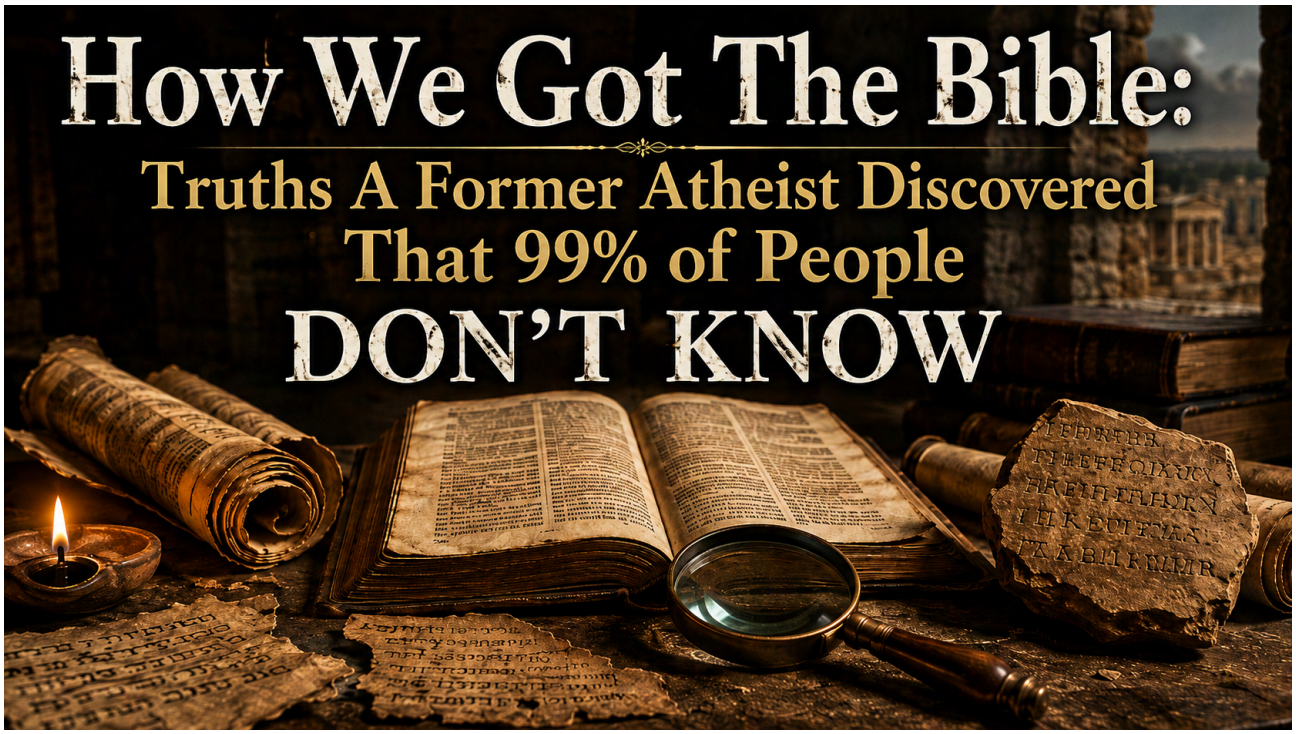
How We Got The Bible: Truths A Former Atheist Discovered That 99% of People DON'T KNOW (Part 1—The Old Testament)

A Historical, Textual, Archaeological, Prophetic, and Theological Investigation of Scripture

By Chaplain Todd DuBord (M.Div.)



Evidence Trail 1: Reopening an Atheist Case I First Investigated Nearly Forty Years Ago

Nearly forty years ago, long before I imagined that I would spend decades as a Christian pastor, chaplain, researcher, author and theologian, I began investigating a book I thought I already understood. I had been raised in an atheist household, and the Bible certainly did not occupy a sacred place in my thinking. To me it belonged to humanity's enormous collection of ancient religious literature: a mixture of legends, morality, mythology, historical memories, religious rules, poetry, and attempts by pre-scientific people to explain things they did not yet understand.

That interpretation seemed perfectly reasonable to me at the time. Ancient people encountered thunder, disease, death, fertility, suffering, earthquakes, stars, seasons, consciousness, and the terrifying mystery of human mortality without modern physics, biology, medicine, psychology, astronomy, or archaeology. I assumed religion arose largely because human beings needed

supernatural explanations before scientific ones became available, and the Bible therefore seemed interesting historically but hardly authoritative personally. I did not believe Moses had communicated revelation from the Creator, that Isaiah spoke prophetically for God, or that the Gospel writers had preserved events upon which my eternal destiny depended.

Looking back, however, I can now see the **first major weakness in my reasoning:** I had effectively rendered my verdict before conducting much of an investigation. I had confused **having an opinion about the Bible with having investigated the Bible**. That led to my original ***Why?*** research and manuscript that addressed my skepticism and presumptions: that the Bible originated merely with human beings, that it was no different from other religious writings, that it contained contradictions or historical inaccuracies, and that centuries of copying had corrupted it beyond confidence. Those objections remain alive today, but the amount of evidence available for examining them has changed and grown enormously.

Four additional decades have given us new archaeological discoveries, dramatically improved Dead Sea Scroll scholarship, continuously updated manuscript catalogues, digital access to manuscripts once available only to specialists, more sophisticated canon research, better archaeological methodology, and extraordinary online access to primary sources. That is why I am reopening the case. I have not reopened it because four decades of study caused me to abandon the conclusion I reached as a younger man, but because some of the arguments I used then can now be made much more precisely, some need correcting, and many new pieces of evidence deserve to be entered into the record.

The 1987 Investigation That Started It All

In 1987, while completing my undergraduate degree, I voluntarily undertook a year-long private canonical and textual study of the Old and New Testaments. It was not required for graduation. I chose it because, having grown up an atheist, I still carried what I sometimes call the **"leftover demons" of atheism**—the lingering questions and objections about Scripture that had followed me into my Christian faith and that skeptics continue to raise today. Rather than avoid those questions, I wanted to face them academically and historically and see where the evidence actually led.

For an entire year I investigated how the books of the Old and New Testaments were written, recognized, collected, canonized, copied, transmitted, and preserved across the centuries. The project ultimately produced a **two-part, approximately 240-page undergraduate thesis—roughly 120 pages on the Old Testament and another 120 on the New Testament**. And, remarkably, I still possess that original thesis today, printed nearly forty years ago on a **dot-matrix printer**—a wonderfully primitive technological relic from an investigation that would profoundly shape the rest of my life.

Personally and privately guiding me through the research was **Dr. Richard D. "Rich" Israel, Ph.D.**, a Claremont-trained Old Testament scholar then near the beginning of what would become a distinguished career in biblical scholarship, theological education, and academic leadership. In the years that followed, Dr. Israel became Chair of Biblical and Theological Studies at Bethany and ultimately served as its Vice President for Academic Affairs and Chief Academic Officer. He later joined Vanguard University of Southern California, where he directed its Graduate Programs in Religion, served as Chair of the Department of Religion, continued teaching Old Testament, and

remained actively engaged in professional biblical scholarship—including leadership within the **Old Testament section of the Society for Pentecostal Studies**.

As I write this today, Dr. Israel has been retired from full-time university teaching since **2018**, after more than three decades devoted to biblical scholarship, theological education, and Christian academic leadership. Nearly four decades have likewise passed since I sat under his direction and produced those 240 dot-matrix pages. Yet the questions that drove that investigation have hardly disappeared. If anything, many of the very objections I wrestled with in 1987—Who chose the books? Were other writings deliberately excluded? Has the biblical text been corrupted? Can we really know what the ancient authors originally wrote? How could handwritten manuscripts survive centuries of copying without losing their essential message?—have simply migrated from classrooms and skeptical books into public academia and onto the Internet and social media.

What began for me as an extracurricular undergraduate attempt to finally settle the unanswered questions left over from my atheistic upbringing became one of the foundational investigations of my life. I did not undertake that study merely to defend conclusions I had already reached. I undertook it because I wanted to know whether Christianity's claims concerning Scripture could withstand serious historical examination. Those original 240 pages became an early foundation beneath convictions I would spend the ensuing decades continuing to test, refine, teach, and defend: that the biblical canon possesses an identifiable history, that its manuscript transmission can be subjected to rigorous historical investigation, and that confidence in the preservation of Scripture need not arise from refusing to ask difficult questions—but can emerge precisely because those questions have been asked carefully, persistently, and exhaustively.

Nearly forty years later, this investigation has come full circle. God willing, I hope this greatly expanded study will one day become part of a new edition of the book I originally called ***Why?***. The title still seems appropriate, because beneath the manuscripts, archaeology, canon, prophecy, and textual evidence lies the question that first drove me into that 1987 investigation: Why are we here, has God actually spoken, and is there any reliable revelation capable of telling us?

Evidence Trail 2: Before I Could Investigate the Bible, I Had to Investigate Reality

My journey toward Scripture did not begin by assuming Christianity was true. It began with a more fundamental investigation into reality itself. If the Bible claimed to reveal God, the first obvious question was whether there was any rational reason to believe that God existed at all. As an atheist, I had been taught and assumed there was not. Matter and energy seemed sufficient, scientific progress seemed destined to shrink the territory once occupied by religion, and a Creator appeared unnecessary.

But as I moved deeper into formal study, the questions became harder rather than easier. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why does a universe exist at all? Why does nature exhibit mathematical order sufficiently stable and intelligible for minds like ours to investigate it? Why do the physical constants and initial conditions of the universe permit complex matter, chemistry, stars, planets, and biological life? Those questions then opened into others involving consciousness, rationality, morality, beauty, justice, information, intentionality, and the strange human conviction that some things are not merely disliked but actually wrong.

I increasingly found myself using several forms of reasoning at once. Some questions permitted **deduction**, because logically contradictory explanations cannot all be true in the same sense. Other questions required **cumulative reasoning** or what philosophers and historians often call **inference to the best explanation**, asking which worldview accounts most adequately for the total body of evidence. That distinction mattered because almost nothing important in historical life is established through one spectacular fact; investigators typically weigh multiple clues whose significance becomes clearer when they converge.

That shift also forced me to reconsider what counted as evidence. Science is extraordinarily powerful when investigating repeatable processes within nature, but questions about why nature exists at all, why its laws are intelligible, or why anything possesses objective moral value are not settled by laboratory measurement alone. Those questions require philosophy, metaphysics, history, and science to speak together rather than pretending one discipline can answer every category of inquiry. Once I stopped demanding that every question about God be reduced to a laboratory experiment, the evidence became much harder to dismiss.

Gradually the question changed. Instead of asking whether atheism could be defended, I began asking whether atheism actually explained reality **better than theism**. That larger investigation eventually became my treatise ***The Scientific Evidence for God***, where I examine cosmology, the origin of the universe, fine-tuning, information, life, and other scientific considerations that contributed to my movement away from atheism. (See: ***The Scientific Evidence for God***.)

Even a strong argument for a transcendent Creator, however, does not establish Christianity. The detective work had only narrowed the field. If God existed, I still needed to know whether humanity's religions represented genuine revelation, human speculation, or some mixture of both, and that opened the next evidence file.

Evidence Trail 3: If There Is a Creator, Which Religion Is Telling the Truth About Him?

For years, I had assumed that the world's religions probably represented different cultural expressions of essentially one and the same spiritual reality. It is an attractive idea because it appears tolerant, peaceful, and intellectually generous, but the difficulty emerges as soon as the teachings themselves are examined.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Zoroastrianism, and Indigenous religious traditions do not simply use different vocabulary for identical claims. They differ fundamentally over whether ultimate reality is personal, whether one Creator exists, whether reincarnation occurs, whether karma governs future existence, whether human beings possess enduring souls, whether sin separates humanity from God, how salvation or liberation occurs, and what ultimately happens after death.

I investigated those contradictions much more fully and documented that evidence in ***Do All Religions Lead to the Same Truth—and the Same God?***. Once their actual claims were placed beside one another, my old pluralistic assumption became impossible to maintain, because contradictory propositions cannot all describe reality accurately in the same respect simply because sincere people believe them.

That realization prompted another investigation. Perhaps the religions differed, but perhaps the great religious leaders were essentially equivalent spiritual geniuses whose followers exaggerated their differences. That too failed under comparison. In ***How Jesus TRULY Compares to Religious Leaders***, I compared Jesus with figures such as Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, Mahavira, Muhammad, Guru Nanak, Moses, and Socrates. Their self-understandings, missions, teachings,

relationships to God, diagnoses of humanity's problem, and proposed solutions are profoundly different.

Finally, I tested another assumption I once scarcely realized I possessed: perhaps every religion simply had its own cultural version of the Bible. That evidence became ***How the Bible Truly Compares with Other Sacred Writings***, where we discovered that Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Confucian, Daoist, Shinto, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian sacred writings differ dramatically in origin, authority, chronology, relationship to founders, canon, literary structure, manuscript history, and theological purpose.

Those investigations progressively narrowed the question. This treatise therefore does not need to compare all religions again, nor does it need to repeat the entire comparison among religious leaders or sacred writings. We have arrived at a more focused scene. The Bible is now lying open by itself underneath the forensic light, and the question is no longer whether it differs from the other sacred books but whether **the Bible itself deserves to be believed**.

