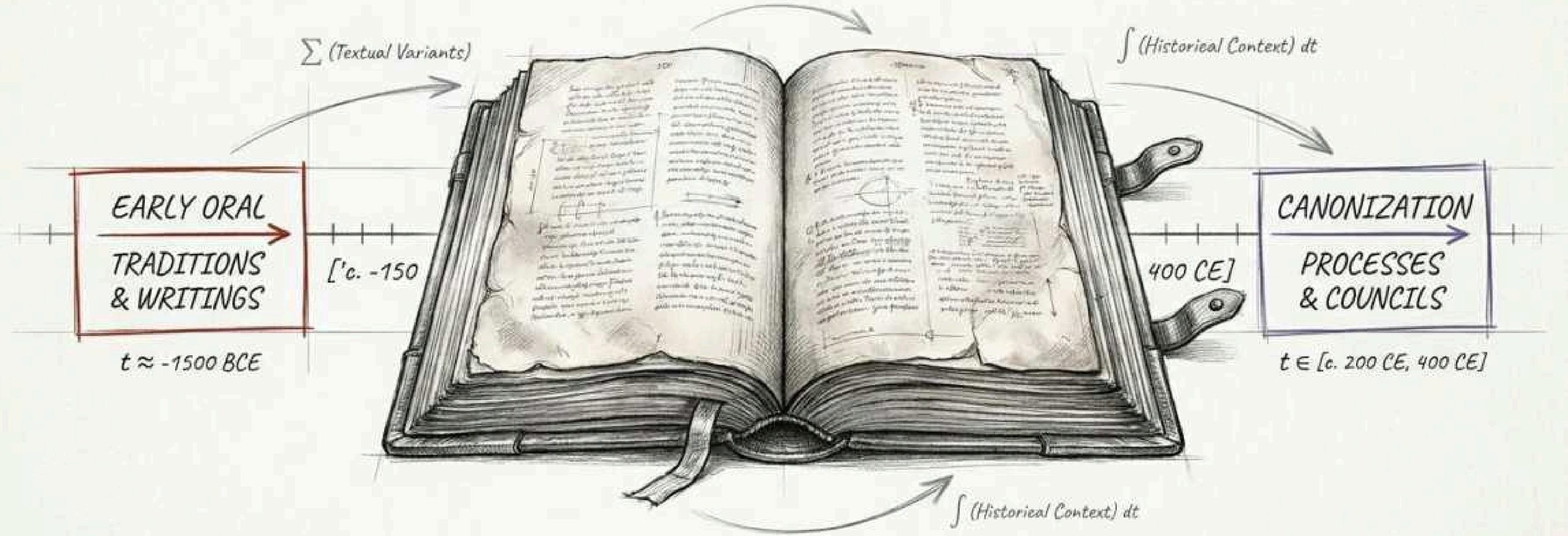
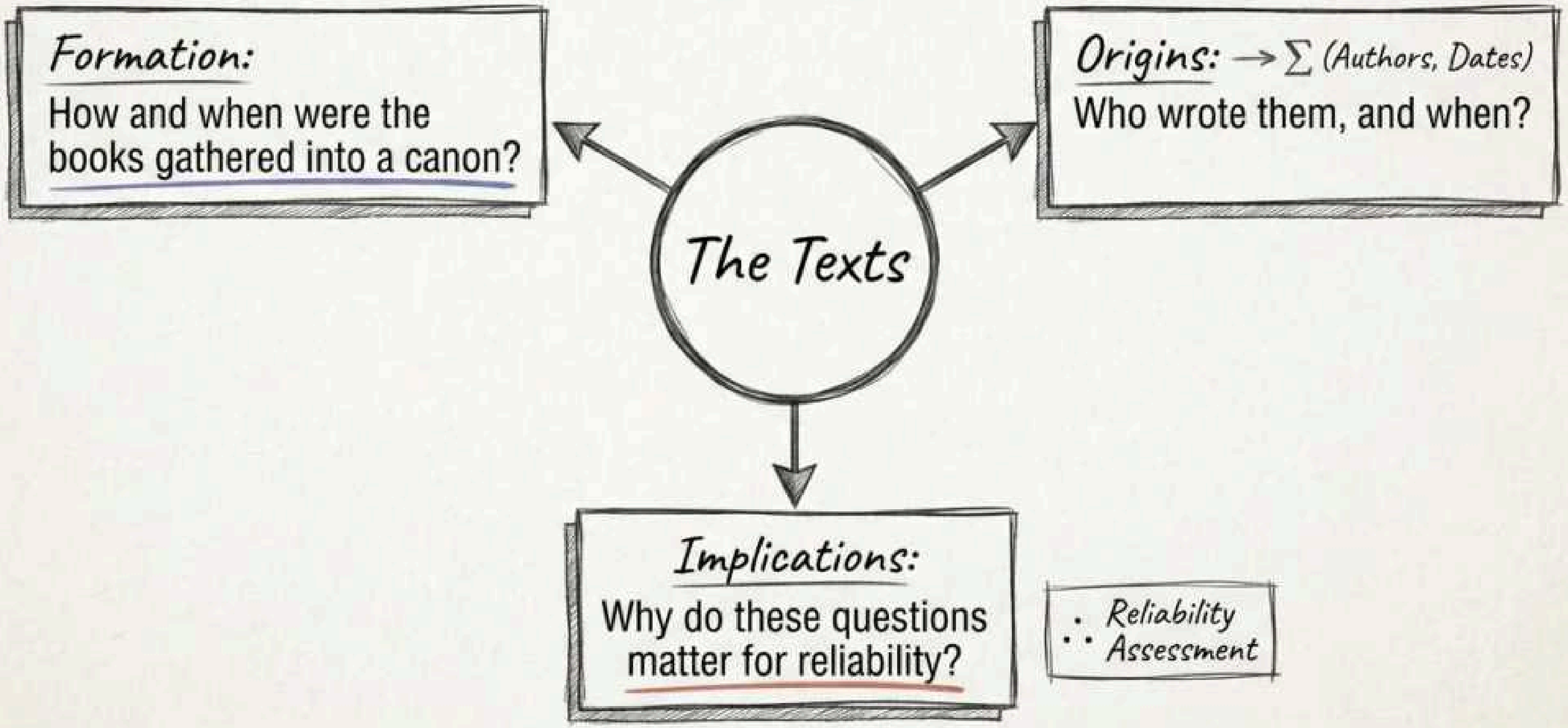
The Origins of the Biblical Canon

