

Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn From Ancient Biography*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 308 pp. \$35.00. (Cloth) ISBN 9780190264260.

Michael R. Licona, Ph.D. is an associate professor of theology at Houston Baptist University. He has written on defending the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus and frequently debates on this topic. This book, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* attempts to use some Greco–Roman biographies to offer a possible explanation as to why there are differences between the Gospels. Licona explains, “Its aim is rather to investigate compositional devices that are often inferred by classical scholars and by some New Testament scholars in order to see if the existence of those devices may be more firmly established and provide insights into many of the differences in the Gospels” (3). This connection was first suggested in 1977. So, Licona is not the first, but he is likely the first evangelical apologist to fully embrace, explore, defend and rely on this understanding and method.

Chapter 1 briefly explores ancient compositional (or progymnasmat) textbooks. Seven have survived. Such texts teach the ancient writers to use Chreia, “brief sayings of action making a point” (10) and narrative language describing things that may or may not of happen, but as if they did happen (11). Licona says these texts teach there is a “substantial amount of flexibility” as long as the narration is credible and suitable to the speakers, audience members, and occasion” (11). Licona explains, “In these exercises, students improved their skills by altering the wording of their sources. Although the textbooks do not specifically state this was the manner in which they handled their sources when writing professionally, it is a very small step of faith to surmise they would employ such alterations” (14).

Chapter 2 introduces us to Plutarch, (Mestrius Plutarchus, c. 45 – 120 CE). An avid writer of about 227 items and more than sixty biographies, fifty of which have survived that were written around 96 CE. Licona identifies seven compositional devices and one overall law in Plutarch which he thinks serve as the main devices that can be used to help explain differences in the Gospels. Licona explains, “classical scholars have recognized a number of compositional devices that are ‘practically universal in ancient historiography.’ ” (19)

Transferal: “When an author knowingly attributes words or deeds to a person that actually belonged to another person. . . (20)

Displacement: “When an author knowingly uproots an event from its original context and transplants it in another, the author has displaced the event.” (20)

Conflation: “when an author combines elements from two or more events or people and narrates them as one . . .” (20)

Compression: “When an author knowingly portrays events over a shorter period of time than the actual time it took . . .” (20)

Simplification: “When an author adapts material by omitting or altering details that may complicate the overall narrative . . .” (20)

Expansion of Narrative Details: “If minor details were unknown, they could be invented to improve the narrative while maintaining historical verisimilitude.” (20)

Paraphrasing which can involve “altering the syntax” (13), adding “to original words” (13), “subtracting words or thoughts from the original” (14) and “substitute words in the original” (14)

Law of biographical relevance: “A story is told in a manner that is most relevant to the main character.” (21)

Chapter 3 is an in–depth analysis of Plutarch’s *Lives* (Biographies). Licona explains that “the sole objective of this research is to identify various compositional devices employed by Plutarch that resulted in differences in the periscopes he reported in two or more *Lives* and to examine the possibility that the evangelists employed similar devices. Accordingly, I am making no suggestions that the evangelists were more or less accurate than Plutarch” (25). The chapter summarizes a narrative, analyzes it to discover the compositional devices and then summarizes the conclusion.

Chapter 4 identifies 16 parallel Pericopes in the Canonical Gospels. Licona favors the widely held Markan priority (118), that Matthew (especially) and Luke used Mark as a source in writing their Gospels and often uses Two–Source terminology yet expresses some reservations about the widely held Q source (114–115). John is viewed as later due to its heavy theological emphasis but is used none the less, not seeing any need to resolve that puzzle (116). He follows the same method of analysis offered in chapter 3. He harmonizes the narrative, gives an analysis of the text that identifies real and potential problems and suggests where the compositional devices may have been used followed by a brief summary.

Finally, chapter 5 examines why he thinks the authors altered the chronological placements of some events using three examples. The remaining 4 appendices provide supporting lists, charts of data and more detailed information supporting the chapters. The book is kind, via a glossary to help students of Roman history that may not have the background in New Testament studies and students of the New Testament that lack a background in classics.