Evidence Trail 4: What I Wrote Forty Years Ago—and What I Would Change Today

Springing from my 240pp dot-matrix undergraduate research, my original ***Why?*** manuscript already contained the basic architecture of this investigation. I described the Bible as a library of writings that, from the Christian perspective, tells the history of salvation from paradise lost in Genesis to paradise restored in Revelation. I examined its languages, literary forms, canon, manuscripts, archaeology, historical testimony, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, and at the conclusion I asked whether the evidence surrounding Scripture was what we might reasonably expect if God truly had revealed Himself through it.

I still believe that question remains sound, yet forty additional years of study have also taught me that Christians should never defend a true Bible with a claim that is not true. Some manuscript totals in my original work are now outdated because manuscripts have subsequently been catalogued, joined, reclassified, redated, or reassessed. My description of a Jewish "Council of Jamnia" definitively closing the Old Testament canon was too simple. Some archaeology statements popular in apologetics were expressed more categorically than current archaeological method justifies, while my earlier treatment of the Dead Sea Scrolls needs greater precision because the Scrolls demonstrate both impressive textual continuity and some textual plurality in Second Temple Judaism.

None of those corrections has weakened my confidence in Scripture. Instead, they have removed arguments critics can legitimately attack while leaving a much stronger evidential structure behind. That is how I intend to proceed throughout this investigation: we will make the Christian case clearly and confidently, but we will not protect that conclusion through exaggeration. If Christianity is true, truth is not something Christians need to fear.

Part I: Identifying the Old Testament

Evidence Trail 5: What Exactly Is the Old Testament?

Because Part 1 is devoted specifically to the Old Testament, the first task is to identify the evidence before us without allowing the later New Testament to affect or blur (or clarify) the picture—at least not yet. The Protestant Old Testament contains thirty-nine books, but that number reflects the familiar Christian division of the same canonical literary material traditionally counted as twenty-four books in the Jewish Tanakh. The difference is one of division, enumeration, and order rather than fifteen additional Protestant writings. In Jewish arrangement those books are grouped as

Torah, Prophets, and Writings, while Protestant editions commonly arrange them as Pentateuch, historical books, poetry and wisdom, and prophets.

The Old Testament's 39 original documents were principally written in Hebrew, with smaller portions in Aramaic, and they contain an extraordinary range of literature: covenant and law, historical narrative, genealogies, poetry, wisdom, lament, prophetic proclamation, royal history, temple and priestly material, apocalyptic visions, and prayers. Scholarly chronology places the Old Testament's earliest substantial composition in the Mosaic period of the second millennium BC and its latest books within the Persian or early post-exilic period. Questions concerning the precise date, final form, or human authorship of individual books remain subjects of scholarly discussion, but those debates should not obscure the larger historical reality that the Old Testament is a library that arose across many centuries of Israel's history.

That long development matters because the Old Testament is not a pile of unrelated religious fragments. Its books continually return to creation, covenant, holiness, sin, judgment, sacrifice, kingship, exile, restoration, divine presence, and the expectation that God's purposes are moving somewhere. A fair investigation therefore has to examine both the diversity of the books and the coherence of the larger story they form. Before we can ask how the thirty-nine books came together, however, we need to understand the kind of authority these writings claim for themselves.

Evidence Trail 6: What Does the Old Testament Claim About Itself?

The Old Testament repeatedly presents itself not merely as Israel reflecting about God but as God speaking and acting within Israel's history. The Torah introduces divine commands with formulas such as "the LORD spoke to Moses," while the prophets repeatedly announce, **"Thus says the LORD."** Deuteronomy distinguishes true prophetic speech from words merely spoken

presumptuously in God's name, and Jeremiah describes God placing His words in the prophet's mouth. These claims do not prove inspiration simply because they appear in the text, but they tell the investigator what kind of claim is actually being examined. (See: **Deuteronomy 18:18–22**; **Jeremiah 1:9**.)

The same high view of divine speech appears outside the prophetic books. The Psalms celebrate God's word as enduring and trustworthy, while the historical books repeatedly interpret national events through covenant promises and warnings already given in the Torah. The writers are therefore not simply collecting spiritual insights disconnected from history; they believe Israel's history is being interpreted under revelation and covenant. Within the Christian understanding of inspiration, this is foundational: **real human authors** speak from within real historical settings, yet the message ultimately derives its **authority from God**.

That understanding becomes even clearer when we allow the Old Testament to describe God's word in its own language. **Psalm 19:7–9** calls the law of the LORD "perfect," His testimony "sure," His precepts "right," and His judgments "true." **Psalm 119:89** declares that God's word is "settled in heaven," while **Psalm 119:160** summarizes its character with the remarkable statement that "the sum of Your word is truth." **Isaiah 40:8** contrasts the transience of human life with the permanence of revelation: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." Even more strikingly for our investigation into textual preservation, in **Isaiah 30:8** the prophet is commanded to **write** the message on a tablet and inscribe it in a scroll so that it may remain "for the time to come, forever and ever. It may be an everlasting witness." Likewise, **Joshua 1:8** refers to an already authoritative "book of the law" that Israel's leader was commanded to keep continually before him. Taken together, these passages reveal an important feature of the Old Testament's own self-understanding: divine revelation was not intended merely to be spoken momentarily and disappear; it was spoken, remembered, written, preserved, read, obeyed, and transmitted from one generation to another.

The Old Testament also repeatedly links covenant faithfulness with the preservation and public reading of written revelation. In **Deuteronomy 31:24–26**, Moses is described as completing the writing of "the words of this law in a book," after which the Levites are commanded to place it beside the ark of the covenant as an enduring witness. Centuries later, **2 Kings 22:8–13** records the discovery of the "Book of the Law" in the Temple during Josiah's reign, and the king's reaction assumes that this written text carried binding authority over the nation. Likewise, **Nehemiah 8:1–8** portrays Ezra publicly reading from the Book of the Law before the assembled people while the Levites explain its meaning. These passages show that written revelation was not treated merely as private religious literature; it functioned as covenantal authority to be preserved, recovered, read publicly, interpreted, and obeyed.

The cumulative picture is therefore striking. The Old Testament does not merely preserve claims that God once spoke; it repeatedly portrays divine revelation as something that was **given, written down, guarded, transmitted, publicly read, interpreted, and treated as binding across generations**. **Deuteronomy 6:6–9** commands Israel to teach God's words diligently to succeeding generations, **Deuteronomy 17:18–20** requires Israel's future king to possess and continually read a written copy of the law, and **Psalm 78:1–7** describes God's testimony and law being transmitted so that generations yet unborn would know them and teach them to their own children. That helps explain why later Jewish communities would care so intensely about which writings belonged to the sacred collection and why scribal preservation eventually became so exacting. Before we ever reach

the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Masoretes, the Old Testament itself has already established the theological expectation that God's revealed word should not simply vanish with the generation that first heard it.

That claim makes the history of the Old Testament canon especially important. If these writings were received as divine Scripture, when did Israel begin recognizing them as a bounded body of authoritative books, and how did the collection eventually take the twenty-four-book Jewish form that Protestants divide into thirty-nine? The answer is not one dramatic council or one afternoon when somebody assembled a Bible. It is a long historical process that left multiple clues behind.

Part II: How the Thirty-Nine Books Came Together

Evidence Trail 7: Writing, Copying, Canon, and Translation Are Different Questions

Before following that process, four questions need to be kept separate. **Inspiration** asks about the ultimate source and authority of the biblical writings; **transmission** asks how their wording was copied; **canon** asks which books were received as Scripture; and **translation** asks how those Hebrew and Aramaic texts were rendered into other languages. These processes overlap historically, but confusing them creates some of the most persistent misunderstandings about the Old Testament.

A scribal error in a medieval Hebrew manuscript, for example, is a **transmission** question rather than proof that an inspired prophet originally taught error. The fact that Greek-speaking Jews translated Scripture into the Septuagint is a **translation** question rather than evidence that a new **canon** was automatically created by every book that later circulated beside those **translation**s.

Likewise, disagreement among later Christian traditions over Tobit or Maccabees is a **canon**ical question and should not be confused with whether the text of Isaiah or Genesis survived.

Once those evidence files are separated, the formation of the Old Testament becomes much clearer. We can ask first how authoritative writings accumulated within Israel, then how later Jewish witnesses describe the resulting collection, and finally how the same material came to be numbered as thirty-nine books in Protestant Bibles. (See: *John D. Meade and Peter J. Gurry — How Did We Get Our Bible?*)

Evidence Trail 8: How the Thirty-Nine Books of the Old Testament Came Together

The thirty-nine-book Protestant Old Testament did not appear all at once, and neither did the **twenty-four-book Jewish Tanakh** fall from heaven as a completed table of contents. The collection grew within the history it records. The **Torah** stands at the foundation, with the Pentateuch presenting Moses as covenant mediator and lawgiver and later biblical books repeatedly treating the Mosaic law as authoritative. The **Prophets** then preserve Israel's history and prophetic proclamation in relation to that covenant, while the **Writings** contain Psalms, wisdom, post-exilic history, and other sacred literature that became part of Israel's received scriptural inheritance.

The threefold structure itself appears to reflect stages in Israel's reception of sacred writings. The Torah clearly stands first and functions as the controlling covenantal foundation for everything that follows. Deuteronomy 31:24–26 portrays “the words of this law” being written in a book and preserved beside the ark, while later books repeatedly appeal back to the Law of Moses as an established authority. The Prophets then develop around that covenantal core, not merely by adding predictions of the future but by interpreting Israel's national history in light of the Torah. In the traditional Jewish arrangement, this second division includes both the Former Prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—and the Latter Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve.

That arrangement is revealing because it treats Israel's history and prophetic preaching as one great covenantal commentary on whether the nation obeyed or violated the Law already given. The Writings appear to have developed more gradually around this established Law-and-Prophets framework, gathering Psalms, wisdom literature, festival scrolls, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Daniel 9:2, for example, already refers to “the books” and specifically to Jeremiah's prophetic writings, while Nehemiah 8:1–8 shows the Torah functioning publicly as an authoritative written text in the post-exilic community. Later evidence suggests that the first two divisions were more clearly established while the precise boundaries of the third collection took longer to become universally settled. Thus the Tanakh did not grow as a random pile of religious texts but around an expanding covenantal structure: first the foundational Law, then prophetic interpretation of Israel's life under that Law, and finally a collection of sacred writings that preserved Israel's worship, wisdom, suffering, exile, return, and theological reflection.

The historical trail becomes especially visible in the centuries before Christ. **The Greek translator of Ben Sira,** writing his prologue around 132 BC, refers several times to “**the Law**,” “**the Prophets**,” and “**the other books**” or “the rest of the books.” He does not supply a complete twenty-four-book table of contents, so we should not force more precision from his words than they contain. Nevertheless, the prologue is powerful evidence that Jewish sacred literature was already being conceived in distinguishable collections well before Christianity began.

The Dead Sea Scrolls add a second line of evidence. The Qumran library contains manuscripts representing nearly every book later found in the Hebrew Bible, alongside many other Jewish religious works. That coexistence reminds us that a manuscript library is not automatically a canon list, yet it also demonstrates how widely the biblical books were being copied, interpreted, and used in the centuries before and around the time of Jesus. By the late first century AD, the Jewish historian Josephus could speak much more explicitly of a limited collection of **twenty-two books** regarded as divine, distinguishing those books from later Jewish writings that did not possess the same authority.

Josephus' twenty-two-book count is not a different Bible from the later twenty-four-book Tanakh. Ancient counting systems combined works that modern Protestant Bibles divide. Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles were each single books; Ezra-Nehemiah was one book; and the twelve Minor **Prophets** formed one collection called “The Twelve.” The traditional Jewish twenty-four-book count and Protestant **thirty-nine-book count** therefore contain the same canonical literary material, arranged and divided differently. This evidence also points instead toward a long process of reception within Judaism, with a substantial and increasingly recognizable scriptural collection already in place before Christianity and a bounded corpus clearly described by the end of the first century.

This means the strongest historical account of the thirty-nine books is cumulative rather than dependent upon one council. The **Torah** forms the foundational scriptural core; **Prophets** and other sacred writings accumulate and are cited as authoritative; pre-Christian witnesses such as the Prologue to Sirach attest recognizable scriptural groupings; Qumran preserves the books in active use; Josephus describes a limited divine collection by the end of the first century; and later Jewish tradition preserves the same canonical material in the Tanakh. Protestants inherit that Hebrew canonical corpus and divide it into thirty-nine books.

The next question is why Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments came to include additional ancient Jewish books beyond that Hebrew corpus or collection.

(See: *Tyndale House — Why Do Our Bibles Contain These Books and Not Others?*); John D. Meade — How Were the Books of the Bible Chosen?; Prologue to Sirach; Josephus, Against Apion 1.8; Sefaria — Tanakh.)

Evidence Trail 9: Why Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Old Testaments Differ

My treatment of this question forty years ago relied too heavily upon a once-common explanation that a **Jewish "Council of Jamnia,"** a rabbinic gathering traditionally placed around AD 90, definitively settled the Hebrew canon. I would no longer make that a major argument because modern canonical scholarship generally does not regard Jamnia as a neat canonical council at which rabbis gathered, voted on every book, and handed later Judaism its finalized Bible.

Textual scholar John D. Meade, coauthor of *Scribes and Scripture*, explains why Christians should not put all their canonical eggs in the Jamnia basket. No surviving ancient Jewish or Christian source records a vote at Jamnia determining which books belonged in Scripture. The gathering appears instead to have been a school or assembly, where questions concerning books such as Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs may have been discussed. In other words, whatever happened at Jamnia, the history of the Hebrew canon cannot reasonably be made to depend upon one supposed canonical council around AD 90. (John D. Meade — "Four Myths Related to the Bible's Origins".)

