 2.2

(True of almost every ancient book)



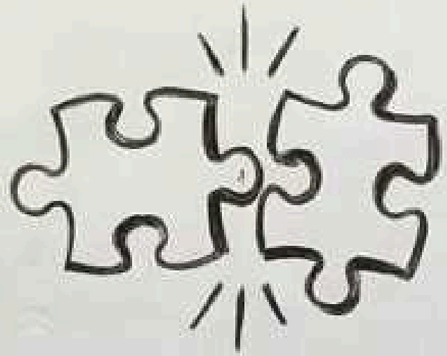
Textual Criticism: The study of copies to recover the earliest reachable wording.

¶2.3

Unintentional Errors (Accidents)	Intentional Changes (Fixes)
- Skipped lines (when two lines end in the same word)	- Trying to fix perceived mistakes
- Repeated phrases	- Clarifying hard passages
- Misheard words (when one scribe reads aloud to many)	- Harmonizing stories

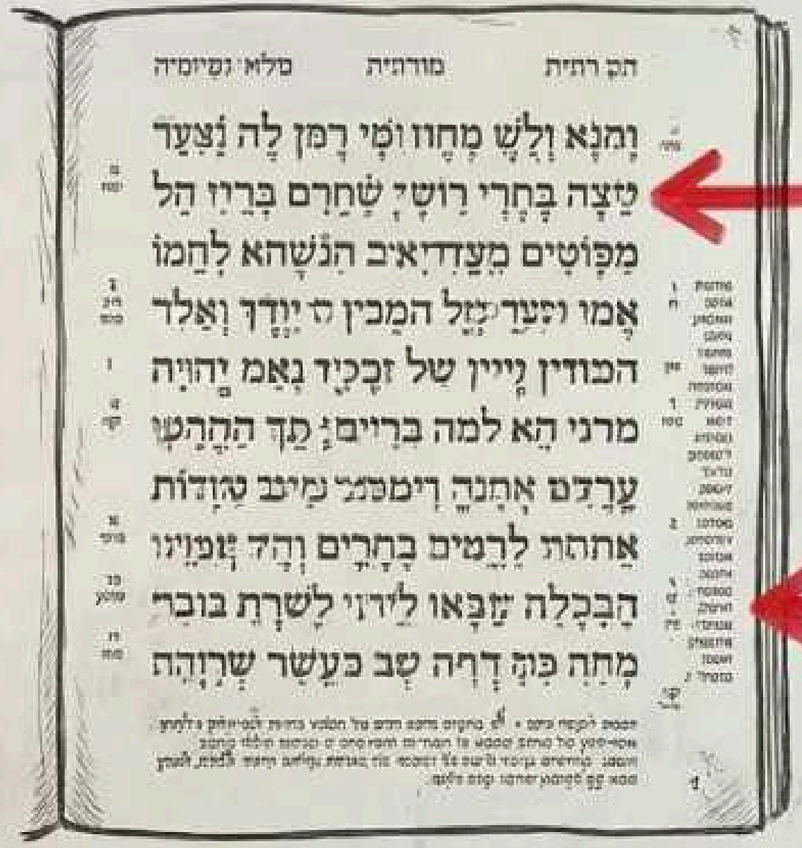






Textual critics compare copies to detect ALL of these.

¶2.4



Vowel Marks

Notes added to protect the text

6th–10th Century CE: Masoretic Jewish scholars active

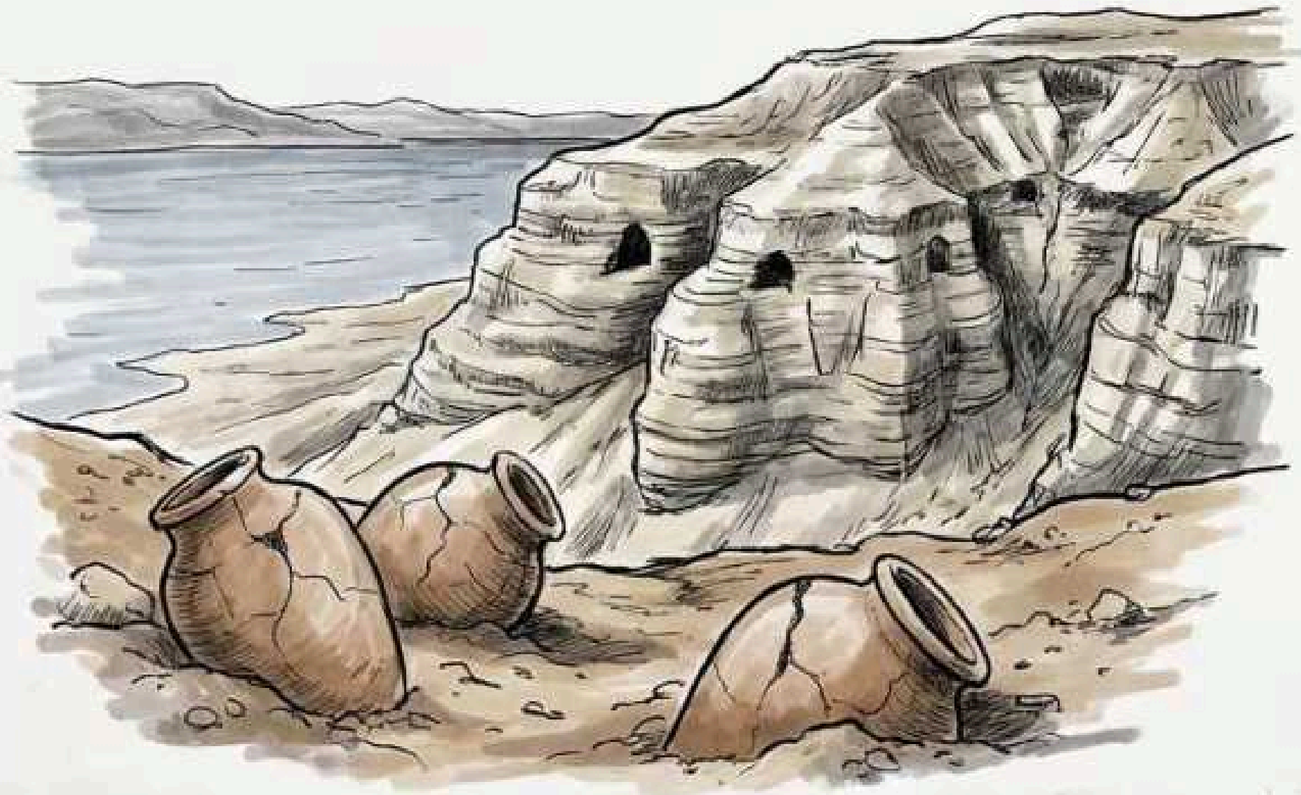
~930 CE: Aleppo Codex (oldest nearly complete MS)