Some Positive Features

Licona explains that the differences in the Gospels, regardless of their perplexity, are “. . . almost always appear in the peripheral details” (184). He acknowledges the strong reliability of the New Testament text (7). He recognizes that it is difficult, may be impossible “to discuss Jesus of Nazareth . . . neutral of metaphysical commitments” (118). Therefore, Licona personally and unashamedly puts himself in the camp of believing in the historicity of the miracle reports in the Gospels (118). Yet, he is cautious to not allow this theological and philosophical commitment to partisan his work (118). This is in a scholarly world, which he recognizes New Testament scholars as a “heterogeneous community” (169) coming in all shapes and sizes: atheistic, agnostics, theologically liberal, and conservative (170). He also thinks that the resurrection of Jesus cannot be reduced to “wholesale invention” (170). He briefly explains why using Paul’s early (even before the Gospels) creedal affirmation of the gospel (1 Cor 15:1–8) and noting his larger work on the historicity of the resurrection. I would also add that Licona’s work in harmonizing texts and attention to detail is very good. In short, he is good at identifying differences in the Gospels.

Some Shortcomings

There are a few areas not addressed to my satisfaction. First, by the title of the book alone offers to explain *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* Yet his analysis and conclusions are described in such uncommittable terminology such as “maybe,” “perhaps,” “appears,” “possible,” “impossible to tell,” etc. Even before he begins, Licona says of ancient texts,

It is also possible that an author may have altered his sources(s) in order to render the story in a manner he regarded as being more plausible than as it was told in his sources(s). We can often make a good guess pertaining to why one text differs from another. But it is also the case that we are often left scratching our heads in bewilderment. (2)

By Licona’s own words, he does not seem sure of his results,

My proposed solutions are tentative. Others have offered different solutions . . . I am primarily attempting to view the differences in light of compositional devices to see if a greater understanding of what lays behind the differences may be obtained in some instances. (119)

For example, despite the promise that “. . . it will quickly become apparent that the evangelists employed many of the devices found in the compositional textbooks discussed in chapter 1” (120); This is quickly followed with “Perhaps John transferred the message of Isaiah to the lips of John the Baptist. It is impossible to know” (121).

The supposed literary devices do not seem to clear anything up, except to say that *maybe* they were used.

Second, I do not think a good argument has been put forward that clearly puts the Gospels in the “flexible” genre of Greco–Roman Biography. He even says,

Some biblical scholars view Luke’s Gospel as history rather than biography. They recognize that the prologues to his gospel and its sequel, Acts, reflect Luke’s familiarity with Greco–Roman historiography. That is, he knew and was probably writing in a manner that had strong affinities with Hellenistic or Greco–Roman histories. Therefore, some ancient biographies, including one or more of the Gospels, may be said to resist firm grouping with a genre. (5)

It would be after this that I would expect a counter argument for including the Gospels in the genre of Greco–Roman Biographies. Instead, the reader is told,

For our purposes, we only need to recognize that the New Testament Gospels bear strong affinity to Greco–Roman biography. Accordingly, we should not be surprised when the evangelists employ compositional devices similar to those used by ancient biographers. In fact, we should be surprised if they did not. (5)

But again, this affinity is almost always couched in vague uncommitted terminology. Further, while it is mentioned that there are a few Jewish biographies (4) and he has read a significant amount of literature from that period (201) no argument is given against why the evangelists are not better understood as writing in the tradition of Jewish biblical prophets who were concerned with truth, a level of accuracy and used various genres. In short, why is the Old Testament not the preferred background for answering the question, why are there differences in the Gospels?

Third, Licona clearly rejects prior attempts to harmonize (200–201). He even criticizes them at instances (119, 164, 159, 171) yet at least 1/3 of his two chapters on the Gospels involves harmonization. Followed again by vague uncommitted terminology to what the evangelists did that is at least superior to the prior efforts at harmonizing the text. It just is not clear how this is an improvement over other’s attempts to harmonize the Gospels if the results are not firmer. Consider, Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Peter’s Denial (Mark 14:53–72; Matt. 26:57–75; Luke 22:55–71; John 18:13–27). “According to Mark 14:72, a cock crowed twice, whereas it is once in Matt. 26:74 // Luke 22:60 // John 18:27” (159).

It could also be that “twice” is original and both Matthew and Luke have simplified with a single cock’s crow. Whether the “two” in Mark is a textual corruption or Matthew and Luke were either simplifying or correcting Mark’s “two” is difficult to determine. (159)

This is an example, where Licona criticizes previous harmonizers (159) but is unable to give any better or more definite answer with his method.