The actual history is more complex—and, I believe, ultimately provides a stronger case for the traditional Hebrew and Protestant Old Testament canon than the old Jamnia argument did.

Indeed, by the time of Jesus there was already a deeply established body of Jewish sacred Scripture. **Jesus Himself,** who was also a first-century Jewish teacher whom His contemporaries

addressed as Rabbi, repeatedly treated the Jewish Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God. After His resurrection, according to Luke 24:44, Jesus told His disciples that everything written about Him "in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" had to be fulfilled. That language is particularly significant because it resembles the developing threefold Jewish division of Scripture—Law, Prophets, and Writings, with Psalms serving as the most prominent book, and eventually the opening book, of the third division in later Jewish ordering.

We should not press Luke 24:44 beyond what it actually says. Jesus does not stop and provide His disciples with a twenty-four-book table of contents. Nevertheless, His terminology makes little sense if Judaism possessed merely a loose and undefined assortment of religious literature. He refers naturally to recognizable categories of sacred writings already familiar to His Jewish audience.

Again, remarkably, evidence for something resembling this threefold structure reaches back more than a century before Christ. The **Prologue to Sirach,** written by the grandson as well as the Greek translator of Ben Sira around 132 BC, speaks repeatedly of "the Law," "the Prophets," and "the other books" or "the rest of the books." Whatever precise boundaries the third collection possessed at that point, this is important evidence that Jewish Scripture was already being conceptualized in distinguishable groups long before the Christian Church existed.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, manuscripts copied approximately between the third century BC and first century AD, add another fascinating line of evidence. The Qumran community possessed manuscripts representing nearly every book eventually included in the Hebrew Bible, although Esther has not been securely identified among the surviving biblical manuscripts. One particularly interesting document is 4QMMT—*Miqsat Ma'ase Ha-Torah*, "Some of the Works of the Law", whose reconstructed closing section refers to "the book of Moses," "the books of the Prophets," and "David." Scholars debate whether this should be regarded as a formal three-part canon formula, and we should not pretend that Qumran has supplied us with a surviving twenty-four-book table of contents. Nevertheless, the wording provides further evidence that collections associated with Moses, the Prophets, and Davidic writings were already recognized before the time of Christ.

We therefore have to hold two historical facts together. It would be too strong to claim that we possess a surviving first-century Jewish decree formally listing every later book of the Tanakh. But it is equally misleading to imagine that first-century Jews were wandering around with no recognizable body of authoritative Scripture. Sirach, Qumran, the New Testament, and Jesus' own language collectively point toward an already deeply established scriptural inheritance centered upon the Law, the Prophets, and a further collection of sacred writings.

And for emphasis, don't forget one of the most important witnesses of all: **Flavius Josephus,** who was also a first-century Jewish priest as well as historian, writing around AD 93–94. In *Against Apion* 1.8, Josephus contrasts Jewish Scripture with the enormous number of competing Greek writings and says that the Jews possessed only twenty-two books regarded as divine. He divides them into five books of Moses, thirteen books associated with the prophets, and four containing hymns to God and principles for human conduct. Even more significantly, Josephus says writings produced after the Persian king Artaxerxes were not accorded the same authority because the recognized succession of prophets had ceased.

Alongside the developing Hebrew canonical tradition was another enormously important textual stream: the **Septuagint, commonly abbreviated LXX,** the ancient Greek translation tradition of the Jewish Scriptures. Its beginnings are traditionally associated with the translation of the Torah in Alexandria during the third century BC, with other books translated into Greek over succeeding generations. The Septuagint became especially important among Greek-speaking Jews and eventually among the earliest Christians, and New Testament authors frequently quote Old Testament passages in forms corresponding closely to the Greek Septuagint, though they do not invariably do so.

Yet an important distinction must be maintained. The **Septuagint was not originally one leather-bound "Greek Bible,"** produced at one moment with one universally fixed table of contents. It is better understood as a collection and textual tradition that developed over time. Ancient Greek biblical manuscripts eventually transmitted not only translations of books contained in the Hebrew canon but also such Jewish writings as Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and Greek additions to Esther and Daniel. These books therefore cannot fairly be dismissed as medieval Roman Catholic inventions. They are ancient writings, several originating before Christianity itself.

But their antiquity does not by itself decide their canonical authority. That is precisely where the distinction between manuscript history and canon history becomes crucial. A book can be ancient, religiously valuable, copied alongside biblical books, quoted by Christians, and read within churches without those facts alone demonstrating that it belongs to the uniquely inspired Hebrew canon.

Several centuries later another major chapter in the textual story emerged: **the Masoretic Text, usually abbreviated MT, the carefully preserved traditional Hebrew form of the Jewish Bible.** The Jewish scribes known as **the Masoretes**, whose work flourished especially from roughly the seventh through tenth centuries AD, did not invent the Hebrew Bible or suddenly decide which books belonged in it. (I will speak about the Masoretes later in depth.) They inherited a far older Hebrew consonantal textual tradition and preserved it with extraordinary care, adding vowel points, pronunciation traditions, accents, and extensive marginal notes designed to guard the text from accidental alteration.

The most influential branch became the **Tiberian Masoretic tradition,** associated with Jewish scholars working around Tiberias in Galilee. Particularly influential was the Ben Asher family of Masoretes, culminating in the work of Aaron ben Moses ben Asher during the tenth century AD. The resulting textual tradition eventually became the dominant Hebrew form of the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, and it remains the standard traditional Hebrew textual basis of mainstream Judaism, including Jewish biblical editions used in modern Israel.

It is therefore more precise to say that **the Masoretic Text became the standard traditional Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible** than to call it a new Jewish Bible created in the Middle Ages. Its great surviving manuscripts are medieval, but much of the textual tradition they preserve is demonstrably far older. Indeed, one of the reasons the Dead Sea Scrollsbecame so important is that Hebrew manuscripts more than a thousand years earlier than the great medieval Masoretic codices could now be compared with the later Masoretic Text. That comparison revealed genuine textual variants but also, in many biblical books, remarkable continuity across the centuries.

This leads to another distinction readers frequently miss: the Masoretic Text and the Jewish canon are related, but they are not identical concepts. *Canon* asks, "Which books constitute Scripture?" The *Masoretic Text* asks, "What Hebrew textual form of those books has been transmitted?" The Masoretes were principally preservers of the text of an already received collection, not medieval rabbis deciding for the first time whether Genesis, Isaiah, Psalms, or Daniel belonged in Scripture.

The **Protestant Old Testament,** therefore, is best understood as the thirty-nine-book arrangement of the same canonical material contained in the twenty-four-book Jewish Tanakh. During the sixteenth-century Reformation, Protestants distinguished this Hebrew canonical collection from the additional ancient Jewish writings transmitted in broader Greek and Latin Christian traditions. Early Protestant Bibles sometimes continued printing those additional writings in a separate Apocrypha section, demonstrating that Reformers were perfectly aware of their existence; the issue was not whether those books were ancient or historically valuable but whether they possessed the same canonical authority as the Hebrew Scriptures.

The **Roman Catholic Old Testament** reaches a different canonical conclusion. Catholicism includes the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament together with Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and additional portions of Esther and Daniel. Catholics ordinarily call these the Deuterocanonical books. They were certainly not invented at the Reformation: they had ancient Jewish origins and long histories of Christian usage. The Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic council held from AD 1545 to 1563, formally defined their canonical standing during its Fourth Session on April 8, AD 1546. Trent therefore did not create these books; it formally settled their canonical status for Roman Catholicism.

The **Eastern Orthodox Old Testament** developed even more directly within the Greek Septuagintal tradition. The Orthodox Church in America describes its biblical listing as being "generally that of the Septuagint." Orthodox traditions consequently receive additional Old Testament writings beyond the Protestant collection, although there has historically been some variation around the edges among Orthodox churches and editions.

Depending upon the Orthodox tradition or edition, the Old Testament may include such writings as 1 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, additional Maccabean material, Psalm 151, and the Prayer of Manasseh, with some Greek traditions placing 4 Maccabees in an appendix or secondary position. For that reason, it is better historically to speak of an Orthodox Septuagint-oriented canonical tradition than to imply that every Eastern Orthodox jurisdiction throughout history has possessed one perfectly identical Old Testament table of contents.

This produces an important historical picture. Protestants receive the Old Testament canon corresponding in content to the Hebrew Tanakh and ordinarily translate primarily from the Masoretic Hebrew textual tradition; Roman Catholics receive a broader canon shaped by ancient Greek and Latin Christian usage; and Eastern Orthodox Christianity has remained especially attached to the Septuagintal stream. The differences did not arise because these traditions somehow discovered completely different Old Testaments in modern times. They reflect ancient textual histories, differing judgments about canonical authority, and centuries of ecclesiastical reception.

Why the Hebrew–Masoretic and Protestant Canon Makes the Strongest Historical Case

The Protestant Old Testament corresponds exactly in canonical content to the traditional Jewish Tanakh, the Scriptures preserved within the Hebrew Jewish community from whom the Old Testament itself came. Jesus and the apostles knew an established body of Jewish Scripture; the Prologue to Sirach provides pre-Christian evidence for a developing Law-Prophets-Writings structure; Qumran demonstrates the widespread copying and authoritative use of these writings before and during the time of Christ; Josephus, writing near the end of the first century AD, explicitly describes a limited collection of books regarded as divine while distinguishing later Jewish literature from them; and the later Jewish Tanakh preserves the same canonical material represented by the Protestant thirty-nine-book Old Testament.

The Masoretic tradition then gives us the principal traditional Hebrew textual stream through which those books were meticulously preserved. Thus the Protestant case does not ultimately depend upon the disputed idea that one council at Jamnia settled everything in AD 90. It rests upon a much broader cumulative historical argument extending from pre-Christian Judaism through Jesus and the apostles, Sirach, Qumran, Josephus, subsequent Jewish reception, the Tanakh, and finally the Masoretic preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

That, I believe, makes for a better and more historically defensible case for the thirty-nine-book Protestant Old Testament than the older Jamnia argument ever could. The additional Catholic and Orthodox books are unquestionably ancient, many are historically valuable, and several enjoyed widespread use among early Christians. The real issue is not whether they existed, whether Christians read them, or whether they sometimes appeared within ancient biblical manuscripts. The decisive question is whether they belonged to the uniquely authoritative Hebrew scriptural corpus itself.

Put differently, the disagreement is not principally archaeological but canonical. Nobody needs to deny the antiquity of Sirach or Maccabees to defend the Protestant canon. The stronger argument is that the twenty-four-book Jewish Tanakh and thirty-nine-book Protestant Old Testament represent the same canonical body of writings, whereas the Catholic and Orthodox traditions receive additional Jewish works whose canonical status was historically less uniform.

That history may be more complicated than the simple Jamnia story I once used, but it gives us a stronger case precisely because it is less vulnerable historically. The principle is important enough to repeat throughout this investigation: if a simplified apologetic argument is weaker than the evidence, discard the argument rather than distort the evidence.

And with the canonical question clarified, we can now turn toward the manuscripts themselves. The Masoretic Text gives us the great medieval Hebrew textual tradition; the Septuagint takes the Greek textual evidence centuries earlier; and the Dead Sea Scrolls carry substantial portions of the Hebrew manuscript evidence back into the centuries before Christ. **Now the investigation becomes forensic: when those manuscript witnesses are placed beside one another, how well has the actual text of the Bible survived?**

Part III: The Old Testament Evidence Room

Evidence Trail 10: The Documentary Gap Before Qumran

For generations, one of the most reasonable questions concerning the Hebrew Bible involved the chronological distance between its ancient composition and many of the closest complete medieval Hebrew manuscripts available to scholars. The central Hebrew textual tradition preserved by the Masoretes was extraordinarily important, but a skeptic could still ask what had happened during the preceding centuries. Had large sections been rewritten, had later Jewish scribes modified prophecies, or had theological developments entered texts during the long transmission history?

Then, beginning in 1947, caves around Qumran near the Dead Sea began producing one of the greatest manuscript discoveries in modern history. The **Dead Sea Scrolls** contain hundreds of Jewish manuscripts and fragments dating from the final centuries BC into the first century AD. Among them are copies or portions representing every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther, according to the Israel Antiquities Authority. (See: **Israel Antiquities Authority — Dead Sea Scrolls Content**.)

To understand why this discovery was so consequential, we need to appreciate the documentary problem that existed beforehand. **Scholars certainly did not possess no evidence for the earlier Old Testament text: ancient Greek translations such as the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, quotations in later Jewish literature, and other ancient witnesses all provided important indirect or comparative evidence.** But the surviving complete Hebrew codices representing the mature Masoretic tradition were much later. The famous Aleppo Codex dates to approximately AD 930, while the complete Leningrad Codex dates to AD 1008–1009. That meant that for many passages scholars were working with an enormous chronological interval between the

period in which the biblical books originated and the principal complete Hebrew manuscripts available for direct examination. The issue was never simply, “Can we trust a manuscript because it is old?” The more important historical question was whether manuscripts separated by many centuries would preserve substantially the same books, passages, names, prophecies, laws, and theological claims—or whether comparison would expose evidence of wholesale rewriting. Qumran suddenly supplied the kind of evidence needed to test that question directly. Instead of merely theorizing about what might have happened during the intervening centuries, scholars could now place ancient Hebrew biblical manuscripts beside the medieval Masoretic tradition and examine continuity and variation line by line. In historical investigation, that is an extraordinary development: an enormous documentary gap had not vanished completely, but a major portion of it had suddenly been filled with actual manuscripts.

