In my debates with other scholars about whether we can know (for certain) (or at they sometimes put it, with 99% certainty) what the original words of the New Testament were, I always argue that we cannot “know,” and they argue we can. Let me explain one reason that I find their position highly problematic by dealing with a broader issue. What exactly *is* the original text of a document? If we can’t agree on that very basic and fundamental question, then we can’t very well agree on the possibility of getting back to the original.

I’ve dealt with this problem on the blog before, but let me approach it from a different angle this time. I have just finished my recent book on how memory studies can help us think about the oral traditions of Jesus that were in circulation in the years and decades before the Gospels were produced. The book will be called *Jesus Before the Gospels*, and should be published sometime in the spring.

So in 20 years, looking back on things, what will people imagine is the “original” text of that book? Or, say, of a chapter of the book, e.g., Chapter 1? Here is the reality. I had an extensive outline of what I wanted to say in chapter 1, which I had worked on for weeks. Then I wrote the chapter over the course of two days. After finishing it on the second day I went back and revised it, rearranging some material, correcting spelling and grammatical mistakes, rewording sentences, restructuring paragraphs, and so on. About two weeks later, I went back to it, and revised it again. After I finished the whole manuscript, I went back and revised the whole book, including chapter 1, again. Is one of those drafts or revisions “the original”?

I then sent the book off to friends, colleagues, and other readers (including some on the blog!) and they made suggestions. I took their suggestions to heart, and made edits. I then read the whole thing through one last time, tweaking it here and there. I then sent it to my editor. He had lots of comments and wanted me to change things: add things, remove things, alter things. I did so, on his advice. And then I went through it one last time to make final adjustments in style to make it absolutely as good as I could. Is one of these revisions “the original”?

I have now...

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*[Irrelevant Arguments and the So-called Tenacity of the Tradition Arguments that We Have the Original Text]*