Finally, Licona seems to claim too much. He acknowledges his sample size of Gospel Pericopes is small, saying,

Of course, we must keep in mind that our sampling is small. So it would be premature to conclude that only Luke or only Matthew does something. The evangelists' use of these devices most often appears to have no objective other than to follow the literary conventions of their day. However, there are exceptions. For example, John often redacts Jesus's words in order to add theological flavoring. (183)

But evidently it is sufficient enough to conclude:

As interesting as the differences in the Gospels may be, it is the refusal of their authors to paraphrase more freely that is striking to those readers familiar with both the Gospels and Plutarch's *Lives*. (199)

The bottom line is we do not have any sure guidance from this method on how much or how little or to what degree the Gospels were changed or are in fact in error about matters.

Impact on Apologetics

This leads me to be very hesitant in apply or affirming this as even a possible explanation for any differences in the Gospels to use in defending their historicity as a part of Christian apologetics. Such an approach clearly leaves the door open for the Gospel writers to be mistaken or in error regarding just about any detail through the writing or reworking of their text, whether they intended it or not. Licona's ambition to defend the resurrection of Jesus is admirable, but what he and many others may fail to see is that the resurrection of Jesus is not the end of Christian apologetics. Showing that the Bible is the inspired Word of God is the end (should be the end) of Christian apologetics. This requires that the teaching of Christ on the Bible be used. But if a historical method, such as Licona supposes, allows for errors, even if deemed unimportant, then there is no way to limit or prevent the method from calling into question any teaching of Jesus Christ including Jesus' view of the Bible.

Let me give a few examples, consider what Licona says about John the Baptist and Jesus's Baptism:

John offers it as the words of John the Baptist. Perhaps John transferred the message of Isaiah to the lips of John the Baptist. It is impossible to know. And there is no reason why John the Baptist could not have made such a claim about himself and the Synoptics chose to communicate the role of John the Baptist by citing the Scriptures he allegedly fulfilled. (121–122)

If the author is so free to make a real person say something they may not have said or make it so they fulfilled something they may not have fulfilled, what stops someone from concluding the same for Jesus' view of the Bible?

Consider what he says about the man with the withered hand and the Gadarene Demoniacs:

It is possible that Matthew locates this even on a different day than Luke. (129)

Matthew may have used a different source or illustrated multiple demons through creating an additional person or conflated two stories. However, it could also be that Mark, followed by Luke, has shown a literary spotlight on the main demoniac whom Matthews reveals. (132)

If persons can be created and days can be changed, what stops someone from suggesting *any* person, *any* day and *any* events were just invented? It seems to lay a foundation or give us a method that may not even

support a solid historical core to the resurrection. Nothing is suggested as to how, why and when to limit this methodology.

When considering the feeding of the five thousand; walking on water; healings at Gennesaret (Mark 6:31–56; Matt. 14:13–36; Luke 9:10b–17; John 6:1–25), Licona says memory and precision was compromised,

It is possible that the earliest tradition or recollection of the event was imprecise pertaining to when the issue of feeding the crowd arose and that the evangelists used their literary artistry to work it into their narratives in different manners. (137)

Either John slightly compresses one or more of the evangelists artistically weave elements into their narrative that were not remembered in a precise manner. (139)

When analyzing the Last Supper (Mark 14:17–25; Matt. 26:20–29; Luke 22:14–23; John 13:1–30; 1 Cor. 11:21–23) Licona says,

The most profound difference pertains to the day on which Jesus’s last meal with his disciples is said to have occurred. . . . there are several elements in John’s Gospel that suggest he has located the Last Supper a day earlier than what is portrayed in the Synoptics. (155)

John appears deliberate in his attempts to lead his readers to think the Last Supper was not a Passover meal. (156)

For now, we may suggest that John may have displaced the celebration of the Passover meal to have occurred one day later than we find in the Synoptics. (156)

So, either Licona or his method cannot be clear on the kind of meal and when was the Last Supper. How is this a reliable method if it cannot tell us who is in error. Consider the following chart:

Day 1–John	Day 2–Synoptics	Day 3–John
Last Supper–Not Passover	Last Supper–Passover	Passover–Not Last Supper

I guess all we can be sure about is that his method gives us what must be an error in the Gospels.