Suddenly scholars possessed biblical manuscripts approximately a millennium earlier than some of the medieval witnesses that had dominated the discussion. The importance was not merely that old manuscripts had been discovered but that they could be compared. For the first time on an unprecedented scale, scholars could examine what parts of the Hebrew biblical tradition looked like more than a thousand years before the great medieval Masoretic codices. The investigation had recovered a large section of its missing paper trail, and the next question became obvious: what did the comparison reveal?

Evidence Trail 11: What the Dead Sea Scrolls Really Show

Christian apologetics once tended to tell the Dead Sea Scrolls story too simply. The standard presentation often suggested that scholars compared the Qumran manuscripts with medieval Hebrew Bibles and discovered virtually letter-for-letter identity. The actual evidence is more complex and more interesting—facts I believe lead to a greater foundation for faith.

Many Qumran biblical manuscripts stand remarkably close to the textual tradition that later becomes associated with the Masoretic Text. The Israel Antiquities Authority itself notes the impressive similarity of numerous Scrolls to later Hebrew witnesses despite the immense chronological distance between them. At the same time, textual differences are real. Some Qumran manuscripts preserve readings related to the Hebrew textual base reflected in the Greek Septuagint, others show affinities with the Samaritan Pentateuch, and still others preserve distinctive forms. (See: **Israel Antiquities Authority — Introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls**.)

As I explained above, one reason the Dead Sea Scrolls transformed biblical scholarship so dramatically is that they moved scholars far closer to the ancient world in which the Hebrew Scriptures were actually being copied and read. Before the discoveries at Qumran, much of the direct Hebrew manuscript evidence available for comparison came from medieval manuscripts. The Scrolls suddenly provided more than two hundred biblical manuscript witnesses from the centuries before and around the time of Christ. Leading Hebrew textual scholar Emanuel Tov has emphasized that Qumran revealed both substantial continuity and genuine textual diversity within the biblical tradition, giving scholars an unprecedented opportunity to observe the Hebrew Bible's transmission history rather than merely reconstruct it from much later evidence. (See: **Emanuel Tov — "Biblical Texts and Interpretations in the Dead Sea Scrolls," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion**.)

That means Second Temple Judaism did not possess one perfectly uniform manuscript tradition in which every surviving copy was identical in every letter, but Christians do not need such a claim. The important finding is that amid this genuine textual plurality, the biblical works remain profoundly recognizable. Genesis remains Genesis, Isaiah remains Isaiah, Psalms remain Psalms, and Israel's covenant, law, history, prophetic message, worship, and theology have not transformed into another religion during transmission.

It is also important to understand what scholars mean when they speak of **textual plurality** or **textual variants**. The phrase can sound far more dramatic than the evidence usually warrants. Many differences among ancient biblical manuscripts involve **spelling, word forms, word order, omitted or repeated words, scribal slips, corrections, grammatical differences, or alternate ways of expressing essentially the same reading**. Hebrew itself could be written with differing orthographic conventions, and the Qumran manuscripts preserve numerous examples of such spelling and scribal variation. Other differences are more substantial, including passages in which a manuscript reflects a textual form closer to the Septuagint or Samaritan Pentateuch, and scholars should not minimize those cases. Yet textual plurality does **not** mean that every manuscript represented a different Bible, much less a different theology. Precisely because thousands of such comparisons can now be made, scholars can distinguish ordinary copying variations from larger textual differences and can often trace how particular readings developed. The existence of variants is therefore not evidence that the Hebrew Scriptures disappeared in transmission; rather, the surviving variants are themselves part of the evidence that allows the transmission process to be examined, compared, and reconstructed with remarkable precision.

That distinction is especially important because "textual plurality" should not be confused with "textual chaos." The Scrolls show spelling differences, alternate readings, scribal corrections, and in some places more substantial textual forms, but they do not reveal an Old Testament whose books were endlessly rewritten into unrecognizable works. Instead, they allow scholars to identify recognizable biblical compositions across multiple textual streams and to compare them directly

with later Hebrew traditions. The Israel Antiquities Authority identifies the Qumran biblical manuscripts as the oldest known surviving copies of biblical works and notes that every book of the later Hebrew Bible except Esther is represented among them. (See: **Israel Antiquities Authority — Scrolls Content**.)

The Scrolls therefore give us something much more useful than a slogan about perfect letter-for-letter copying. They permit us to watch ancient textual transmission actually occurring, to see continuity and variants together, to compare families of readings, and to investigate scribal practices rather than speculate about them. That is what genuine manuscript evidence looks like, and the overall continuity is remarkable. Among those manuscripts, one enormous scroll becomes especially important to the Christian investigation because of what it tells us about prophecy.

Evidence Trail 12: Isaiah Before Jesus

The Great Isaiah Scroll, 1QIsa[a], discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran and generally dated to approximately the second century BC, is one of the most spectacular objects in biblical textual history. It preserves essentially the entire Book of Isaiah and gives scholars a physical Hebrew witness to the prophet's text from well before the birth of Jesus. The Israel Museum provides direct access to information about this extraordinary manuscript. (See: Israel Museum — Great Isaiah Scroll.)

That dating establishes an enormously important chronological fact. Whatever interpretive conclusions Jewish and Christian scholars may reach concerning passages such as Isaiah 7, Isaiah 9, Isaiah 42, Isaiah 52–53, or Isaiah 61, those texts were not created by Christians after the life of Jesus. Isaiah already existed, the manuscript was copied before Christ, and the Christian interpretation came afterward. That point alone severely weakens the claim that Christians

retroactively manufactured Isaiah's Messianic material to fit the life, suffering, death, or mission of Jesus.

The textual evidence is equally significant. Dr. Adolfo D. Roitman, longtime curator of the Dead Sea Scrolls and head of the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, has emphasized that the Great Isaiah Scroll generally conforms to the Masoretic, or traditional, Hebrew version later preserved in medieval manuscripts such as the Aleppo Codex. The Israel Museum also notes that the scroll preserves all sixty-six chapters of Isaiah in their conventional order while containing alternative spellings, scribal corrections, and some variant readings. In other words, the manuscript is not a letter-for-letter duplicate of the medieval Masoretic Text, but neither is it a substantially different Isaiah. Across roughly a millennium of transmission, we still encounter the same prophetic book, with the same fundamental structure, theological message, and Messianic passages. (See: Israel Museum — Great Isaiah Scroll.)

That is precisely where a careful defense of Scripture is strongest. We do not need to claim that every ancient copyist reproduced every Hebrew letter without variation. The real question is whether the text was preserved with sufficient fidelity that later readers still possessed the same book and the same message. The Great Isaiah Scroll strongly supports that conclusion. The variants are real, but the continuity is even more striking. Isaiah was not transformed into another book during transmission, its theology was not rewritten into something radically different, and its central prophetic passages were not inserted by Christians centuries after the fact.

Israeli textual scholarship provides further weight to that conclusion. Dr. **Emanuel Tov, Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem** and one of the world's leading authorities on the textual history of the Hebrew Bible, has shown that Qumran preserves a genuinely diverse textual environment while still allowing scholars to trace substantial continuity between many Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts and the textual tradition that later became the Masoretic Text. His work is especially important because it prevents two opposite errors: pretending that all ancient Hebrew manuscripts were perfectly identical, and pretending that textual variation means the Hebrew Bible was unstable or unknowable. The evidence supports neither extreme. (See: Emanuel Tov — The Text of Isaiah at Qumran.)

This does not by itself prove that Isaiah 53, the famous passage concerning the suffering servant, refers to Jesus. That interpretation still must be argued through context, language, theology, and historical fulfillment. But the Great Isaiah Scroll eliminates one simplistic escape route: Christians cannot reasonably be accused of inventing Isaiah's Messianic material after Calvary and inserting it backward into Judaism. The text of Isaiah 53 existed in a Jewish manuscript copied before Christianity began.

That chronological fact becomes especially important when Isaiah is compared with the New Testament. Christians did not first write the story of Jesus and then compose Isaiah afterward to match it. They inherited an already ancient Jewish prophetic text and argued that Jesus fulfilled it. Whether one agrees with that interpretation or not, the historical order is fixed: the prophecy came first; the Christian claim came later.

The Great Isaiah Scroll therefore provides two powerful lines of evidence at once. First, it establishes the pre-Christian existence of Isaiah's Messianic and prophetic material. **Second,** it demonstrates substantial textual continuity between a manuscript copied centuries before Christ and

the later Hebrew tradition preserved by the Masoretes. That is a far more meaningful result than the old slogan that the texts were "virtually identical." The evidence is stronger because it is real: there are variants, there are scribal differences, and yet the Book of Isaiah remains unmistakably Isaiah.

For investigation, that matters enormously. Biblical confidence does not require us to deny the existence of textual variants; it requires us to ask whether those variants have destroyed, rewritten, or obscured the message of Scripture. **In Isaiah, the answer is plainly NO. The same prophetic book that stood within Jewish Scripture before are the time of Jesus still confronts readers today with the same extraordinary claims, the same servant passages, the same promises, and the same expectation of divine redemption.**

That is why the Great Isaiah Scroll remains one of the most important manuscript witnesses in the entire biblical evidence room. It does not merely tell us that Isaiah is old. It allows us to place a pre-Christian Hebrew Isaiah beside the later Masoretic tradition and observe substantial continuity across more than a thousand years. And when the investigation later turns to prophecy, that ancient scroll will become even more significant, because by then the question will no longer be whether Christians wrote Isaiah after Jesus, but whether Jesus truly fulfilled what Isaiah had already written centuries before.

Evidence Trail 13: Ketef Hinnom—Biblical Words Written on Silver

One discovery I would give considerably more prominence in this new edition of *Why?* is the pair of tiny silver scrolls discovered at **Ketef Hinnom** near Jerusalem. Excavated in 1979, the rolled silver amulets contain ancient Hebrew inscriptions. After painstaking conservation and study, scholars recognized language corresponding closely to the priestly blessing preserved in **Numbers 6:24–26**, including the familiar words, "The LORD bless you and keep you…"

The Israel Museum dates these objects broadly to the First Temple period, commonly the seventh–sixth centuries BC. (See: **Israel Museum — Priestly Benediction on Silver Scrolls**.) We need to describe the evidence correctly because these are not miniature copies of the entire Book of Numbers; they are amulets containing wording closely corresponding to a biblical blessing.

Yet that qualification does not make the discovery less fascinating. Here we possess ancient Hebrew religious language invoking **YHWH** and closely paralleling a passage preserved in the Torah, physically attested in Judah centuries before the Dead Sea Scrolls. That gives the investigation another chronological anchor.

The significance becomes even greater when we ask what these objects actually establish. The amulets do not prove that the entire Pentateuch had already reached its final literary form, but they do demonstrate that language closely corresponding to Numbers 6:24–26 was circulating in written Hebrew religious usage in Judah before the Babylonian exile. That matters because the wording is not merely a vague appeal to a generic deity. The divine name YHWH appears explicitly, and the blessing belongs unmistakably to the religious world preserved in the Hebrew Bible. In other words, Ketef Hinnom gives us a physical artifact from ancient Judah in which biblical-language tradition and Israel's covenantal worship intersect centuries before the great manuscript discoveries at Qumran.

The scholarly evaluation is striking. In their major peer-reviewed reassessment of the inscriptions, Gabriel Barkay, Marilyn Lundberg, Andrew Vaughn, and Bruce Zuckerman concluded that the evidence allowed them to "reaffirm with confidence" a late pre-exilic date and to reaffirm the judgment of most scholars that the plaques preserve the earliest known citations of texts also found in the Hebrew Bible. They further described the inscriptions as containing some of the earliest known confessional statements concerning Yahweh. That is a carefully worded but historically powerful conclusion. We are not dealing merely with a medieval manuscript tradition claiming to preserve much older words; we are dealing with pieces of silver from the closing generations of the kingdom of Judah on which language closely paralleling Scripture had actually been inscribed. (See: Barkay, Lundberg, Vaughn & Zuckerman — "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 334 (2004).)

There is another reason Ketef Hinnom matters so much historically: the inscriptions are not preserved in a later manuscript copied centuries after the events they describe, but on artifacts excavated from a securely ancient Judean context. That moves the discussion from literary transmission alone into material culture. The blessing was not merely remembered by later scribes; some form of it had already entered the devotional life of people living in ancient Judah, who inscribed the divine name and priestly language onto precious metal and carried or deposited those words in a funerary setting. Archaeology therefore gives us something manuscripts by themselves cannot provide—a physical intersection between biblical language, ancient Hebrew writing, Judean religious practice, and the world in which the Old Testament places that faith. Ketef Hinnom does not settle every question about when Numbers reached its final form, but it makes one conclusion very difficult to dismiss: important biblical language now preserved in the Torah was already part of Israel's religious world centuries before the surviving medieval Hebrew codices and long before the rise of Christianity.

Qumran takes the biblical manuscript tradition far back into the centuries before Jesus, while Ketef Hinnom pushes recognizable biblical-language tradition farther still into the world of ancient Judah.

If the Bible were merely a much later literary creation projected backward into Israel's history, discoveries like this become increasingly difficult to explain. The textual story has now moved from ancient fragments toward the scribes who eventually preserved the Hebrew text with extraordinary care.

Evidence Trail 14: The Masoretes and a Culture of Preservation

Centuries after the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish scholars known as the **Masoretes** developed highly detailed systems for preserving and transmitting the Hebrew Bible. Their work did not create the Hebrew Scriptures; rather, they transmitted an older consonantal tradition while adding vowel signs, accents, marginal notes, and other devices intended to preserve and clarify its reading.

