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Revelation, 21:2a, English Standard Version.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,^[a] coming down out of heaven from God.

A vast world of Faith.

The Dead Sea scrolls were the greatest archeological find of the 20th century, and one of the greatest of all time – especially for the faithful. They were found by accident in 1947 by a Bedouin boy, a shepherd. It was near an ancient settlement called Qumran, near the Dead Sea in what is now the West Bank. He tossed a rock into the opening of a cave and heard a shattering sound. It turned out to be pottery. Between that day and 1956, a vast stockpile of ancient manuscripts was found carefully packed in clay jars and hidden in a series of caves. They date from the third century B.C. to the first century A.D. They contain portions of every book of the Old Testament except for Ester. There were also other religious manuscripts among them. It's not known exactly how they came to be there. A popular theory is that an isolated community of Jews lived in Qumran until the settlement was destroyed in 70 A.D. These Jews belonged to an ascetic sect called the Essenes, people who lived a bit like John the Baptist (although he was not an Essene). They left the Jerusalem area to be separate from a corrupt world. The theory is that as

Romans began their repression of northern Israel in 66 A.D., the Essenes were forced to flee their desert community, and so they hid their precious manuscripts. We don't know how accurate this theory is. But we do know that the Dead Sea scrolls were a phenomenal discovery. Until they were found, the oldest surviving manuscripts of the Old Testament were from about 935 A.D. This means that the Essenes' copies of the Scriptural books are more than ten centuries older than the oldest copies that were known to exist up until that point. A thousand years.

Here is the truly astonishing part. When comparing the Dead Sea scroll manuscripts to the previously known oldest versions, they are 95% identical. Importantly, the changes that are present are very minor, make only minimal impact on the interpretation of the Bible, and were in fact almost exclusively the result of transcription errors, not deliberate attempts to alter content. In other words, over the course of over a thousand years, when the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, was being copied many, many times, manually, and with no access to modern typesetting or modern printing devices, and certainly no means to store the text in any other way than by written hand, only very minor variations were introduced to the text of the Old Testament. So, there is a good chance that what we have today are perfect copies of the originals. But just what are the "originals"? When did the Old Testament books become frozen, never to be changed again?

The answer is: we don't really know. But, very, very roughly, we believe that the Old Testament books were written between 400 B.C. and 1,000 B.C., meaning that the Dead Sea scrolls are copies of the Old Testament that were created approximately one third into the period of time between their original creation and now. There is one important caveat. There is evidence that King Josiah, during his reign from 640 B.C. to 609 B.C. heavily influenced the content of Deuteronomy, and possibly Joshua, Judges, the Samuel books, and the Kings books, as part of his program of moral reform. Josiah's father had been wicked, as had the Jewish kings in the decades preceding Josiah's father. Josiah set out to restore the morality of the People of God. Much of the content of the Old Testament dates to long before King Josiah. We really don't know how much the stories of the Old Testament, such as the life of King David, who lived about 400 years before Josiah, might have been altered by Josiah's scribes. And in general, we don't know how much editing and rewriting the books of the Old Testament might have gone through up until around the third century before Christ. What we do know, because of the Dead Sea scrolls, is that the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, were not altered after that. Other than King Josiah's possible deliberate changes to Scripture, we have no concrete evidence that anyone else monkeyed with them. It would make sense to assume that even before the Dead Sea scrolls were written, the Jews of the Holy

Land were using the same discipline in copying the Scriptures as they did from the time of the Dead Sea scrolls until modern times. So, there is a good chance that most of what we have in the Old Testament is identical to the original Scriptures.

With respect to the New Testament, the oldest manuscripts that we have date to the second and third century A.D.; in other words, we have manuscripts that were hand copied as little as a hundred years after the originals were written. Given how carefully the Old Testament manuscripts have been preserved over thousands of years, there is very little doubt that we have the true, original text of the books of the New Testament. The Bible you pick up is authentic.

None of this, of course, addresses the issue of how much the various books of the two Testaments represented true historical events when they were written. But let me make one important point. Without going into detail, there are non-biblical sources, and ones that are not Christian in nature, that back up the existence and the life of Jesus Christ. The New Testament is real history.

My personal belief, and there is good evidence to back this up, is that the Old Testament is more likely to contain faith stories not rooted in true history than the New Testament. But when changes were made, the motivation was to portray our God and his relationship to us in compelling terms. There is evidence that draws into question the story of the Exodus and the conquering of Canaan, and the history

of the Kings. Also, some parts of the Old Testament, like the Creation story and the lives of Adam and Eve, were never meant to be historically accurate. We can make a strong argument that were intended to be read as allegories. Now, consider this:

Our Bible, including both Old and New Testaments, was not created by deluded people or with the intent to mislead later readers. What we have is very complex in nature, was created over an extraordinarily long period of time, and involved the work of perhaps hundreds of people. It contains a wide variety of literary types, including poetry, history, theology, revelation, correspondence, and wisdom. Much of it began as oral traditions. The Bible tells a consistent story of a God who revealed himself to humanity in two consecutive waves, first through the prophets and second through Jesus Christ. It is a glorious document that, as a piece of literature, has withstood the test of time like nothing else has. The Bible is not entirely historically accurate, but it is not fiction. It is massively complex and highly varying in style and literary structure. But it is not tangled or unfocused. The Bible has inconsistencies internally and with respect to known historical events. But it is not wrong. I want to do more than motivate you to read it or care about what is in it. I want you to be prepared to be amazed. Let me step through two points:

Point One: The Bible is an invitation to a vast world of Faith, a world we cannot see with our eyes or hear with our ears or touch with our hands. The Bible

takes us on a journey through the Faith world. At its beginning are a vast sea of peoples struggling to understand who we are and how we got here. These people, who have not yet received the revelation of God, turn the planets, the wind, rain, and wild animals into gods. Like us, they had a powerful hint of the nature of God because they saw God in the creations of God. They just didn't understand that there was a single creator behind the beauty of the world. In Romans, we are told:

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

But gradually, in the Bible, God reveals himself in two stages, first as a single God, an all-powerful being, one that is loving, and not a vengeful, vain, highly flawed human-like god with magical powers and named after a planet. In that first stage of revelation, in what we call the Old Testament, God cast aside that notion that there is an array of gods, each controlling some aspect of our lives, and with various gods constantly fighting with each other. In Nehemiah, we are told:

⁶ "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you.

In the second phase of revelation, God told us, through Jesus Christ, that honoring God and living by the will of God, walking in the Kingdom of God in joy,

having a personal relationship with God, and knowing that we will be with God for eternity, can all be boiled down to following the two great commandments of Jesus:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

Point 2: the Bible is a vast depiction of the far, far distant past, the present, and all of eternity before us, in the world of Faith. The first words of the Bible are:

***1** In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. **2** The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.*

The people of the Bible didn't know about the trillion galaxies that we know exist or the 200 billion suns in our galaxy. They naively thought that the Earth was the center of existence. But through the revelation of God, they knew that all of the heavens – whatever that might mean – were made by a single, trustworthy God.

We don't fully know how much time is covered by the Old Testament, but very roughly speaking, it goes back 3,000 years. After being told that God created all that is around us, as well as us, and that we were created with the purpose of honoring God, we are told far more. We read about the Fall of humanity, of the source of hatred and anger, and that is, of course - us. Humanity, depicted as Adam

and Eve, try to be like God instead letting God guide us. We try to lead ourselves through the world - without God. We fail when Evil tempts us:

God knows that when you eat of the fruit your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

We are also told about the Old Covenant, the laws that God laid down for the People of God. We are to do more than just understand that there is only a single God. There was a huge demand made of humanity: live in a moral fashion. For the Israelites and then the Jews, this was no simple task. The laws were many and they were intricate. Many of them are laws that we follow today, to not murder, to not steal, to honor our parents, but many were seemingly arbitrary, such as not planting two kinds of seed in one field, not wearing clothing of two different types of fabric such as linen and wool, and not killing a burglar during the day - only at night. There were intricate laws, like not lifting anything heavy on the Sabbath and preparing food in prescribed ways. But these laws that seem arbitrary to us today created a sense of community among the People of God. They also kept God in people's minds every day of the year. Remember that a primary goal of the Old Testament, of the Covenant of Moses, was to constantly remind people who were surrounded by pagans that there is indeed a single, all-powerful God.

A major lesson of the Old Testament history of the ancient world of the People of God is that wisdom leads to faith and faith leads to wisdom, that the two

are interdependent, are in a symbiotic relationship, and they constantly build each other up. We are not to be ignorant followers. We are to be intelligent, thoughtful people who at times must be very creative and adapt in the moment so that we can continue to live as a moral people. In the eloquent Book of Proverbs, we read:

¹³ *Happy is the man who finds wisdom, And the man who gains understanding;*

Wisdom gives us joy, especially if we use that wisdom to control our actions.

We also learn about the Exodus, of God's commitment to meet his side of the bargain when it came to the Covenant. God is a giving God, a loving God. If the people simply acknowledge and honor him, God will give them three things: offspring, his eternal blessing, and a home of their own – a homeland for people who were constantly held in slavery by other peoples. The Old Testament story included the many Prophets, the conscience of Israel, and who were visited by God, often in visions, and who constantly served to bring the people back to their God.

The New Testament continues the history of the world of Faith, with the second phase of God's revelation. The Old Testament, with its complex, innumerable laws are superseded, and all we are asked to do, now that we have indeed accepted a single, eternal, loving, and powerful God, is to love God and love others – and of course do all that this implies. We hear the life of Jesus, who lived for peace and for empathy for all people. We are told that we no longer

need prophets to speak to God for us, because we now have God living within each of us in the form of the Holy Spirit. The big news is that our single God has three important aspects, God the Father who created all, God the son who brought us this New Covenant, and the Holy Spirit, inspiring and lifting us up every day. We learn about the astonishingly rapid expanse – the peaceful spread – of the new faith. We gain deep theological insights and a detailed understanding of the lives of the earliest Christians through the letters of the New Testament. And finally, we have a key principle from the Old Testament reaffirmed, bringing the history of Faith full circle by reminding us that although our Covenant with God is very different than that of the people of the Old Testament, a huge principle has remained the same. The New Testament God is the same God as the Old Testament God. In Revelation, we learn in powerfully poetic terms what will one day happen to evil: ¹⁰ *The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone.* And, as a capstone to the history of the people of Faith in the one God, we learn where we will live for eternity: *I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem,^[a] coming down out of heaven from God.*

Instead of offering a closing prayer, let me offer this very short, final reason to live by the Bible. This is from the Gospel of Luke, and these are the words of Christ: *“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”*