At the crucifixion and death of Jesus (Mark 15:22–41; Matt. 27:33–56; Luke 23:33–49; John 19:17–37), Licona says,

Mark 15:25 says it was the third hour (i.e., 9 a.m.). However, in John 19:14, Jesus was still on trial before Pilate at the sixth hour (i.e., noon). . . . Thus, there are discrepancies pertaining to both the time and day of Jesus’s crucifixion. (162)

If Plutarch can alter the year in which Caesar wept when considering the inferiority of his own accomplishments in comparison [sic] to those of Alexander in order to emphasize Ceasar’s ambitious character, John could alter the day and time of Jesus’s crucifixion to symbolize the sacrificial quality of Jesus’s death. And we have previously observed how either Mark or John changed the day when the woman anointed Jesus. (163–164)

When considering the two thieves who had been crucified on each side . . .

Thus, “Luke may have displaced the act of the repentant thief from a later time that day, or Mark—followed by Matthew—left the thief unrepentant in order to highlight Jesus being rejected by all. As a historical question, it is impossible to determine what occurred with the available data. Accordingly, it would appear that either displacement of the altering or omission of narrative details has occurred.” (165)

For the next-to-last logion, it appears that John has redacted “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark //Matthew) to say, “I am thirsty.” . . . the evangelists has reworked what Jesus said “into an entirely different form.” It is “a dynamic equivalent transformation” of what we read in Mark // Matthew. (166)

How does attributing these kinds of changes by the evangelist’s help resolve any differences? For an apologist, there is no way to limit the historical changes and possible errors introduced. It would seem to open up an unsolvable puzzle. As an apologist, I am left scratching my head how any of this helps resolve differences.

When it comes to the resurrection (Mark 16:1–8; Matt. 28:1–10, 16–20; Luke 24:1–51; John 20:1–29; 21:1–24), the assessment regarding differences does not get better. Consider the following:

Earlier we observed that Plutarch’s treatment of events . . . [is] impossible to harmonize and observed him reworking his material in ways that are sometimes difficult to discern. We will observe some similar reworking of the resurrection narrative by the evangelists that are every bit as perplexing. In a few instances, they are even more so. The analysis that follows can only attempt to provide various proposals for the differences, in which we may have varying degrees of confidence. (171)

At minimum, it appears that either Matthew or John has relocated the appearances to Mary Magdalene. This shows the extent to which at least one of the evangelists or the sources from which he drew felt free to craft the story. (176)

However, if the resurrection narratives in the Synoptics have not been conflated and greatly compressed, why is the initial appearance of the angels to the women absent in John? If Matthew (and the Synoptics) conflated and compressed elements in the narrative, of necessity they would have needed to redact other elements in order to improve the flow of the narrative. (177)

Accordingly, either Luke conflated the first and second appearances to the male disciples, or John crafted the second appearances in order to rebuke those who like Thomas, heard about Jesus’ resurrection and failed to believe. (177–178)

It is possible that Matthew (and the Synoptics) have conflated and compressed numerous elements in the narrative and were forced to redact other elements in order to improve the narrative flow or that one or more of the evangelists have engaged in a bit of creative reconstruction. (182)

Licona can say the resurrection is not a “wholesale invention” (170) and that “. . . irrespective of what one thinks pertaining to the degree of flexibility each evangelist may have taken when writing his resurrection narrative, none of them invented the core story” (170). He even can say the Gospel writers did not employ these compositional devices as much as Plutarch’s *Lives* (199) (although no argument is given to how much they did or did not employ them, Licona acknowledges his sample size is small). But as one returns after having argued for the resurrection, to find the teaching of Jesus Christ on the nature of biblical inspiration and seal the final point of apologetics, there literally may be nothing left because of the assumed flexibility employed by the evangelists in creating their accounts.