German Old Testament textual scholar **Ernst Würthwein**, whose ***The Text of the Old Testament*** became a standard introduction to Hebrew textual criticism, documented the remarkable consistency and care represented in this scribal tradition. The later edition revised by **Alexander Achilles Fischer**, a German Old Testament scholar and textual critic, continues introducing students to the Masoretic Text, Qumran evidence, the Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and other textual witnesses. (See: **Eerdmans — *The Text of the Old Testament***.)

Würthwein described the purpose behind this extraordinary scribal discipline in remarkably concrete terms: **"They counted the verses, words, and letters of the Law and other parts of the Scriptures as a procedural aid in preparing manuscripts and in checking their accuracy."** Elsewhere, in describing the Masorah itself, he emphasized the intense concern to protect the transmitted text from careless alteration. The Masoretes did not simply copy pages and hope for the best. They surrounded the Hebrew text with a network of checks involving the counting of letters, words, and verses, the notation of unusual spellings and grammatical forms, and

the identification of recurring textual features that could alert later scribes when something had been copied incorrectly.

Jewish Masorah scholar **David Marcus, Professor Emeritus of Bible and Masorah at the Jewish Theological Seminary**, describes the same preservation culture from within modern Jewish scholarship. He explains that, in order to ensure that the established Hebrew text would be transmitted correctly, **"the Masoretes counted every word, made copious lists, and wrote thousands of notes on the margins of the manuscripts."** Those marginal observations, collectively called the **Masorah**, were not decorative commentary. They functioned as a sophisticated quality-control system designed to preserve unusual readings, record textual patterns, and discourage a copyist from silently "improving" a passage merely because he thought another wording might sound better. (See: **Jewish Theological Seminary — "What's the Masorah For?"**.)

The Masoretes, then, did not merely copy manuscripts; they built an entire textual culture around preservation. Their counting of words and letters, notation of unusual spellings, marginal comments, pronunciation traditions, accent systems, and systematic cross-checks were all designed to detect and prevent textual drift. That does not mean every medieval manuscript was flawless, but it does mean that the Hebrew Bible was transmitted within one of the most disciplined scribal traditions of the ancient and medieval world.

That culture becomes even more impressive when we remember what the Masoretes believed they were handling. They regarded the biblical text as sacred and therefore resisted the temptation to rewrite difficult or unusual forms merely to make them smoother. In numerous instances the Masoretic tradition preserves a distinction between the **ketiv**, "what is written," and the **qere**, "what is read." Rather than erasing an inherited consonantal reading that seemed problematic, the scribes could preserve the written form in the text while recording the traditional reading in the margin. That practice reveals an extraordinarily preservation-minded instinct: **preserve the received text even when a later reader might have preferred to change it.**

The Masoretes were human copyists, not inspired biblical authors, and they could make mistakes. Nothing in a doctrine of inspiration requires medieval scribes to have been infallible. Their historical importance lies somewhere more testable and more impressive: **they deliberately created mechanisms intended to conserve the Hebrew text rather than casually modernize it.**

Most importantly, we are not required to accept the Masoretes' accuracy merely because later Jewish tradition praised their care. **The Dead Sea Scrolls allow portions of the medieval Masoretic Text to be compared with Hebrew manuscripts roughly a thousand years older.** Genuine variants appear, as we should expect in a manuscript tradition copied by hand, but the underlying continuity is striking. The same books, the same narratives, the same laws, the same prophecies, and the same theological framework remain recognizable across that enormous span of time.

That means the Masoretic culture of preservation can actually be **tested** against earlier evidence. We are not simply told that medieval Jewish scribes copied carefully; Qumran gives us an independent textual control from centuries before the Masoretes. In substantial portions of the Hebrew Bible, the comparison shows that their received textual tradition had preserved the text with remarkable stability.

That does not mean every Qumran manuscript agrees with the later Masoretic Text in every detail. As we have already seen, Second Temple Judaism contained genuine textual plurality, including manuscripts with affinities to the Septuagintal and Samaritan traditions. But that fact makes the substantial agreement found in many Masoretic-type texts more, not less, significant. **Amid an ancient world in which manuscripts were copied by hand, the Hebrew Scriptures did not simply dissolve into uncontrolled textual chaos.**

The cumulative picture is therefore impressive. The **Dead Sea Scrolls** take us back into the centuries before Christ. The **Masoretes** show us an extraordinary medieval culture of preservation. And comparison between the two allows modern scholars to examine the transmission history rather than speculate about it. The Hebrew Bible arrives in the medieval period not as a newly invented religious text but as the continuation of a much older manuscript tradition whose major contours can be traced backward across centuries.

That repeated ability to test the transmission history is one of the strongest features of the biblical documentary record. We can compare scroll with codex, Qumran with Tiberias, ancient Hebrew with medieval Hebrew, and later printed editions with the manuscript traditions behind them. **The text does not ask to be trusted in a vacuum; it leaves evidence behind.**

The Old Testament manuscript file therefore closes with a striking combination: ancient scrolls, later codices, real textual variants, and substantial continuity across centuries. Having established that the text can be traced, the investigation can now move from manuscripts to the material world those writings describe.

Part IV: When the Old Testament Meets Archaeology

Evidence Trail 15: What Archaeology Can Prove—and What It Cannot

The manuscript trail tells us whether the Old Testament text survived, but it does not by itself tell us whether the world described by those texts was real. That is where archaeology enters the investigation. My original Why? gave biblical archaeology a major role, and I still believe it supplies one of the most fascinating external windows into the Old Testament, though I would state its evidentiary value more carefully today than I did forty years ago.

Archaeology cannot excavate inspiration, prove that God spoke to a prophet, or demonstrate a miracle merely by uncovering a wall or inscription. It can, however, test whether the kingdoms, rulers, cities, wars, fortifications, cultic practices, administrative systems, and material culture described by biblical writers fit the ancient Near Eastern world in which those writers place them. That is the kind of evidence archaeology is designed to evaluate.

Archaeology is especially valuable because it allows the biblical record to be compared with evidence that was not written by biblical authors and, in many cases, was produced by Israel's neighbors or enemies. Royal inscriptions, victory stelae, administrative seals, destruction layers, monumental architecture, pottery sequences, burial practices, and foreign annals can preserve information that intersects directly with names, places, political conflicts, and institutions known from Scripture. When an Assyrian king names a Judean ruler, when a Moabite inscription refers to Israel, when a seal impression bears the name of a biblical official, or when an excavated city displays the kind of fortification and destruction history described in an ancient text, those discoveries do not prove every sentence of the biblical narrative—but they do place the Bible within a real and independently attested historical world.

That distinction matters because historical credibility is rarely established by one spectacular artifact. It is usually built cumulatively. A single inscription can be debated. A single site can be redated. A single identification can be overturned. But when multiple independent sources from different kingdoms, languages, archaeological sites, and historical periods repeatedly converge with the same biblical landscape, the probability that we are dealing with mere literary invention steadily decreases. The force of the case lies not in pretending that archaeology answers every question, but in recognizing how often external evidence confirms the kinds of people, places, political structures, conflicts, and cultural settings the Old Testament claims to describe.

The case is therefore strongest when it rests on cumulative historical intersection rather than the slogan that every shovel of dirt proves Scripture. Sites can be misidentified, dates can be revised, and archaeologists can disagree. Yet when independent Assyrian, Aramean, Moabite, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Israelite evidence repeatedly crosses the same historical landscape as the Old Testament, that pattern deserves attention. Several representative discoveries show why. (For the larger archaeological case, see: *The RECENT TOP 10 Archaeology PROOFS of the BIBLE*).

Sennacherib (Taylor) Prism, British Museum (BM 1855,1003.1)

Relief from the Siege of Lachish, Nineveh Palace, British Museum (BM 1856,0909.14.7)

Evidence Trail 16: Sennacherib, Hezekiah, and the Siege of Judah

Second Kings and Isaiah describe the Assyrian invasion of Judah under **Sennacherib** during the reign of **Hezekiah**, and that biblical setting does not remain isolated within Scripture. Assyrian royal inscriptions record Sennacherib's campaign in Judah and explicitly name Hezekiah. The famous prism inscriptions boast about Sennacherib's conquests and describe Hezekiah as confined in Jerusalem under Assyrian pressure. The British Museum preserves one of the best-known copies, commonly called the Taylor Prism. (See: **British Museum — Sennacherib/Taylor Prism**.)

The archaeological story becomes even more vivid at **Lachish**. Scripture identifies Lachish as one of Judah's significant fortified cities in the Assyrian campaign, while Sennacherib's own palace at Nineveh contained monumental stone reliefs celebrating the Assyrian assault and conquest of Lachish. Those reliefs survive today in the British Museum. (See: **British Museum — Siege of Lachish Reliefs**.)

The significance lies in the convergence. The biblical writer knows Hezekiah, the Assyrian inscription knows Hezekiah, the Bible knows Sennacherib, the Assyrian royal record comes from Sennacherib's own regime, the biblical text knows Lachish, and the Assyrian palace walls depict Lachish. That convergence does not automatically prove the supernatural dimensions of the biblical account, but it places Scripture and independent Assyrian evidence inside the same war.

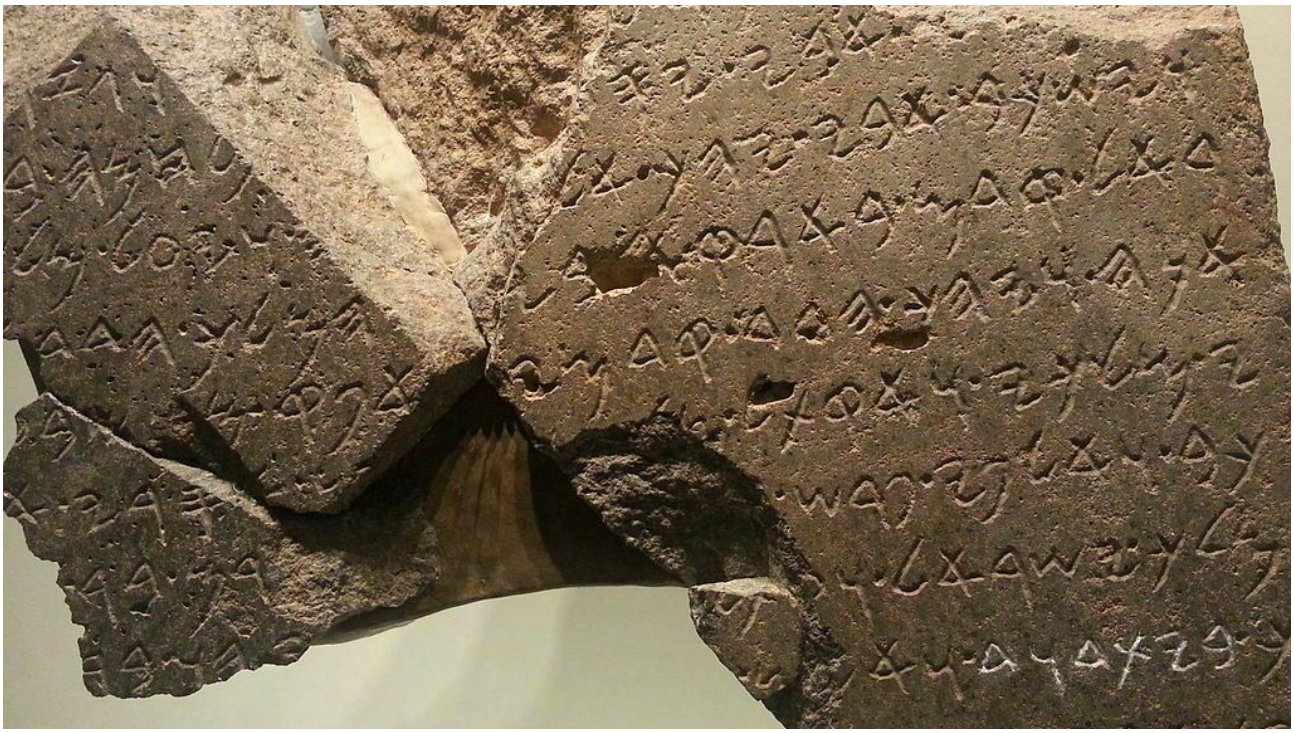
The biblical world is not detached from ordinary ancient history, and the more those intersections accumulate, the harder it becomes to dismiss biblical history merely because it appears in a religious book.

Evidence Trail 17: Jehu Appears in Assyrian Art

Another extraordinary piece of evidence comes from the **Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III**, now housed in the British Museum. The ninth-century BC monument records tribute from conquered or subordinate peoples and includes a scene associated with **Jehu** and the "House of Omri."
(See: **British Museum — Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III**.)

Jehu therefore belongs to more than the literary world of Kings. He appears within the geopolitical records of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Again, we need not force the artifact beyond what it establishes. The monument does not verify every event Scripture records concerning Jehu's reign, character, or religious reforms.

Its value lies in historical intersection. A biblical monarch appears in an external ancient imperial source in the appropriate chronological and political environment, and that pattern occurs repeatedly through biblical archaeology as figures, dynasties, cities, wars, and kingdoms first encountered in Scripture also appear in inscriptions and material remains. One particular inscription changed the modern discussion concerning perhaps Israel's most famous king.



