

F. David Farnell
Professor of New Testament
The Master's Seminary

A Critical Review of Michael R. Licona's *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn From Ancient Biography*

INTRODUCTION

Michael R. Licona, Professor of Theology, Houston Baptist University, has produced another volume in his efforts to apply the ancient historical genre of Greco-Roman biography to the text of the canonical Gospels as a means of explaining differences among the Gospels. The work is titled, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn From Ancient Biography* (Oxford, 2016).

Background to Licona's New Work: classical historiography and its Greco-Roman *Bioi* postulation.

This work may be considered a follow-up to his volume titled, *The Resurrection of Jesus, A New Historiographical Approach*, wherein he initially set forth his thesis that the key to understanding the Gospel account is to consider the Gospels as influenced by ancient Greco-Roman biography. In this prior volume, Licona contended, echoing classicist Richard Burridge, that "Although the Gospels do not possess all of the internal or external features of ancient biography, they do not differ from the genre 'to any greater degree than other [works belonging to the genre of biography]; in other words, they have at least as much in common with Graeco-Roman [*bioi*] as the [*bioi*] have with each other. Therefore, the gospels must belong to the genre

of [*bios*]."¹ This growing opinion among evangelical scholars that the Gospels are *bios* recently created a storm of controversy Licona, in this work *The Resurrection of Jesus A New Historiographical Approach*,² used *bios* as a means of de-historicizing parts of the Gospel (i.e. Matthew 27:51-53 with the resurrection of the saints after Jesus crucifixion is non-literal genre or apocalyptic rather than an actual historical event). Licona argued "*Bioi* offered the ancient biographer great flexibility for rearranging material and **inventing speeches . . . and they often included legend**. Because *bios* was a flexible genre, **it is often difficult to determine where history ends and legend begins.**"³ He called this "poetical," a "legend," an "embellishment," and literary "special effects."⁴

Licona further suggested that the appearance of angels at Jesus' tomb after the resurrection is also legendary. He wrote: "**It can forthrightly be admitted that the data surrounding what happened to Jesus is fragmentary and could possibly be mixed with legend**, as Wedderburn notes. We may also be reading poetic language or legend at certain points, such as Matthew's report of the raising of some dead saints at Jesus death (Mt 27:51-54) **and the angel(s) at the tomb** (Mark 15:5-7; Matt 28:2-7; Luke 24:4-7; John 20:11-13."⁵ (185-186, emphasis added). This extends the infiltration of legend beyond Matthew to all the other Gospels as well. What is more, Licona offers no clear hermeneutical way to determine from the text of Scripture what is legend and what is not. Calling a short unembellished Gospel account

¹ Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2010) 203. Licona's quote is inclusive of a comment of Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*. Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004 [1992], 250. See also: Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² Licona, *The Resurrection*.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 306, 548, 552, 553.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 185-86 (emphasis added).

with witnesses “weird,” as Licona does,⁶ is certainly not a very clear hermeneutical test, especially when the passage is directly associated with the resurrection of Christ (as Matthew 27 is). Many New Testament scholars think the bodily resurrection of Christ is weird too. The late Rudolf Bultmann, the Dean of liberal New Testament scholars in the Twentieth Century, called the resurrection and all such miraculous events in the Gospels as "the mythical event of redemption"; "origin of the various themes can be easily traced in the contemporary mythology of Jewish apocalyptic"; "pre-scientific" “incredible,” “senseless,” "irrational"; "unintelligible"; and even “impossible” to the modern mind.⁷ As a result, a roundtable discussion was formed by the Southern Baptists, of which Michael Licona is a member, for vetting of his views.⁸

An apparent syllogism for Licona's *The Resurrection of Jesus*

A syllogism for Licona's work, the Resurrection may be stated as follows:

PREMISE ONE: Greco-Roman *Bioi* presents a mixture of history (facts) and legendary material that are hard to distinguish

PREMISE TWO: The Gospels are an example of Greco-Roman *Bioi*

CONCLUSION: The Gospels presents a mixture of history (facts) and legendary material that are hard to distinguish.