Impact on the Inspiration of Scripture

I recognize Licona’s book attempts to appeal to historical and critical New Testament scholars, perhaps of a wide variety. But he will influence many younger evangelical apologists that must also do theology. Rarely does he say anything about inspiration, but he hints of it here:

Many who believe the biblical authors were divinely inspired also assume those authors must have written with a degree of accuracy and almost forensic precision we desire and expect today. However, this would require those authors to have stepped out of their culture and to have thought in terms of literary conventions that were in existence . . . (201)

In them (four Gospels) we learn how Jesus was remembered by many of his early followers. (202)

Did you catch that? “. . . how Jesus was remembered.” Not what Jesus actually did or actually said, but how he was *remembered*. This method assumes and flows from an intentionalist view of truth. This view says, “A statement is true if it accomplishes what the author intended it to accomplish and a statement is false if it did not accomplish it” (my thanks to Norman L. Geisler for this). This at first may appear to give room for one to affirm something as true which is false, and we consider it true (even though it is false) if their intentions are right or good. But if this holds, then truth must involve factually incorrect statements that are in fact true only because intentions are right or good. Further, factually correct statements could be false if they do not achieve their intentions. And a persons’ intellect would be what is true or false, rather than propositions either corresponding to reality or not. If the intentionality view is right, not only is such a world unlivable, but such a world could never contain absolute truth that is something that is true for everyone, everywhere and for all time. Truth becomes something that can be created and changed by the intentions of persons. Indeed, some intentions accomplish their intention, but not all intentions are true. Lies can accomplish an intention. Dare we say it: “Maybe all the evangelists and the apostle Paul *just* intended to have Jesus rise from the dead.” As a comprehensive view of truth, only the correspondence view is adequate (see Norman L. Geisler, “[The Concept of Truth in the Inerrancy Debate](#),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137, no. 548 [October–December 1980]; 327–339.)

The doctrine of inspiration, which supports the inerrancy of Scriptures, has room to embrace the full human authorship in its cultural context and vocabulary. This includes allowing different genres, figures of speech, vocabulary, redaction (which does not change the meaning) and any composition devise that does not introduce or necessitate error or falsehood. What it does not have room for is the possibility *or* the actuality of error or falsehood of any kind, regardless of the subject or significance, in the autographs (see [The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics](#) Articles XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII).

A lot less than someone you know rising from the dead can alter your view of the world or the way you do things, such as writing a biography. It is easily conceivable that if the evangelists had their view of God changed (to trinitarianism) and their view of the Messiah changed (God incarnate risen from the dead), it is easily conceivable that their view of literacy could be altered as well. That is, perhaps they thought, existing biographies done by pagans will not suffice for our Lord’s life. We must either write in the tradition of the ancient prophets or invent a new genre to communicate the truth to the world.

Or to put it in modern terms: A movie “inspired by true events” (6) may work for an entertaining ancient biography, but it will not work for the life of the risen Son of God. Given all the events that had transpired within three years of their life, it is not beyond the possibility that they decided to actually write the truth, even if we can never fully reconcile their differences. Especially when there is a very real possibility they could (and many did) lose their life over that truth. And, if the evangelists are under the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they will not even fudge the truth much less forget it. God promised them,

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. (John 16:13, NASB)

A method such as Licona's is hard to reconcile with evangelists such as Luke who had a clear commitment to researching and depended upon the correspondence view of truth when he said,

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4, NASB)

As a beginning seminary student, I had the occasion of attending lectures given by Eta Linnemann (1926–2009), who was a former student of Rudolph Bultmann (1884–1976). One lecture she gave was on the history of New Testament criticism. I came away impressed that a central problem in this field was the artificial division many made between the inspiration of the Bible and theories on the origin of biblical books. If the Bible is indeed inspired by God, that fact must inform and play a guiding role in suggesting and adopting any higher critical view. If the Gospels are historically reliable then proper methods of higher criticism will support this truth. Otherwise, one is at risk of adopting views or methods that undermine apologetics and deny the inspiration of Scripture. One cannot use a method or theory in isolation from truth found in other areas of study. This theory, like others before it, undermines the work of apologetics and theology. In short, if the Greco–Roman biography theory as applied by Licona is correct, it *undermines* the historicity of the Gospels and *denies* the inerrancy of their autographs.

While I am thankful for Dr. Licona's willingness to defend the resurrection of Jesus and explore uncharted waters in New Testament scholarship, this appears to be an unrepairable sinking ship that must be abandoned if apologetics and theology are to survive.

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