Evidence Trail 18: The House of David Appears Outside the Bible

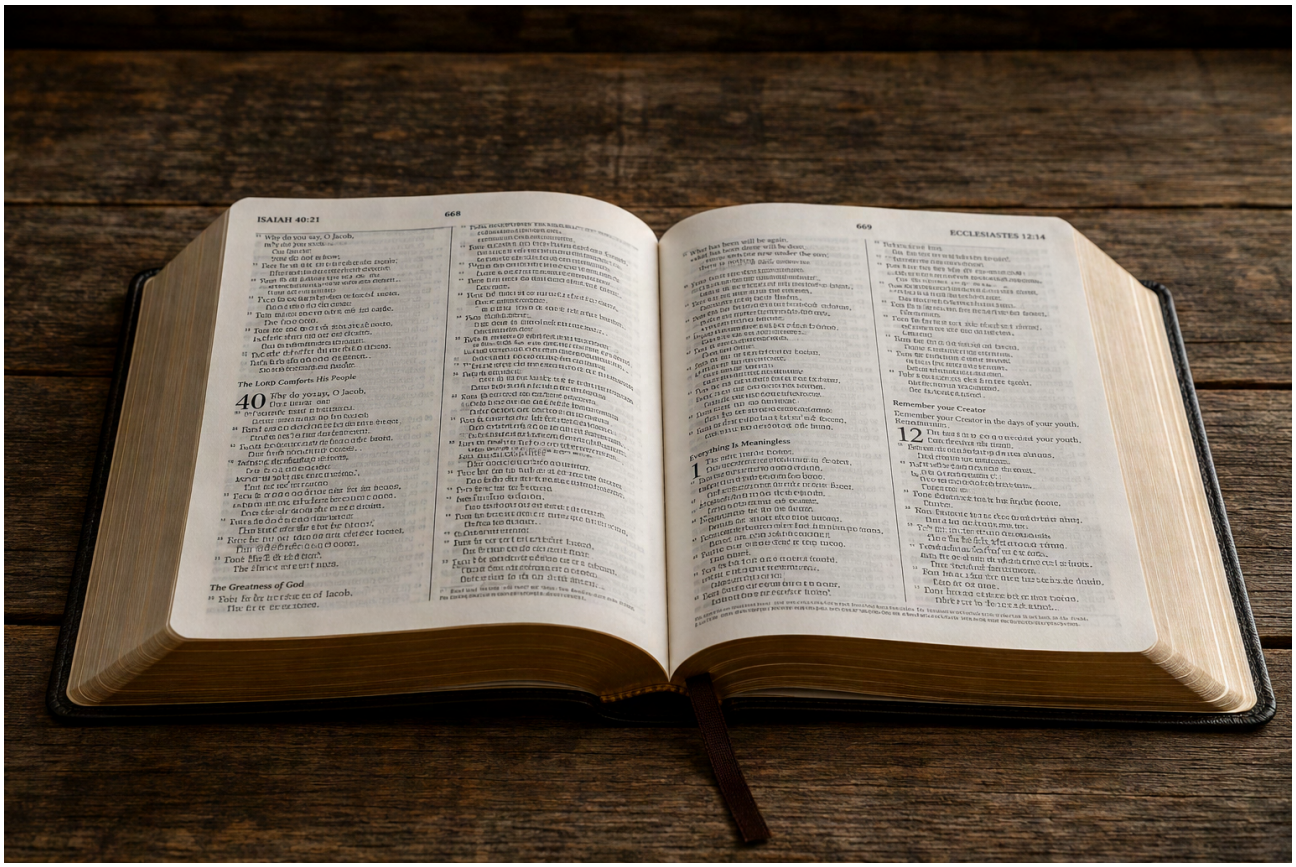
For portions of modern scholarship, especially during the rise of biblical minimalism, David was sometimes reduced toward the level of a largely legendary national hero whose historical dynasty lacked meaningful external confirmation. Then came the **Tel Dan inscription**.

Fragments discovered at Tel Dan in northern Israel preserve an Aramaic victory inscription dating to the ninth century BC, and a phrase within the inscription is widely interpreted as **"House of David."** The importance of the discovery is easily exaggerated in both directions. It does not prove every episode in 1 and 2 Samuel, does not tell us whether David killed Goliath, and does not establish the precise size of David's kingdom.

What it does establish, under the widely accepted reading, is that an ancient dynasty associated with the name David was known outside the Bible within a reasonably close chronological horizon. That is historically significant because an argument once made from silence—that there was no external Davidic reference—could no longer be presented in the same form.

The phrase "House of David" is especially important because ancient Near Eastern inscriptions commonly identified kingdoms or ruling lines by the name of a founding dynasty. In that setting, "House of David" functions naturally as a political designation for the Judahite royal line, much as other regional kingdoms were identified by dynastic names. That does not tell us everything about David himself, but it does show that by the ninth century BC his name was associated with an established dynasty recognized by Israel's neighbors. The argument therefore moves beyond whether later biblical writers merely invented a heroic founder: an external Aramean source appears to know a Davidic royal house as part of the actual political geography of the region.

Archaeology has a habit of teaching both believer and skeptic patience. What has not yet been found is not necessarily what never existed, and that principle becomes even more important when the investigation moves from Israel's monarchy into the New Testament world.



Part V: The Old Testament's Redemptive Architecture

Evidence Trail 19: Unity Without Pretending Every Author Sounds the Same

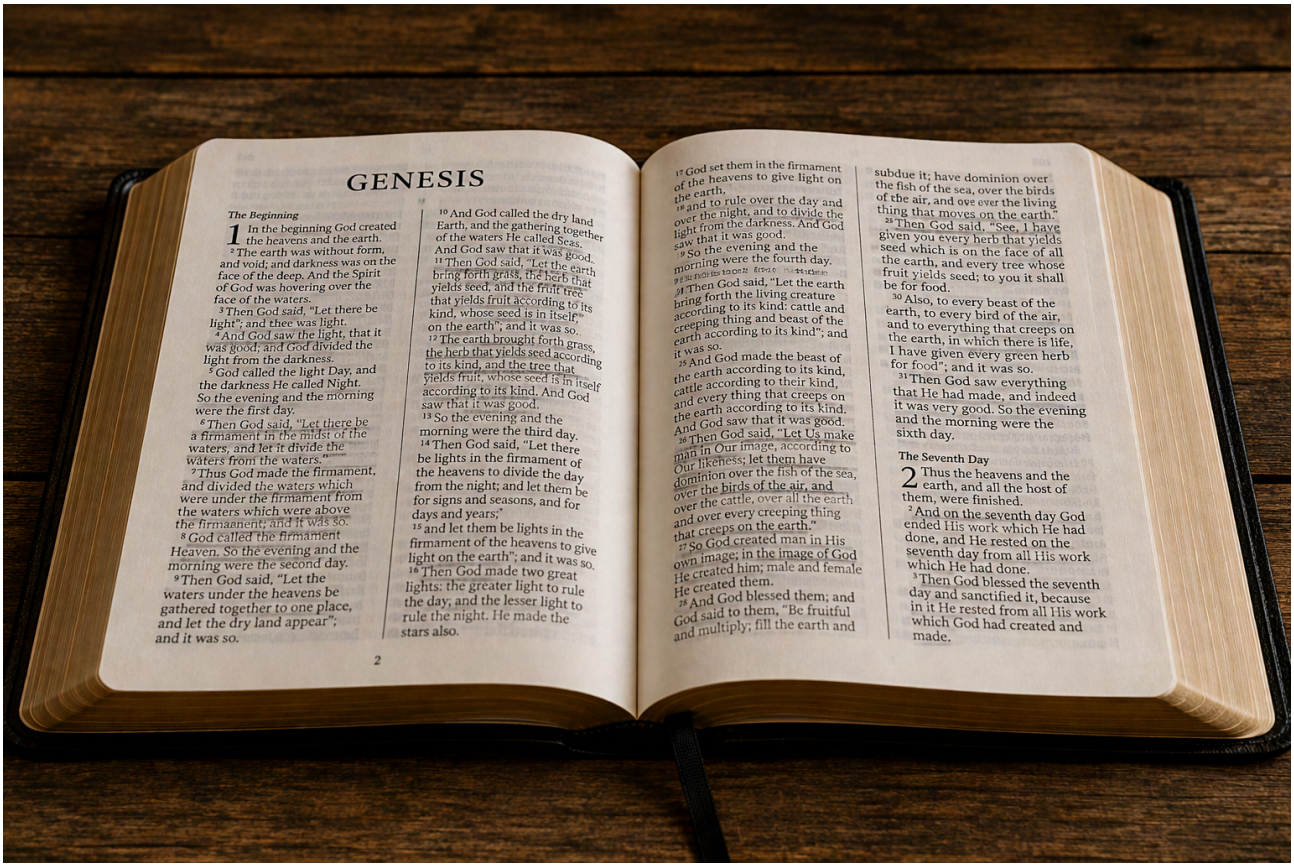
In my original book, *Why?,* I emphasized the Old Testament's extraordinary unity despite its many writers, genres, historical settings, and generations. I remain convinced that this is one of Scripture's most impressive characteristics, but I would phrase the claim more carefully today.

The Old Testament does not possess literary uniformity: Ecclesiastes does not sound like Isaiah, Proverbs does not function like Ezekiel, and Chronicles retells parts of Israel's story from a different historical and theological vantage point than Samuel and Kings.

A high doctrine of inspiration should not flatten those distinctions. If God inspired real human writers, their personalities, historical settings, literary forms, vocabulary, and purposes should actually matter. The stronger argument therefore concerns redemptive coherence rather than stylistic

sameness. Across tremendous diversity, one covenantal story progressively develops as themes are introduced, expanded, judged, restored, and carried forward.

That story does not appear fully formed in Genesis and then merely repeat itself. It unfolds through creation, fall, promise, Abraham, Exodus, law, sacrifice, kingdom, exile, restoration, and prophetic hope. The investigation therefore needs to follow the architecture from its foundation rather than treating the Old Testament as a collection of disconnected proof texts.



Evidence Trail 20: Genesis Begins with All Humanity Before It Narrows to Israel

Genesis opens with a claim of astonishing scope because it does not begin with Israel but with **God and creation**. Humanity appears as the image-bearing creature of God, creation is presented as ordered and good, and human rebellion fractures the relationship between Creator and creation while introducing alienation, judgment, suffering, and death into the biblical story.

Only later does the narrative narrow toward Abraham, yet even that narrowing contains a universal purpose. Abraham is chosen so that through him and his seed **the nations will be blessed**. That becomes one of the most important movements in Scripture: God works through particular people and historical covenants toward a purpose extending beyond them.

Israel therefore does not appear merely as one tribe explaining its private deity. Within the Bible's own theology, Israel becomes the historical channel through which God's larger redemptive purpose for humanity unfolds.

That storyline next enters Egypt, Exodus, covenant, and sacrifice, and those later developments provide theological categories that will eventually become essential for understanding Jesus.

Evidence Trail 21: Exodus Creates the Vocabulary of Redemption

Exodus and Leviticus introduce a vocabulary that becomes central to the rest of the Old Testament. Israel is delivered from bondage, Passover is established, covenant law is given, the Tabernacle embodies divine presence, and priesthood and sacrifice provide categories for holiness, impurity, guilt, atonement, and reconciliation. These themes are not isolated ritual curiosities; they become part of the language through which later biblical writers interpret Israel's relationship with God.

The historical books repeatedly measure kings and nations against covenant faithfulness. The Psalms transform covenant, kingship, suffering, worship, and divine deliverance into the prayer language of Israel, while the prophets apply the same covenant framework to idolatry, injustice, exile, judgment, and restoration. Jeremiah can therefore speak of a coming **new covenant**, and Ezekiel can speak of cleansing, a new heart, the Spirit, renewed land, and restored divine presence without abandoning the earlier biblical story.

By the close of the Old Testament period, a remarkable theological vocabulary has accumulated: **creation, fall, covenant, sacrifice, priesthood, kingship, servant, shepherd, Spirit, judgment, restoration, and hope**. Part 1 does not yet ask how the New Testament uses those categories; that belongs to the second half of the investigation. What matters here is that the Old Testament itself ends with an unfinished redemptive trajectory, looking backward to God's acts and promises while still looking forward to what He has yet to accomplish.

Part VI: Following the Prophetic Trail

Evidence Trail 22: Prophecy Is More Than Religious Fortune-Telling

Biblical prophecy is often defended badly because the prophets are sometimes reduced to religious fortune-tellers writing riddles so later Christians can collect impressive prediction statistics. Their actual ministry was much richer. They were covenant messengers who confronted idolatry, injustice, hypocrisy, political rebellion, oppression, and apostasy, while calling Israel back to God, announcing judgment, and offering hope of restoration.

