I have been discussing the question of whether we can know that we have reconstructed the original text of the New Testament at every point – or even every important point. To me the answer is self-evidently, No, of course not. Many of my conservative evangelical critics think that I’m being overly skeptical, that since we have thousands of manuscripts of the NT, we can surely know better what the authors of the NT said than any other authors from the ancient world. My view is that this might be true, but that simply shows that we can’t know what *most* authors of the ancient world actually said, word for word.

Why does that matter? I’ll explain in a second, for the bulk of this post. But first let me put the matter in very simple form (I keep trying to explain this in a way that’s satisfying to myself.). Suppose Matthew’s Gospel was circulated for the very first time in Antioch of Syria around the year 85 CE. We’ll call that first circulated copy the “original.” Someone copied the original in his church. The original got lost in a fire.

But the copy was copied ten times over the years. And all of our subsequent copies were descended from those ten copies. That would mean that our entire manuscript tradition goes back to the first copy, made from the original. But what if that first copy contained lots of mistakes? What if its copyist added a few stories that he too had heard about Jesus? What if he added sentences here and there to make sure the “true” meaning of the gospel was understood? What if he omitted some sentences he didn’t like or approve of? Remember: he didn’t think he was copying “the Bible.” He thought he was copying a book about Jesus that he wanted people to read to get to a right understanding of who Jesus was.

Then the next copyists (ten of them in this scenario), would have reproduced these additions, omissions and alterations. How would we know what the original said, then, if all our copies go back to something other than the original? There is precisely no way to know. Let me emphasize, there is PRECISELY no way to know.

And why does that matter? Well,

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