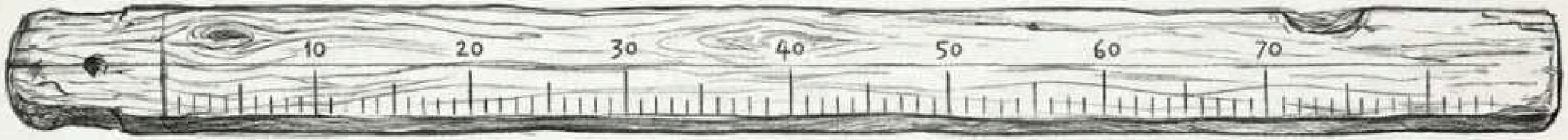
Canon, Authorship, and Dating — A Forensic Historical Analysis.



[¶ 3.1]


Formation:
How and when were the books gathered into a canon?
Origins: → ∑ (Authors, Dates)
Who wrote them, and when?
The Texts
Implications:
Why do these questions matter for reliability?
∴ Reliability Assessment

[¶ 3.2]



Greek word for measuring rod → Authoritative List

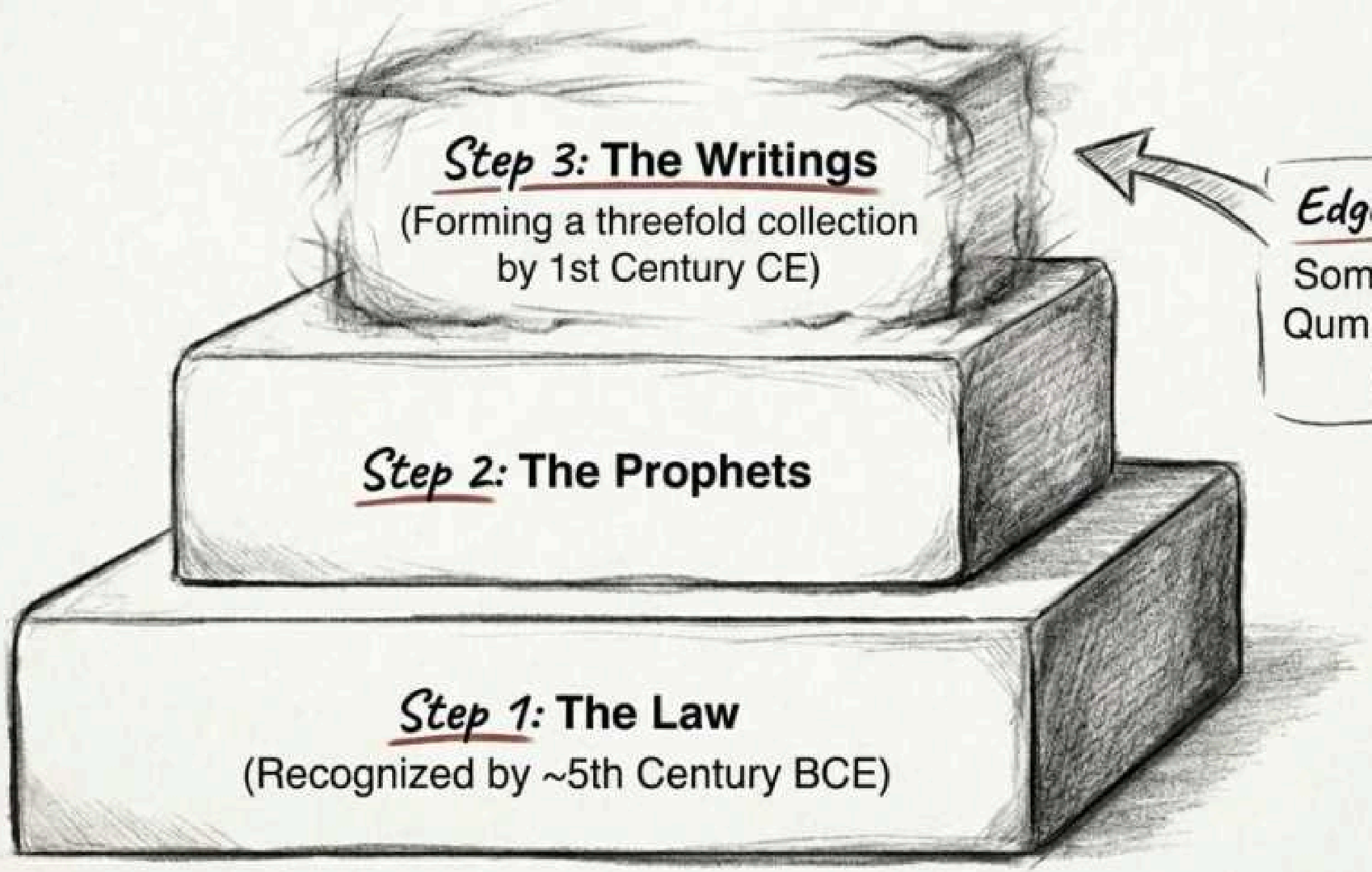
The canon was not decided at one meeting.

Centuries of Community Consensus.

Useful but not binding

Sacred & Authoritative

¶ 3.3



Edges were not sharp:

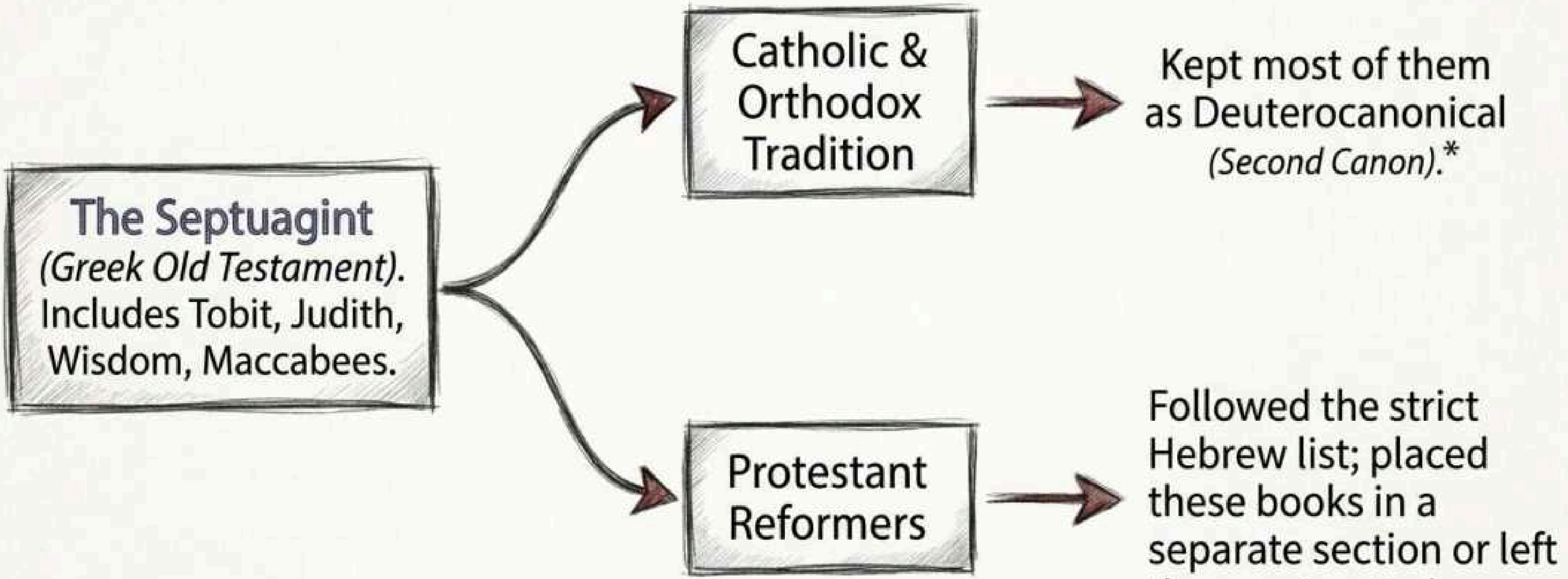
Some communities, like Qumran, read books that others did not.

¶ 3.4

Popular Myth	Historical Evidence
A council of rabbis at Jamnia (Yavneh) fixed the Jewish canon around 90 CE.	Doubted by modern scholars. Rabbis debated the sacredness of books (e.g., Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), but made no formal decision.

The Hebrew list was widely accepted organically by the 2nd Century CE.

[¶ 3.5]


The Septuagint
(Greek Old Testament).
Includes Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Maccabees.
Catholic & Orthodox Tradition
Kept most of them as Deuterocanonical (Second Canon).*
Protestant Reformers
Followed the strict Hebrew list; placed these books in a separate section or left them out entirely.

[¶ 3.6]

Late 1st Century

Paul's letters collected and circulated.

Later 2nd Century

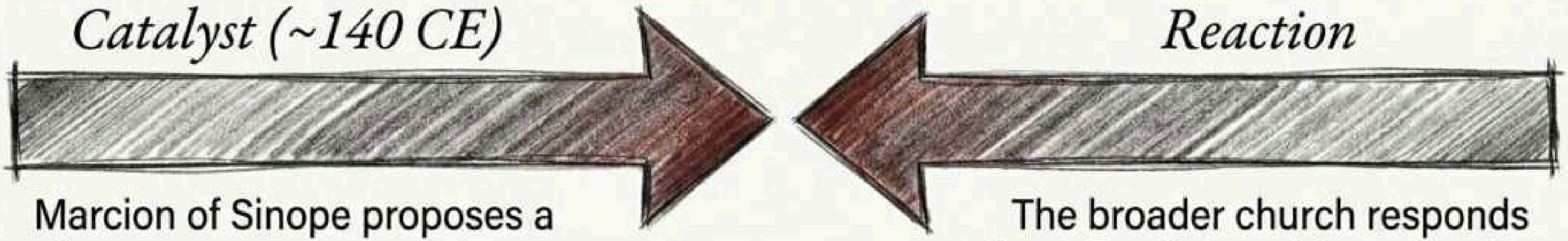
The Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) read together. (Irenaeus argued for exactly four).

Shepherd of Hermas

Read by some churches, ultimately excluded.

[¶ 3.7]

Opposing Forces



Marcion of Sinope proposes a short canon (Edited Luke + 10 Pauline letters).