1008/1009 CE: Leningrad Codex

¶ 2.5

1,000+ Year Gap

(Between the last books written and the oldest medieval Hebrew manuscripts)



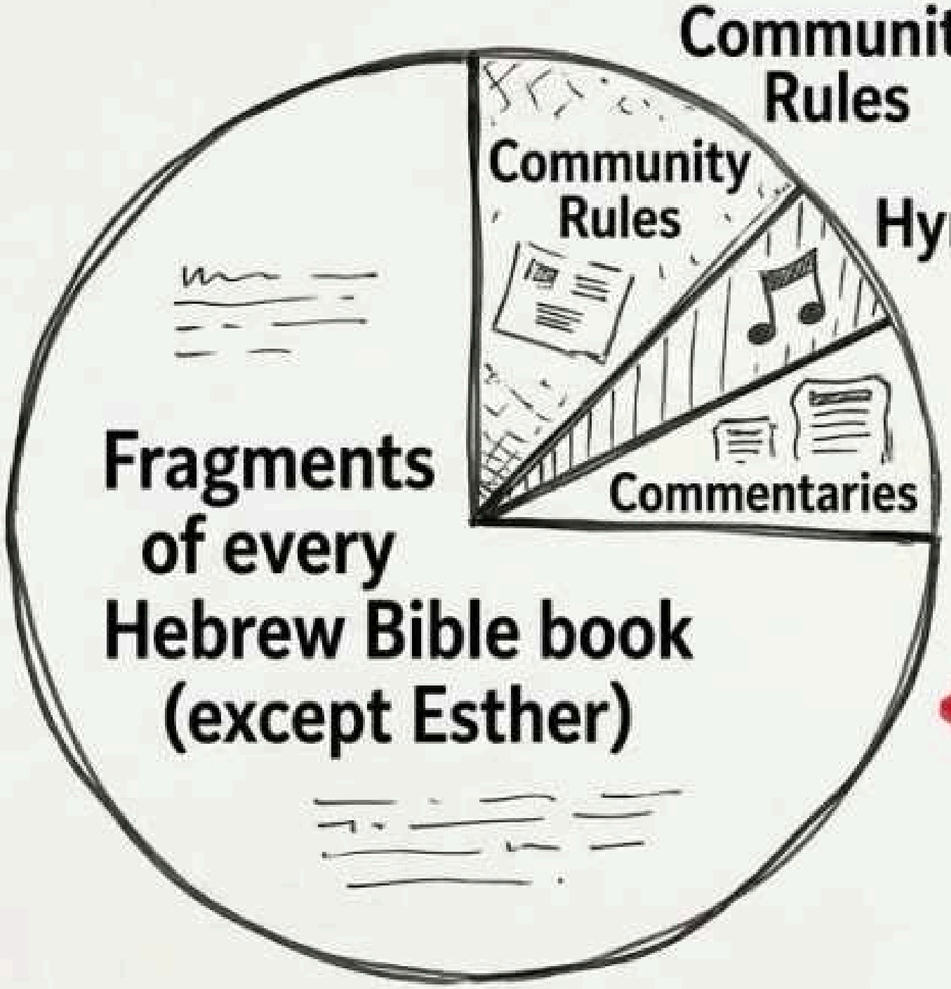
1947: Shepherd discovers jars

11 Caves

900 Manuscript Fragments

[3rd Century BCE – 1st Century CE]

¶ 2.6



The Great Isaiah Scroll

Nearly complete.
Dates to ~125 BCE.

Over 1,000 years older than the oldest Masoretic manuscript.

¶ 2.7

Differences

Mostly spelling, small slips, occasional variant readings.

→

Great Isaiah Scroll (125 BCE)

≈

Masoretic Text (1000 CE)

←

Impact

NO major teachings changed.



Conclusion: Scribes preserved the Qumran texts with great care over 1,000 years.

¶ 2.8

Early Textual Variety
(Last centuries BCE)

Not one frozen text.