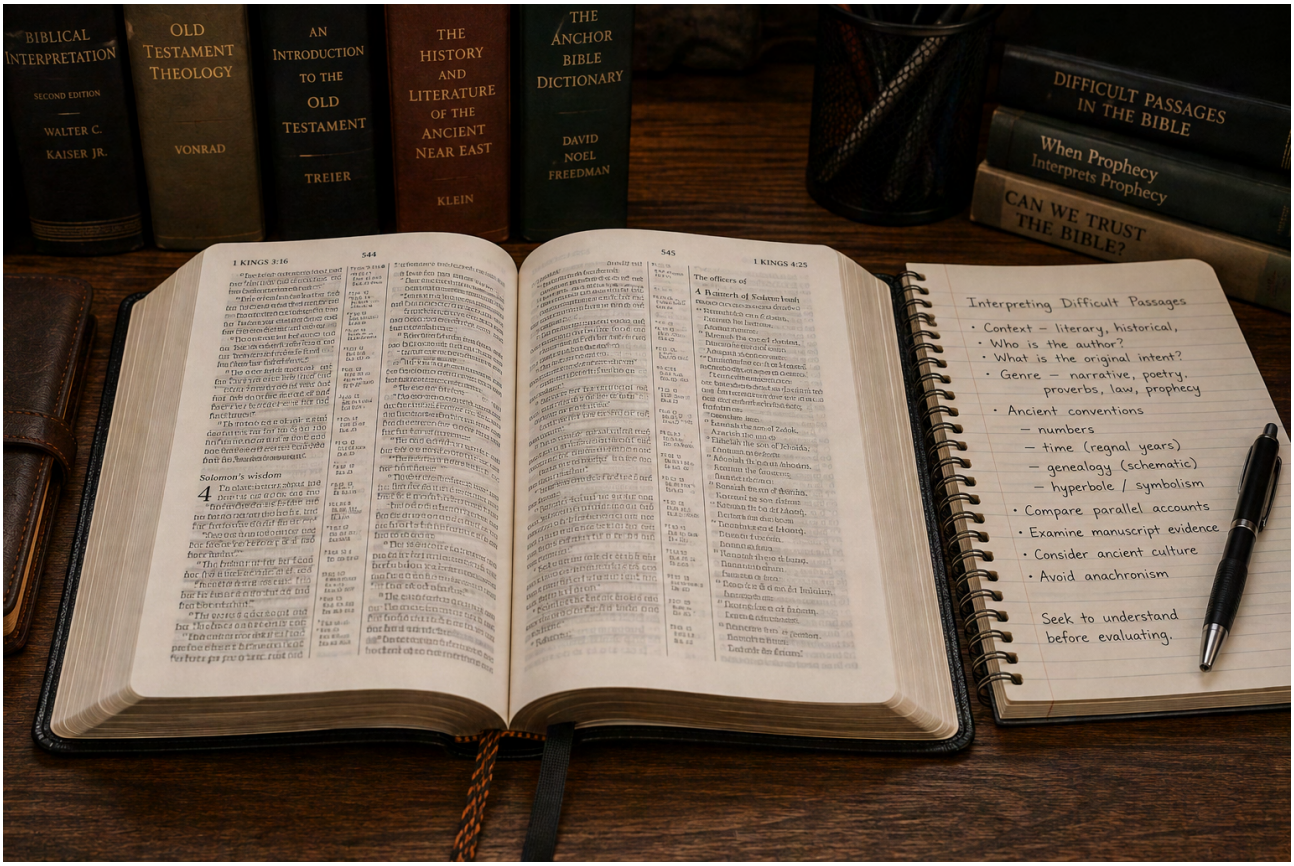
Yet prediction undeniably forms part of their message, and from the Christian perspective the most remarkable feature is not merely isolated future predictions but the way **prophetic expectation becomes woven into the larger covenant history**.

Micah 5:2 associates a coming ruler with Bethlehem. **Zechariah 9:9** portrays Zion's king arriving in humility. **Isaiah 52:13–53:12** presents the remarkable suffering Servant whose suffering is connected with the transgressions of others. **Psalm 22** contains imagery early Christians associated with Jesus' Crucifixion, while **Psalm 16** becomes part of apostolic Resurrection preaching.

Jewish and Christian interpreters do not agree upon the interpretation of every one of those texts, and we need not disguise that disagreement. The Christian argument is strongest when readers can see that we recognize the interpretive question while still demonstrating the historical sequence. Here the Dead Sea Scrolls become extremely important again, because the relevant Old Testament books existed before Christianity.

The prophecy came before the Christian claim of fulfillment, and that chronological order is not a matter of faith but of manuscript history. The investigator can therefore turn from literary interpretation toward a very hard historical boundary.

The manuscript evidence examined earlier gives this prophetic material a hard chronological boundary. Isaiah's servant passages, Micah, Psalms, and other prophetic texts were not invented by later Christianity because the underlying Jewish Scriptures existed before Christianity. Part 1 therefore closes the prophetic file at the point history allows us to close it: the expectations are genuinely ancient. Part 2 will ask whether the New Testament's claim that those expectations converge upon Jesus is historically and theologically defensible.



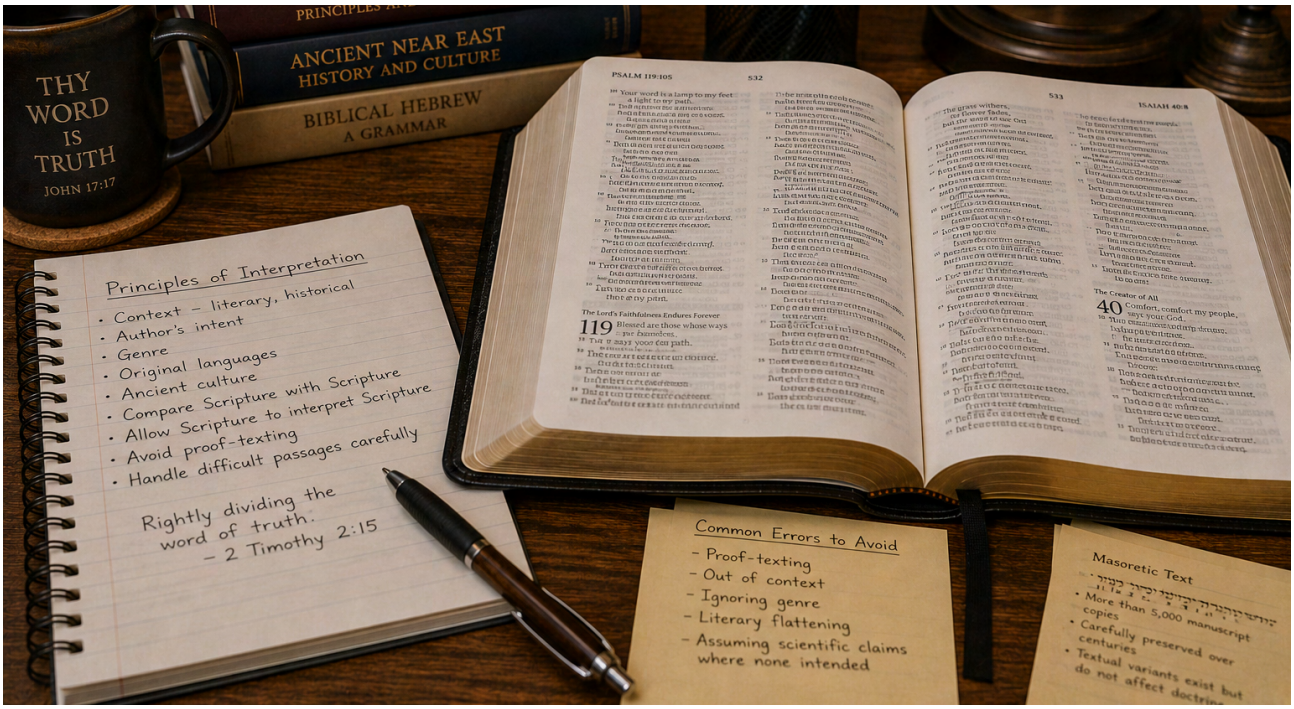
Part VII: Difficulties, Interpretation, and the Scientific Question

Evidence Trail 23: Difference and Contradiction Are Not the Same Thing

Claims of **contradict**ion deserve investigation, but the word itself is often used too loosely. Two statements **contradict** one another only when one affirms what the other denies in the same respect, at the same time, and under the same conditions. The Old Testament contains parallel narratives, differing emphases, ancient numerical conventions, textual variants, poetic hyperbole, compressed genealogies, and authors writing for different purposes. None of those categories is automatically a **contradict**ion.

Some difficulties are genuinely challenging and cannot responsibly be dismissed with a clever one-line answer. Numbers preserved differently across Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles sometimes require textual analysis; chronological systems can reflect different regnal conventions; Proverbs state general wisdom rather than exceptionless promises; and poetic texts use imagery that would be absurd if forced into wooden literalism. A high doctrine of Scripture should make us more attentive to those distinctions rather than less.

The investigator's responsibility is therefore to ask what the ancient author actually intended to affirm. A difficulty can expose a problem in our interpretation, translation, manuscript evidence, chronological assumptions, or knowledge of the ancient world without proving that the original text **contradict**s itself. The existence of hard passages should invite deeper study, not premature acquittal or conviction.



Evidence Trail 24: A High View of Scripture Requires Better Interpretation

I believe Scripture is true, but I do not believe every interpretation Christians have ever offered is true. Pastors have misread passages, teachers have quoted verses out of context, translators can produce better or worse renderings, copyists made errors, and publishers introduced typographical mistakes.

My old *Why?* manuscript even collected humorous examples of printed Bibles containing mistakes such as “Printers have persecuted me” instead of “Princes,” and the infamous edition that omitted the word *not* from the commandment against adultery. Nobody believes Moses originally wrote “Thou shalt commit adultery.” The printing error belongs to the history of an English edition, not the inspired Hebrew text.

That distinction illustrates the doctrine more clearly than many abstract explanations do. Inerrancy concerns what the biblical authors actually affirm when their writings are interpreted properly according to original language, historical context, literary genre, and authorial intention.

That also means interpretation is not an optional step between the text and doctrine; it is the necessary discipline by which we determine what the text is actually saying. A verse can be perfectly true and still be badly used. Words have ranges of meaning, grammar constrains interpretation, historical setting supplies context, and literary structure often determines emphasis. The question is therefore not merely, “What do these English words sound like to me?” but, “What did this author intend these words to communicate to his original audience?” A high view of Scripture should make that question more urgent, not less, because reverence for the text requires us to hear the text on its own terms rather than forcing our assumptions into it.

Poetry must be read as poetry, Proverbs should not automatically be turned into unconditional promises, narrative description should not automatically become moral prescription, apocalyptic symbolism should not be flattened into ordinary newspaper prose, and phenomenological expressions such as sunrise should not be treated as scientific claims that the sun literally circles a stationary Earth any more than a modern television meteorologist saying “sunrise at 6:12” is teaching geocentrism.

The same principle applies to passages that appear difficult or even troubling. Ancient writers could summarize events, arrange material thematically, use rounded numbers, compress genealogies, quote speakers without endorsing their words, or describe events from different vantage points without thereby contradicting one another. None of that gives interpreters permission to explain away genuine problems, but it does require us to distinguish carefully between what Scripture says and what we have assumed Scripture must say. Many supposed contradictions disappear only after the genre, chronology, textual history, or cultural background is examined more closely. In other cases, the difficulty remains and should be acknowledged honestly. Faithful interpretation is not the refusal to see problems; it is the determination to investigate them before declaring the text guilty.

A strong doctrine of inspiration therefore ought to produce more careful interpretation rather than crude literalism. That principle allows Christians to investigate difficult passages rather than fear them, and it helps us approach another perceived conflict intelligently: the relationship between Scripture and science.

Evidence Trail 25: Genesis Was Never a Modern Physics Textbook

As an atheist, I assumed modern science had made ancient creation belief intellectually obsolete, but I no longer believe the relationship is nearly that simple. Genesis does not attempt to teach general relativity, quantum mechanics, stellar nucleosynthesis, DNA replication, molecular biology, or modern cosmology.

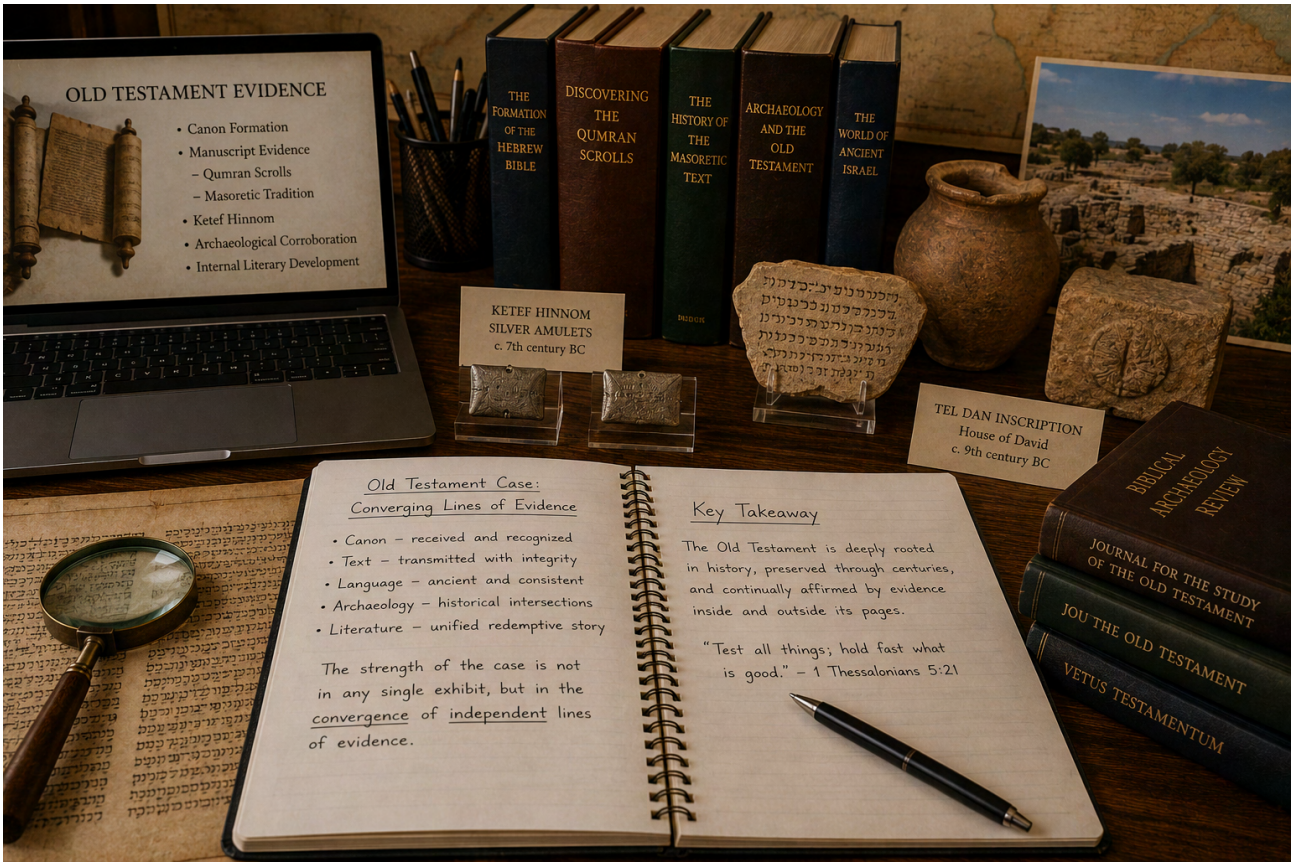
Its foundational claims operate at a different level. God exists, God creates, creation is not itself divine, nature is ordered, human beings possess unique dignity, humanity is morally accountable to its Creator, creation is good but fallen, and human existence possesses meaning within divine purpose.