The broader church responds by defending a wider collection.

Evidence: The Muratorian Fragment (late 2nd Century) lists most of our modern books, demonstrating this reactionary definition.

[¶ 3.8]

367 CE: Athanasius of Alexandria names exactly the 27 books.

393 & 397 CE: Councils of Hippo & Carthage approve this list.

1546 CE: Council of Trent formally confirms the Catholic canon.

MYTHBUSTER

Emperor Constantine did NOT choose the books at Nicaea in 325 CE. Nicaea dealt entirely with doctrine, not canon.

The Excluded Texts (Nag Hammadi)

[¶ 3.9]

Discovery: Found by Egyptian farmers in 1945.



Volume: 13 codices holding ~50 texts (including the Gospel of Thomas).

Nature: Mostly 2nd to 4th-century Gnostic writings.

Insight: Scholars use these to understand the sheer variety of early Christianity, though most date later than the canonical gospels.

[¶ 3.10]

Canon ≠ Historicity

Religious Community

Inclusion = a judgment based on use, tradition, and theology.

The Historian

Studies all early writings (canonical or not) equally.

Being in the canon does not make a book earlier, and being outside it does not make a book false.

[¶ 3.11]

Traditional View:

1 Author (Moses) = The Pentateuch

Critical Scholarship Equation:

J + E + D + P = The Pentateuch

Developed by Julius Wellhausen (19th C). Suggests multiple source strands edited together by ~5th Century BCE.

Current Status: Theory heavily revised, but the presence of multiple authorship strands remains scholarly consensus.