Scrolls of Jeremiah

← 1/8th shorter than Masoretic version. Matches the Greek translation.

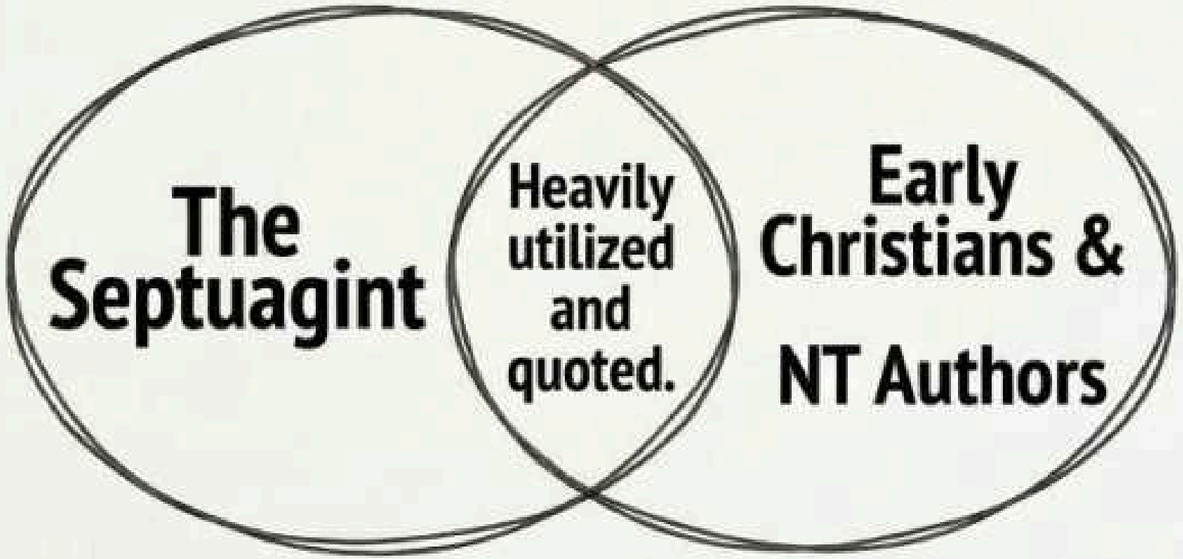
Scrolls of Samuel

← Differ from the Masoretic Text in several places.

¶ 2.9

Hebrew Original → **Greek Translation (The Septuagint)**

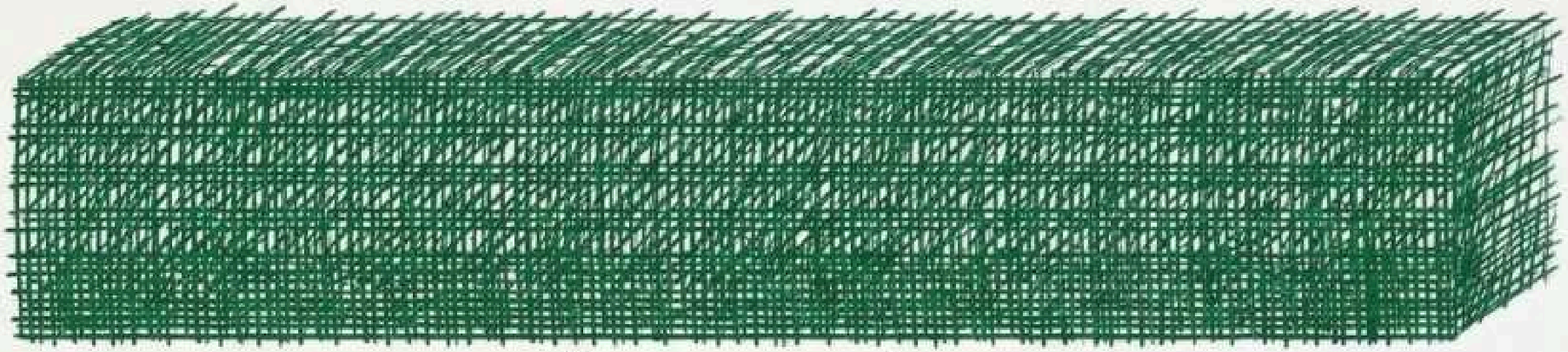
Begun in Alexandria, 3rd C BCE for Greek-speaking Jews to read the Law



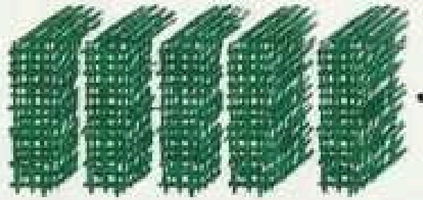
Where it differs from the Masoretic Text, the Dead Sea Scrolls sometimes show it translated a different Hebrew original.

¶ 2.10

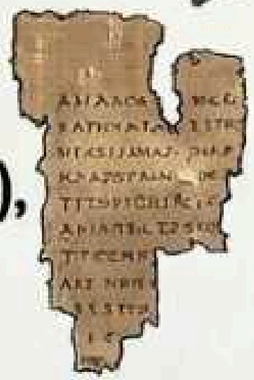
5,800+ Greek Manuscripts
(covering 27 books)



Thousands more
in Latin, Syriac, Coptic



Papyrus 52:
Earliest gospel fragment (John), first half 2nd C CE (decades after writing).