Those propositions overlap questions explored by science and philosophy, but Genesis does not present itself as a twenty-first-century laboratory report. My larger scientific case is developed separately in ***The Scientific Evidence for God***, where I examine modern cosmology, fine-tuning, biological information, and the broader question of whether nature is better explained ultimately by mind or mindlessness.

The Bible's opening line makes an astonishingly economical claim in **Genesis 1:1**: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Modern cosmology does not prove that verse, but twentieth-century science decisively abandoned the simple picture of an eternally static cosmos and revealed a universe with an observable cosmic history extending backward toward an extraordinarily hot, dense early state.

The biblical worldview never required physical matter to be eternal. Its ultimate reality is God, and the cosmos is derivative. That is fundamentally a theological proposition rather than a scientific measurement, but contemporary cosmology certainly has not rendered it the primitive absurdity I once assumed.

The scientific investigation therefore does not close Scripture's case. It becomes another part of my larger deductive and cumulative journey toward asking whether biblical theism explains reality more adequately than materialism. The Bible's influence meanwhile presents another extraordinary historical fact—one I could scarcely have imagined at its present scale when I first wrote *Why?*.



Part VIII: Bringing the Old Testament Evidence Together

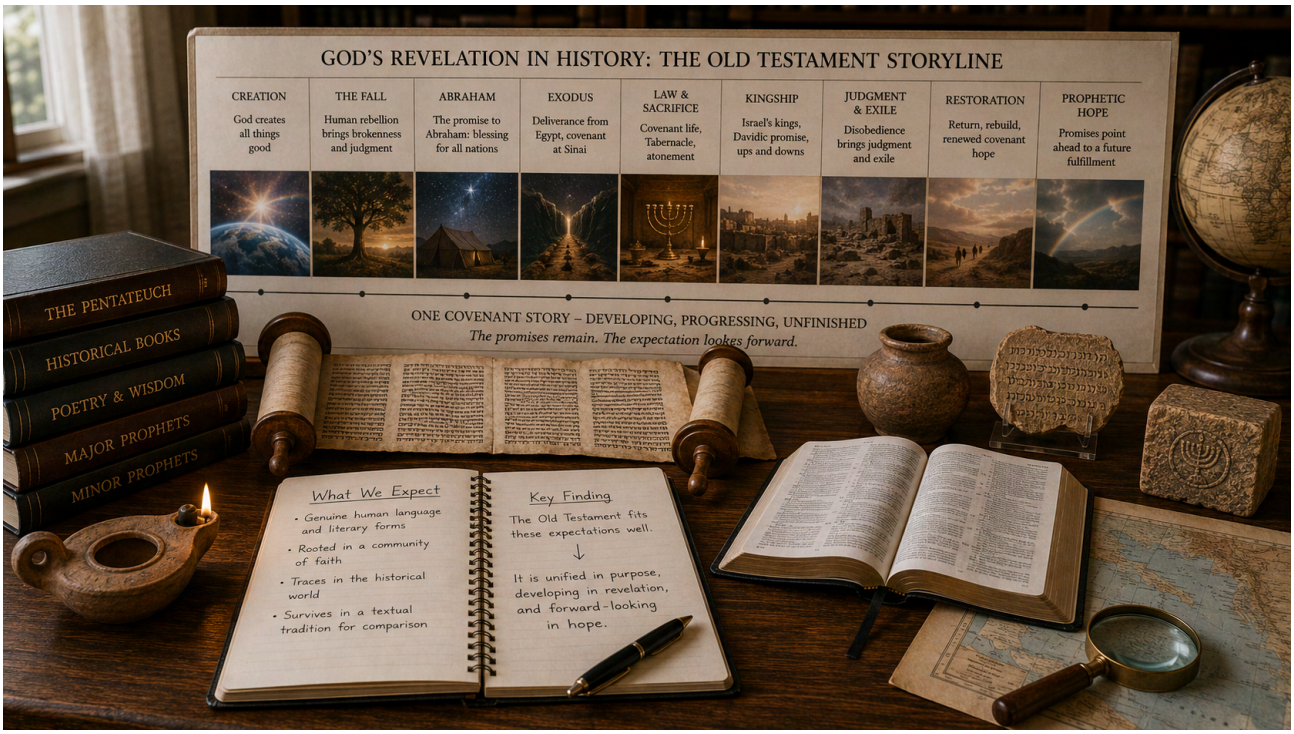
Evidence Trail 26: Why No Single Exhibit Can Carry the Whole Case

At this point the Old Testament case contains several independent evidence files, and none of them needs to carry the entire argument alone. The canon evidence helps identify which writings formed Israel's received Scriptures; Qumran and the Masoretic tradition permit direct investigation of textual transmission; Ketef Hinnom pushes recognizable biblical language into the First Temple period; archaeology repeatedly intersects Israel's historical world; and the books themselves exhibit

a developing covenantal and redemptive architecture rather than a random accumulation of religious fragments.

The force of the case comes from convergence. The Old Testament is ancient enough to leave difficult gaps, yet those gaps are not empty. Manuscripts, inscriptions, archaeological sites, ancient translations, Jewish testimony, and the internal literary development of the books overlap in ways that allow the investigator to test rather than merely assume. That is exactly why weak slogans are unnecessary: the cumulative evidence is more interesting than the slogans ever were.

None of this proves divine inspiration in the way a mathematical equation proves its conclusion. Historical evidence rarely works that way. What it does establish is that the Old Testament is neither a late medieval invention nor a religious text floating free from history. Its canonical roots extend deeply into Judaism, its textual tradition can be traced backward across centuries, and its historical world repeatedly intersects evidence outside its own pages.



Evidence Trail 27: What Would God's Old Testament Revelation Look Like If It Entered History?

If God truly revealed Himself through Israel's history, we would expect that revelation to come through genuine human language and literary forms, to become rooted in a recognizable community of faith, to leave traces in the historical world it describes, and to survive in a textual tradition capable of comparison. Those expectations fit the Old Testament evidence remarkably well. The books differ in genre and historical setting, the manuscripts contain real variants, and archaeology remains incomplete, yet the larger structure survives every one of those realities.

We might also expect such a revelation to possess a developing purpose rather than a static collection of disconnected sayings. The Old Testament begins with creation and human rebellion, narrows toward Abraham and Israel, develops covenant, law, sacrifice, kingship, judgment, exile,

restoration, and prophetic hope, and ends with major promises still unresolved. That unfinished quality is not a weakness in Part 1; it is one of its most important findings.

The Old Testament leaves the investigator with a forward-looking question. Has the God who speaks, covenants, judges, restores, and promises within these thirty-nine books acted again in history in a way that completes the trajectory? Part 1 has deliberately stopped before answering that question. Part 2 will open the twenty-seven New Testament books and ask whether their manuscript, canonical, historical, archaeological, and theological evidence can bear the weight of the answer they give.

Part 1 Verdict: The Old Testament Case Does Not End with the Old Testament

Nearly forty years ago, I approached the Old Testament with the assumption that an ancient religious book was exactly what one should expect human beings to produce. After four additional decades of study, I no longer find that dismissal adequate. The thirty-nine Protestant books correspond to the canonical literary material of the Jewish Tanakh; their textual history can be investigated across the Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls, and Masoretic tradition; recognizable biblical language reaches into the First Temple period; archaeology repeatedly intersects the political world of Israel and Judah; and the books themselves form a developing covenantal story rather than a random anthology.

None of that requires me to pretend that every manuscript is identical, every archaeological identification is certain, every chronological problem is easy, or every canonical question can be reduced to one ancient council. The stronger case is built by acknowledging exactly what the evidence shows and refusing to ask more of it than it can bear. **Truth does not need us to exaggerate on its behalf.**

But the Old Testament also ends with its own unresolved questions. Israel has experienced covenant and rebellion, kingdom and exile, judgment and restoration. The prophets have spoken of future redemption, renewed covenant, Spirit, servant, king, and divine intervention, yet the story remains open. That unfinished trajectory is why Part 1 cannot be the end of the investigation. The Old Testament itself leaves the reader looking forward.

Part 2 will therefore enter the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and investigate the claim that the story continues in first-century history. We will ask how those books came together, how early their manuscripts take us, what textual variants really mean, whether the Gospels and Acts know the world they describe, what archaeology and non-Christian sources contribute, and whether the Resurrection proclamation appears early enough to be treated as apostolic history rather than later legend.

Before You Continue, Read the Old Testament for Yourself

Before moving into Part 2, I encourage readers to open the Old Testament itself rather than relying only upon my investigation. Begin with Genesis and watch the biblical worldview introduce creation, human dignity, rebellion, judgment, and promise. Read Exodus to understand covenant, Passover, law, and divine presence; spend time in the Psalms to hear Israel pray; and then read Isaiah slowly enough to encounter judgment, holiness, servant, kingdom, and restoration in their own Old Testament setting. (Start online with: Genesis 1; Exodus 1; Psalms; Isaiah.)

And Next Week in Tactical Tuesdays: Part 2—The New Testament Enters the Evidence Room!

If Part 1 has taken us deep into the manuscripts, archaeology, canon, prophecy, and preservation of the Old Testament, **next week's investigation moves into an entirely different—and in many ways even more explosive—evidence room**. We will turn from the Hebrew Scriptures to the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and ask how early they actually appear, how the canon came together, how many manuscripts survive, what the earliest papyri really tell us, and whether centuries of copying have preserved or corrupted the apostolic message.

We will examine why the familiar "telephone game" analogy fails so badly when applied to New Testament transmission, what scholars such as **Bruce Metzger, F. F. Bruce, Dirk Jongkind, Peter J. Williams, Michael Kruger, and others**have concluded after working directly with the manuscripts, and why the existence of textual variants does not mean the New Testament has disappeared beneath centuries of corruption. We will also look at the earliest collections of Paul's letters, the four-Gospel tradition, P46, P45, P52 and other ancient witnesses, and the evidence showing that Christians were reading, copying, collecting, and treating these writings authoritatively long before Constantine or the Council of Nicaea.

Then the investigation becomes even more historical. We will ask whether **Luke really knew the world he claimed to describe**, whether the Gospel writers accurately reflect first-century Jewish names, geography, customs, rulers, and political realities, and what archaeology says about figures and places such as **Pontius Pilate, Gallio, Caesarea, Corinth, Jerusalem, and the Pool of Siloam**. We will also bring in non-Christian witnesses such as **Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny**, not because they prove Christianity, but because they independently place Jesus, His followers, and the early Christian movement inside the real Roman world.

And then comes the largest question of all: **the Resurrection**. We will examine why 1 Corinthians 15 contains tradition that predates the letter itself, why Paul's argument leaves Christianity no escape hatch if Christ did not rise, and why the central claim of the New Testament is not merely that Jesus taught profound truths, but that something happened in history that changed everything.

So Part 2 will not simply ask, "Did the New Testament survive?"

It will ask something much bigger: **If the text survived, if the witnesses are early, if the historical setting is real, and if the Resurrection proclamation goes back to the earliest Christian movement—what do we do with the Person at the center of it all?**

That is where next week's Tactical Tuesdays investigation is heading.

Part 1 asked whether the Old Testament can be trusted. Part 2 will ask whether the New Testament brings us face to face with the most consequential historical claim ever made about Jesus Christ.

And that is a case worth opening.

For Readers Who Want to Follow the Other Evidence Trails

This Old Testament investigation intentionally concentrates on the Hebrew Scriptures, but several of the questions touched here are developed much more fully in my related studies. Readers can follow the scientific and philosophical trail that first moved me away from atheism, examine the world's religions and religious leaders, compare their sacred writings, or explore biblical archaeology in greater depth through the following investigations.

(See: The Scientific Evidence for God; Do All Religions Lead to the Same Truth—and the Same God?; How Jesus TRULY Compares to Religious Leaders; How the Bible Truly Compares with Other Sacred Writings; The RECENT TOP 10 Archaeology PROOFS of the BIBLE.)