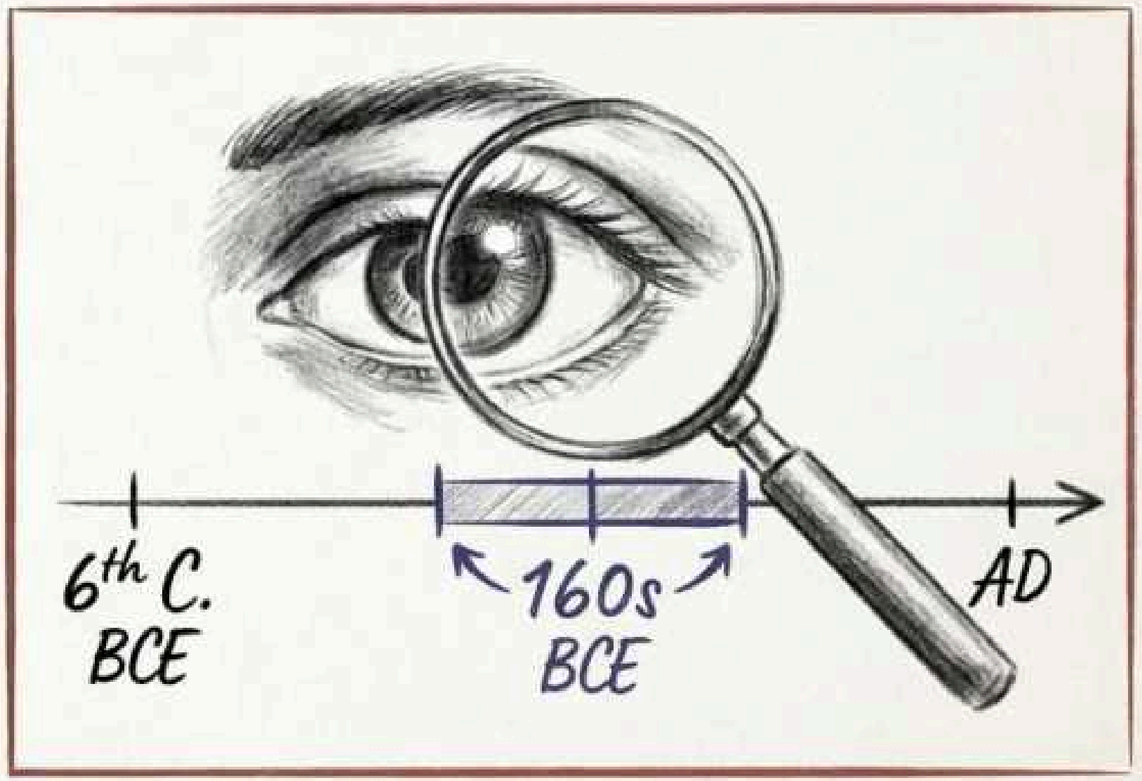
¶ 3.12

Isaiah



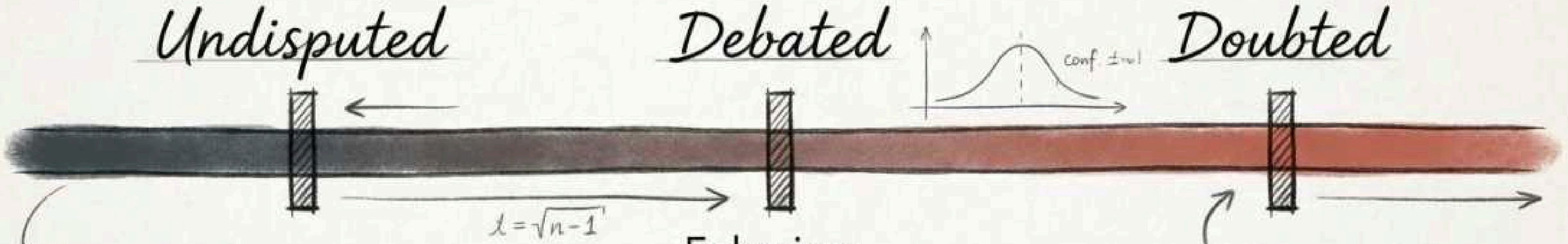
Combines 8th-century BCE oracles with later chapters written during and after the exile.

Daniel



Set in the 6th C. BCE, but critical scholars date it to the 160s BCE because its visions match events of that period with extreme precision.