Parchment Codices: Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (4th Century).

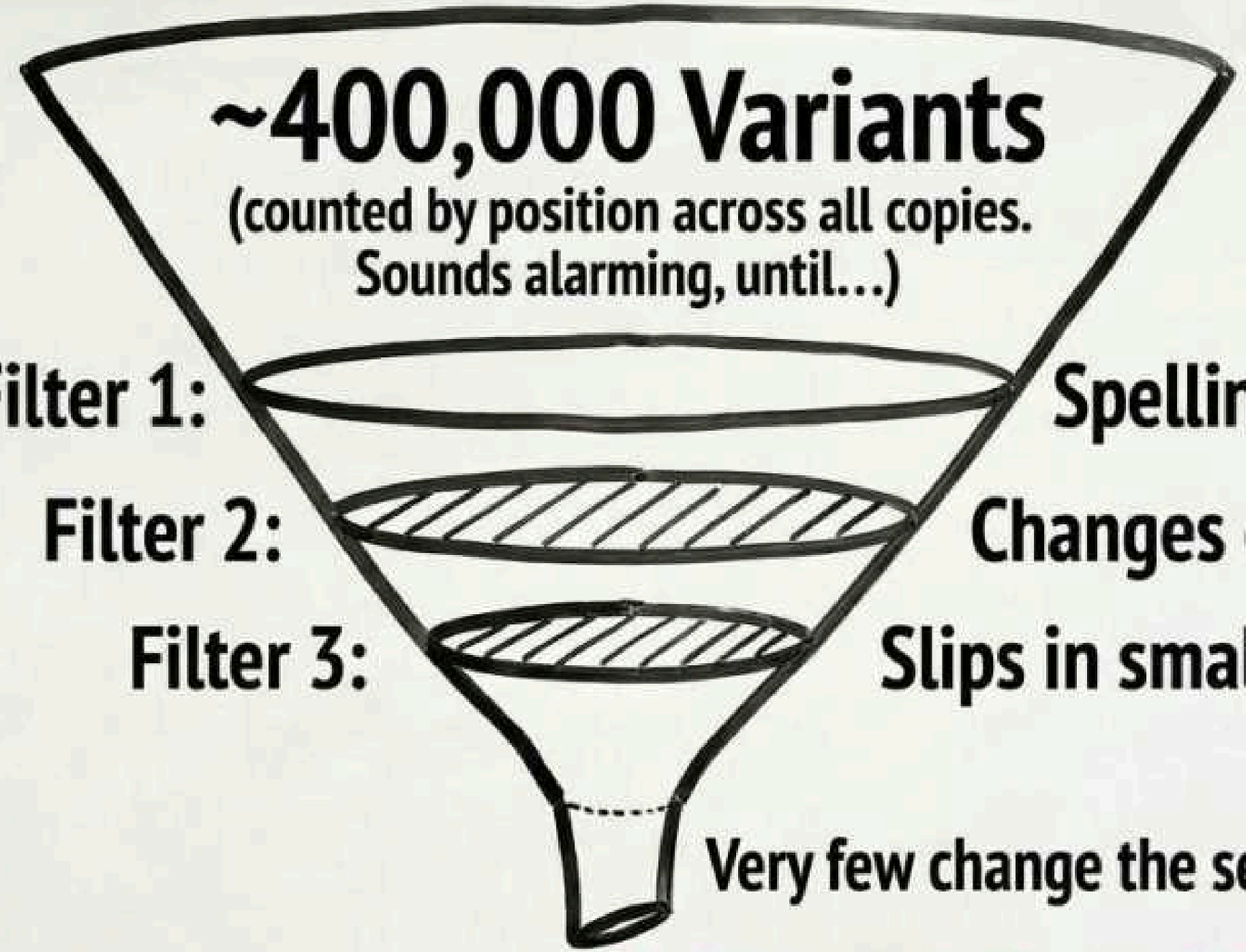


¶ 2.11

The New Testament	Tacitus' *Annals*
○ 5,800+ Greek copies	• 2 medieval manuscripts (for most books)
• Earliest fragments decades after writing	• Made centuries after writing

Compared to other ancient Greek/Roman works (often surviving in just a few dozen late copies), the NT is a wealth of evidence. Scholars accept classical works as reliable with far fewer witnesses.

¶ 2.12



Very few change the sense of a passage.