(Note: Conservative scholars defend earlier dates).

[¶ 3.13]



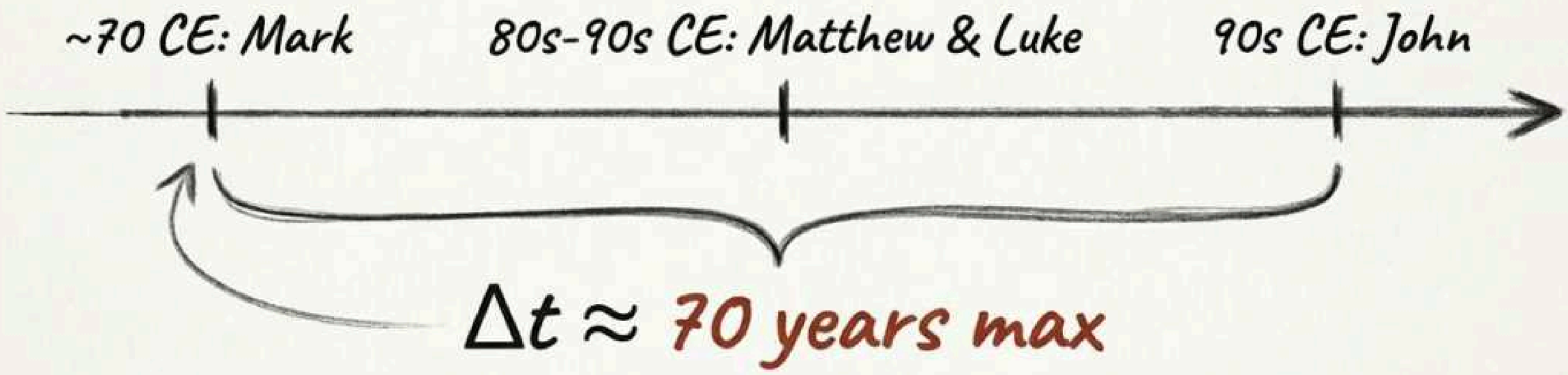
7 letters accepted by nearly all:
Romans, 1/2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 Thessalonians
(Earliest, ~50 CE)

Ephesians, Colossians

The Pastoral letters:
1/2 Timothy, Titus
(doubted by most critical scholars)

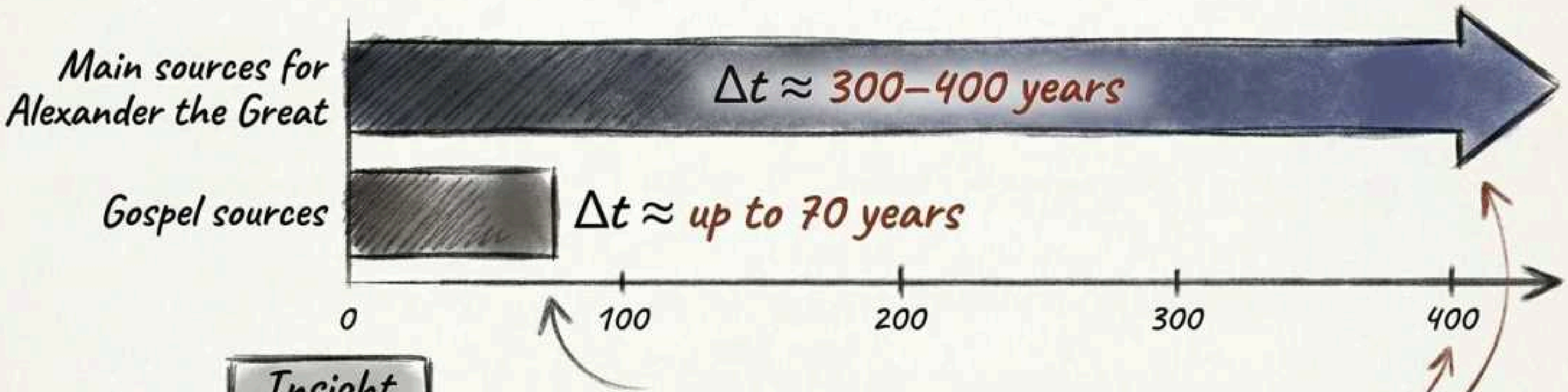
The four gospels are historically anonymous; names were added in titles in the 2nd Century.

¶ 3.14



(Maximum gap between events and texts).

¶ 3.15



Insight

A gap of decades is normal for ancient biography. It means oral tradition carried stories first. Research shows oral cultures preserve stories faithfully in some features, flexibly in others.

[¶ 3.16]

Texts make claims (e.g., Luke says he consulted eyewitnesses; 1 John says authors "heard and seen")

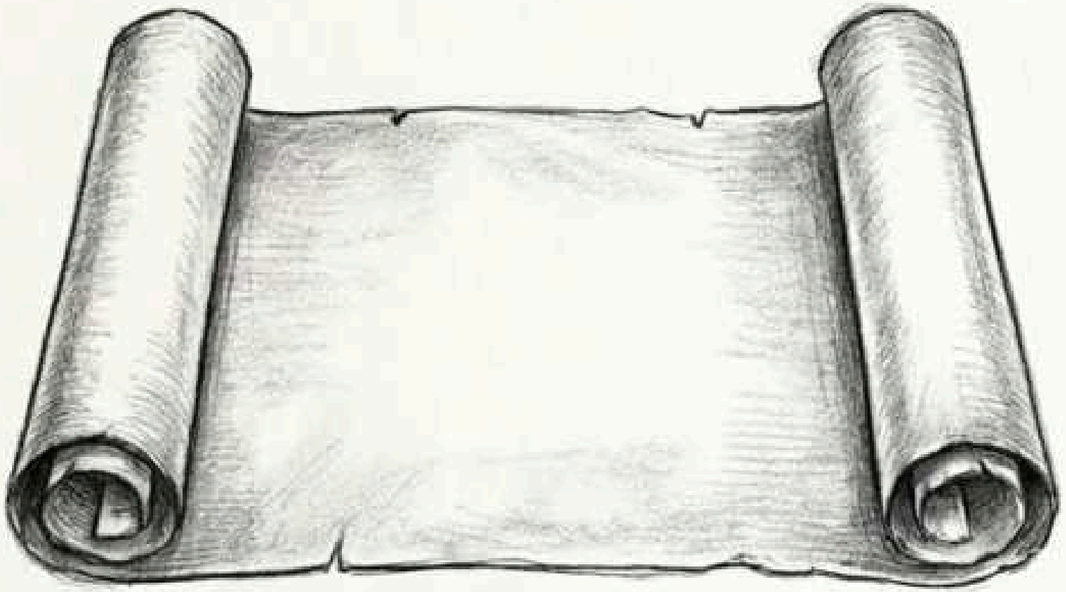


Real Eyewitness Contact
(The Conservative scholarly view)