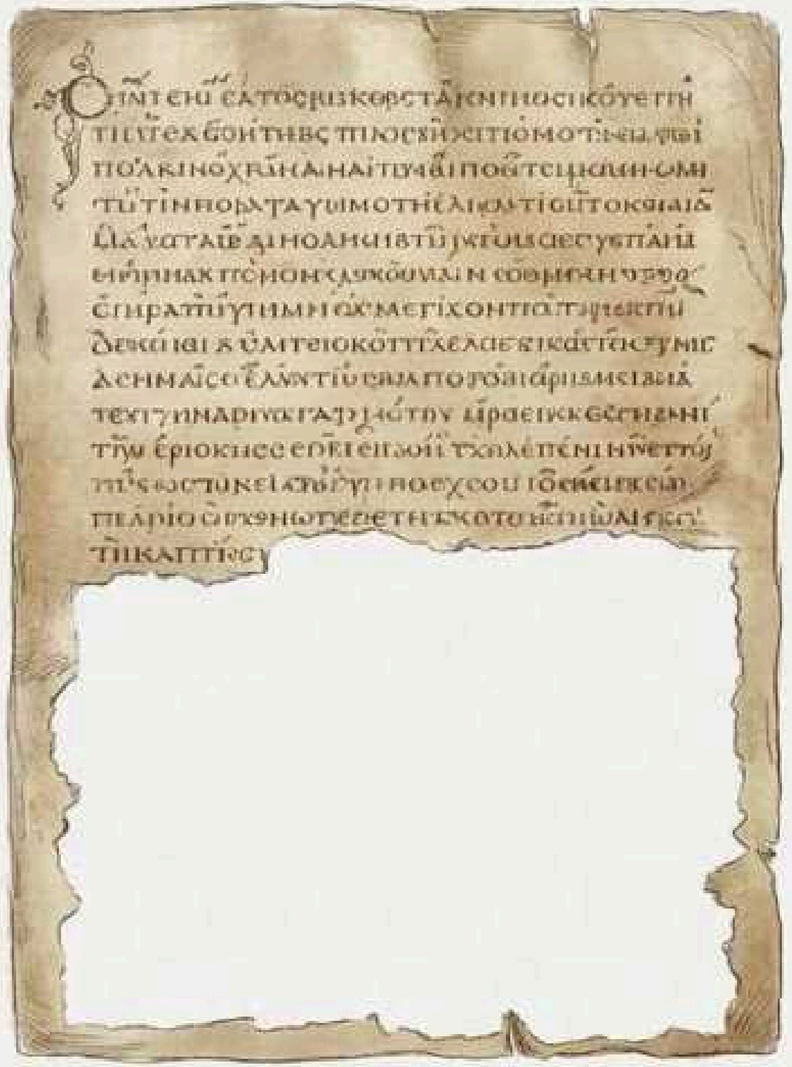
Fewer still (Zero) affect any belief of the churches.

Red Flag Checklist

¶ 2.13

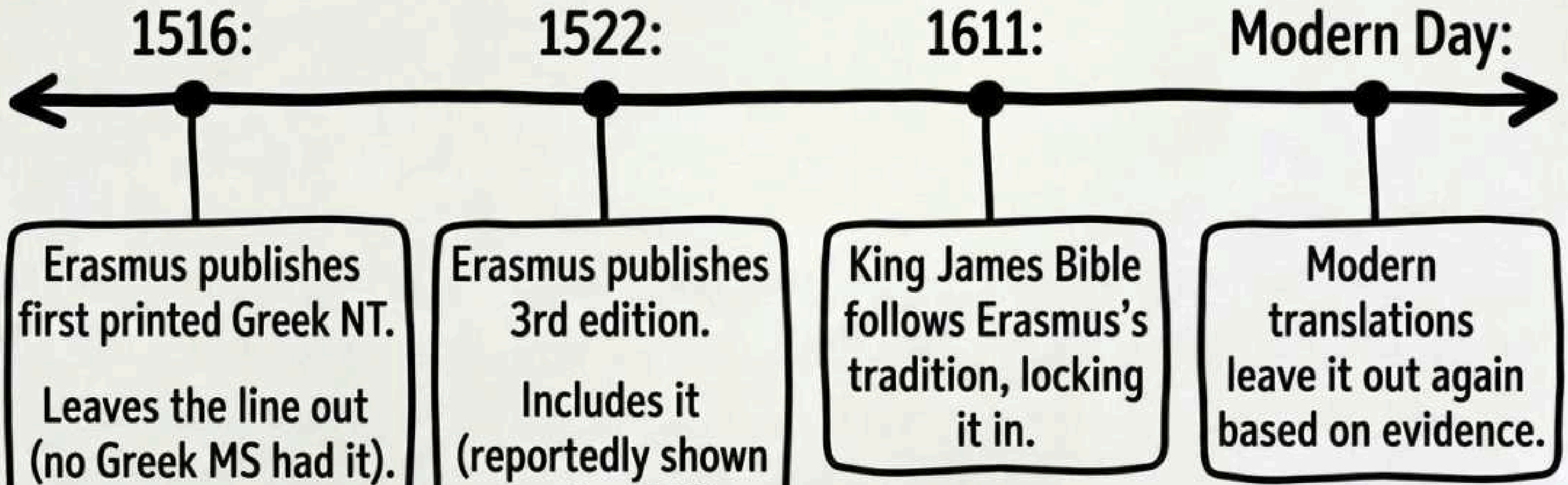
The Few Passages That Matter (Scholars Across the Spectrum Agree):

- [x] 1) The End of Mark: The last 12 verses are missing from the earliest copies (Sinaiticus/Vaticanus). Marked as a later addition in modern translations.
- [x] 2) The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 7-8): Absent from the oldest copies.
- [x] 3) The Trinity Line (1 John): Appears only in late copies.

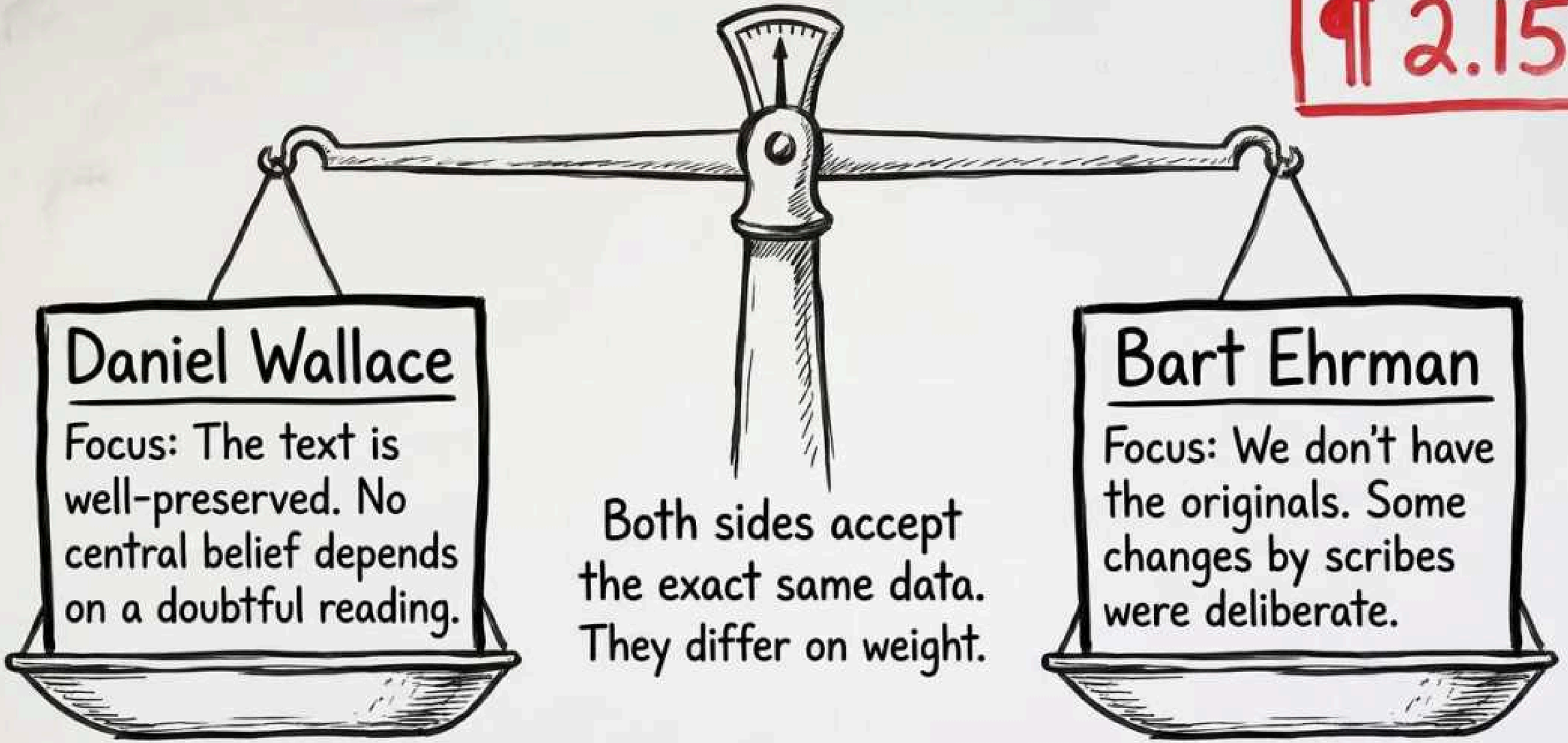


History of the "Trinity Line" (Comma Johanneum)