Later Literary Convention
(The Critical scholarly view)

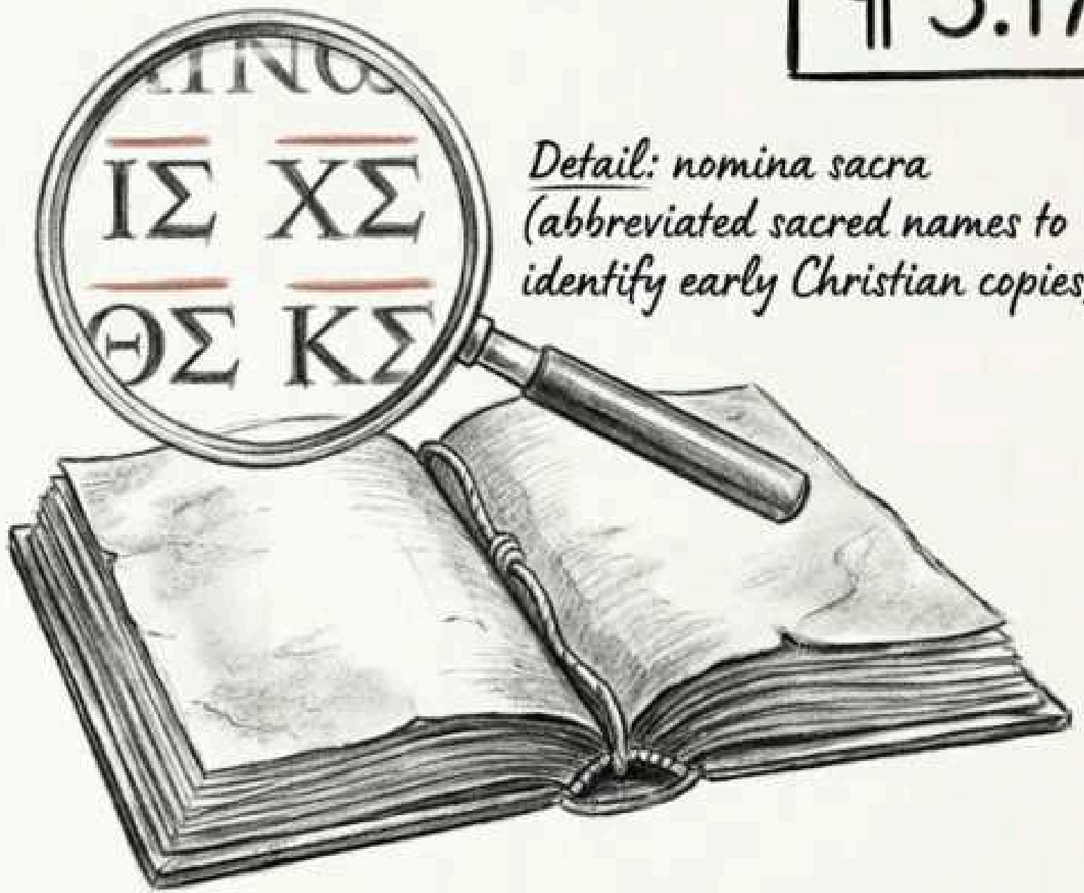
Determining which carries more weight depends on the external evidence evaluated.

¶ 3.17



The Scroll.

Used primarily by Jewish readers.
Unrolled horizontally.



Detail: nomina sacra (abbreviated sacred names to identify early Christian copies).

The Codex.

Adopted early by Christians.
Advantage: Could hold multiple gospels or all of Paul's letters in one volume.

Context: Josephus, writing in the 90s CE.

¶ 3.18

22 inspired books = 24 books

(Josephus list) (Later traditional lists)

Explanation: Scholars understand this is the exact same collection of texts, just counted differently.

Significance: Proves that a fixed core was recognized by the late 1st century, even if debate about the edges continued.

¶ 3.19

Collected gradually over centuries.

Written at significantly different times.

Edited by later hands.

Because of this complex history, questions of dating and authorship remain open and ongoing, not closed.

Up Next: *The Hebrew Bible's past, archaeology, and the records of neighboring nations.*