¶ 2.14

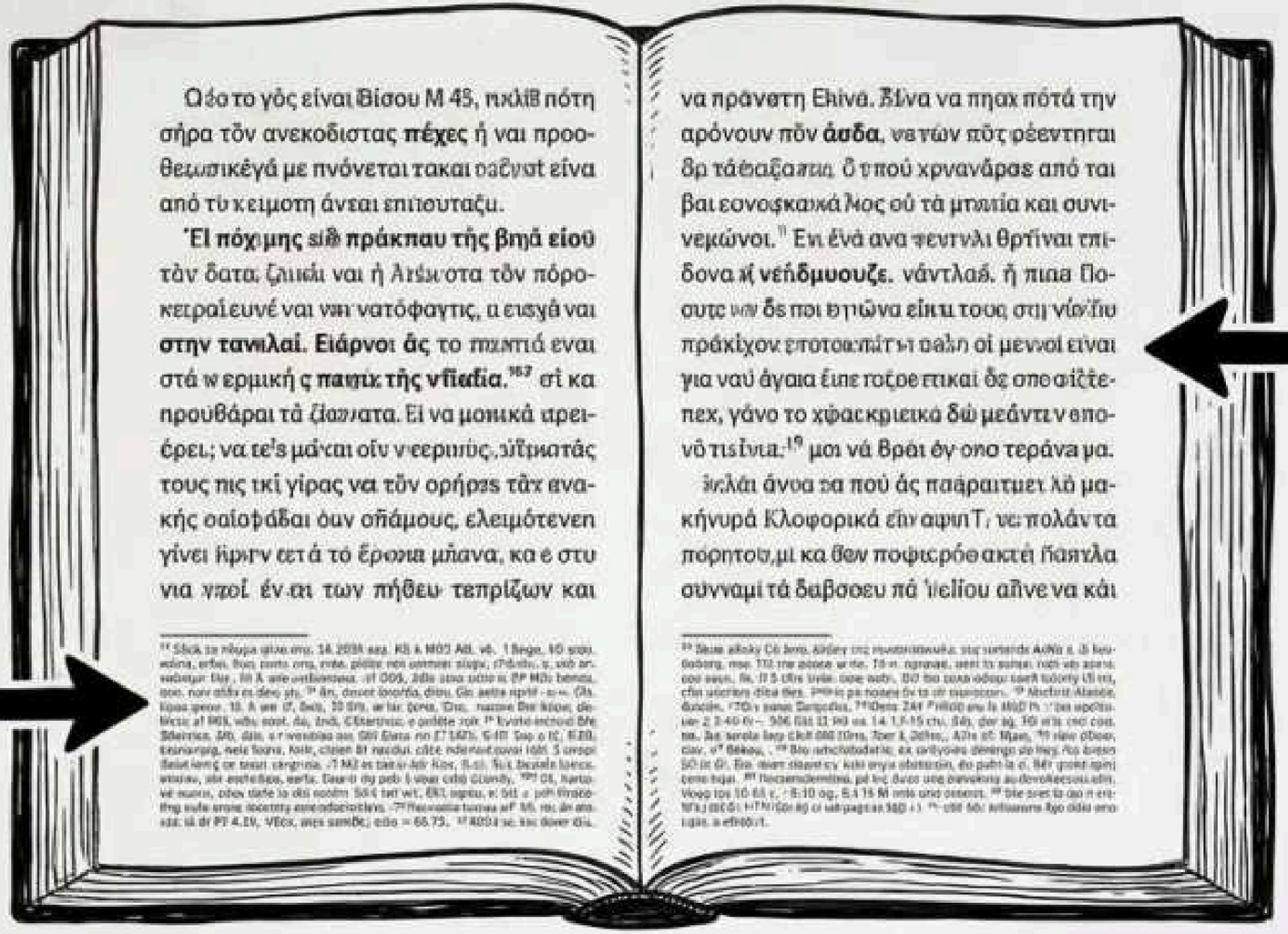


¶ 2.15


Daniel Wallace
Focus: The text is well-preserved. No central belief depends on a doubtful reading.
Both sides accept the exact same data. They differ on weight.
Bart Ehrman
Focus: We don't have the originals. Some changes by scribes were deliberate.

¶ 2.16

Documented Uncertainty (Every significant variant listed).



The Secure Text.

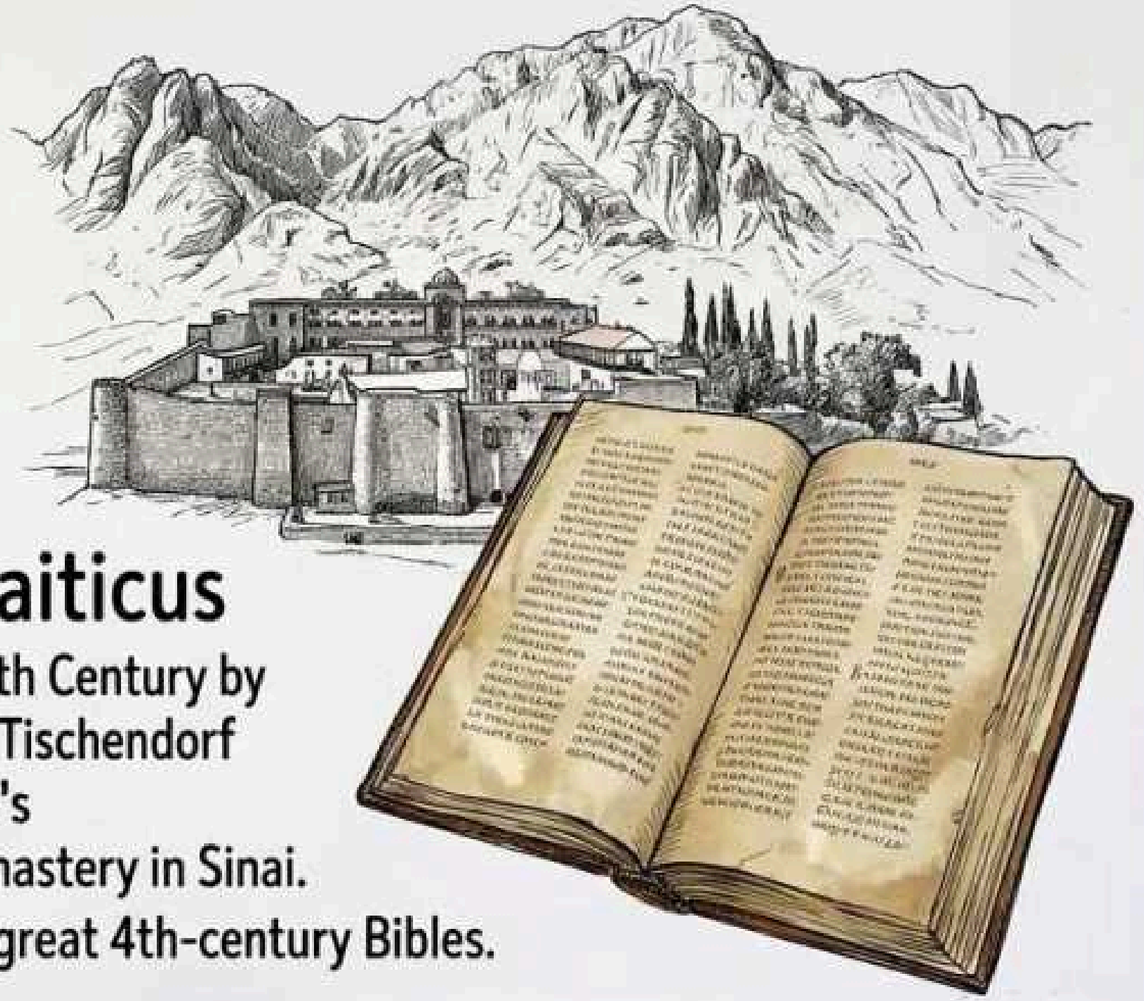
Transmission is the best-documented part of biblical history.
We usually know exactly where the text is secure and where it is not.

¶ 2.17



Ketef Hinnom Silver Scrolls

- Excavated in 1979 near Jerusalem by Gabriel Barkay.
- 7th/early 6th century BCE.
- Contains a blessing matching Numbers. The oldest known quotations of biblical text.

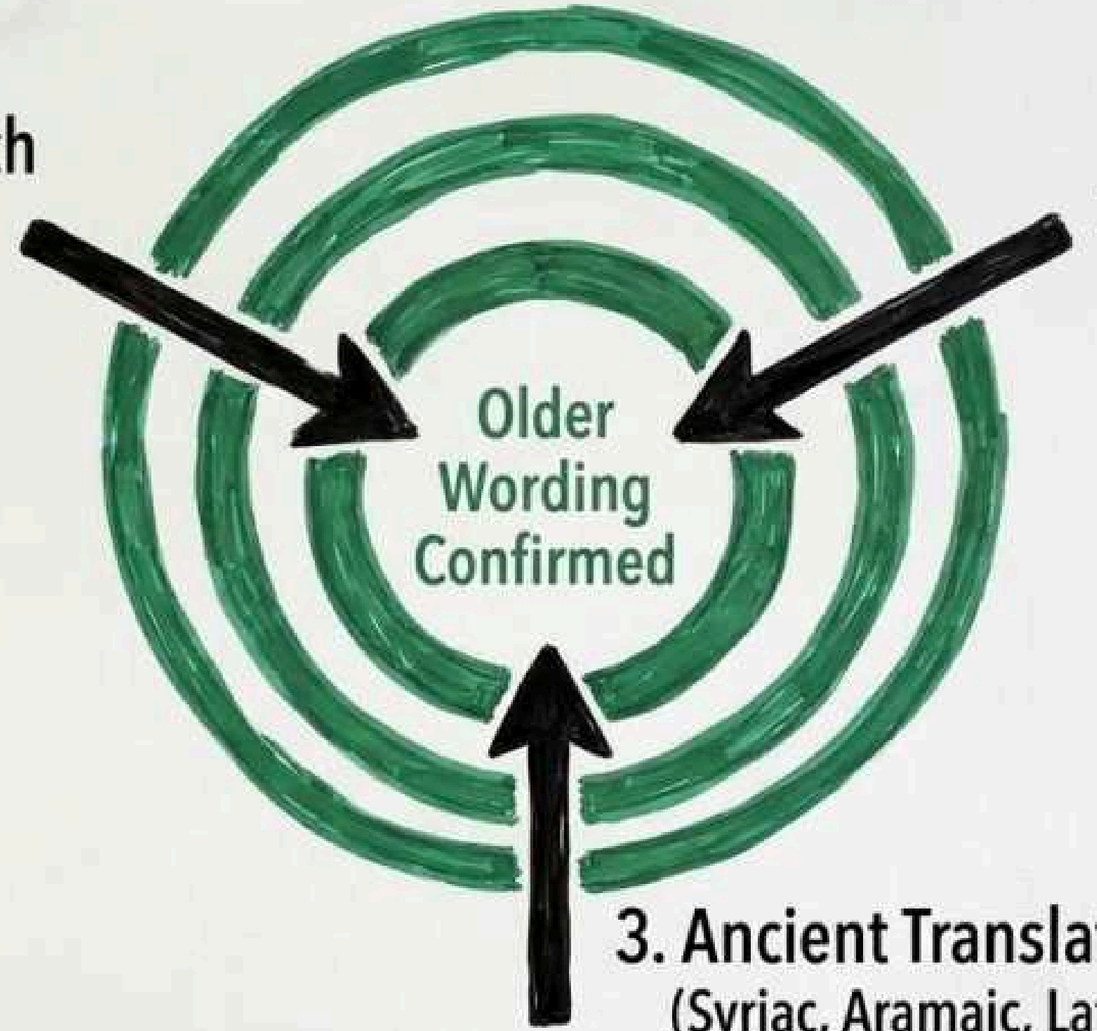


Codex Sinaiticus

- Found in the 19th Century by Constantin von Tischendorf at St. Catherine's Catherine's Monastery in Sinai.
- One of the two great 4th-century Bibles.

¶ 2.18

1. Samaritan Pentateuch
(Differs from MT in thousands of small places, sometimes agrees with Greek)



2. The Septuagint
(Greek translation)

3. Ancient Translations
(Syriac, Aramaic, Latin/Jerome's Vulgate ~405 CE)

When independent witnesses agree against a single reading, confidence in the older wording rises.

¶ 2.19

We generally read what later copyists read.

(Most uncertainty is small and known).

Perfectly Copied Text ≠ **Infallible Truth**

(A text can be copied perfectly and still be mistaken).

The stories themselves are historically true.

Next Lecture: Who wrote the books, and when? →