Discernment of where history ends and legend or non-history, i.e. symbolism, begins is not really specified by Licona, indicating an acute thesis to this work, for he offered no clear hermeneutical principles beyond terms like "apocalyptic;" "weird," etc.⁹ Licona makes such decisions a personal, subjective decision that lacks clear analysis.

⁶ Ibid., 527.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth A Theological Debate* (London: SPCK, 1953) 2-5.

⁸ "A Roundtable Discussion with Michael Licona on The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach," *Southeastern Theological Review* 3/1 (Summer 2002) 71-98.

⁹ For further analysis, see Norman L. Geisler, "Michael Licona Admits Contradiction in the Gospels." <https://www.jashow.org/articles/bible/mike-licona-admits-contradiction-in-the-gospels/>; idem., <https://www.jashow.org/articles/bible/brief-comments-on-the-licona-dialogue/>; idem., "On Licona Muddying the Waters of the Chicago Statement of Biblical Inerrancy and Hermeneutics; idem. And William C. Roach, "Methodological Unorthodoxy" in *The Jesus Quest The Danger from Within* (Maitland, FL: Xulon, 2014) 181-210.

Licona's work on the resurrection did exhibit many commendable items, such as a strong stance on the historical basis for Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead. One might be encouraged that in light of historical criticism's assault on the miraculous since Spinoza and the Enlightenment, Licona has maintained the historical, orthodox position of the church. However, similar to Robert Gundry before him in 1983 who used a midrashic (non-historical approach) to the infancy narratives in Matthew 1-3, Licona (2010) uses genre issues in historical criticism to negate portions of Scripture that have always been considered historical by orthodox Christianity from the earliest times. The same ideological thought process by which Licona was dismissive of the resurrection of the Saints and the appearance of angels could well be applied to Jesus' He has stirred up much controversy that parallels that of the Gundry/ETS circumstance that resulted in the ICBI documents of 1978 and 1982. Being influenced by historical criticism, Licona has now firmly accepted a "scholarly consensus" that has emerged among critically-trained historical-critical scholars that the Gospels are a form of ancient "*bios*."¹⁰

Influence of Talbert and Burridge

By way of further background to the reader of this review, Licona affirms much of the predecessors of Greco-Roman historiographical postulation. The stimulus to these ideas may be traced in recent times to Charles H. Talbert, Distinguished Professor of Religion Emeritus, at Baylor University, taught at Baylor since 1996. Prior to this, he taught at Wake-Forest University from 1963 till his transfer to Baylor. Talbert received his bachelor of arts from Howard College (now Samford University), master of divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and doctorate from Vanderbilt University. He was mentored by Leander H. Keck (1928-) at Vanderbilt University. Talbert was also Professor of Religion at Wake Forest University, in

¹⁰Bock also accepted this basic genre classification, see Darrell L. Bock, "Precision and Accuracy: Making Distinctions in the Cultural Context," in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) 368.

Winston-Salem, North Carolina before transferring to Baylor. He served on the editorial boards of *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* and the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Talbert also served as President of the Catholic Biblical Association from 1999-2000 and delivered the presidential address at its sixty-third annual meeting on "Paul, Judaism, and the Revisionists." Talbert stimulated the view that the Gospels should be viewed as a genre of Greco-Roman *bioi*.

Talbert has written many works, but key to this discussion is his essay titled, "The Concept of Immortals in Mediterranean Society," where in he asserted that the certainty canonical Gospels were influenced by mythology of the era, "It would seem, therefore, that the early Christians were aware of the Mediterranean concept of the immortals and utilized it in one way or another in their proclamation of Jesus. During the first one hundred and twenty-five years of Christian history this mythology functioned initially as a significant Christological category and then as an apologetic tool."¹¹ In another work, "the Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity," he purposed to identify the background for the early Christian picture of Jesus as a descending-ascending redeemer. He argued that although such a myth is also found in Gnosticism and in Greco-Roman paganism, it is the Hellenistic-Jewish myth of a many-named descending-ascending redeemer that is closest to the early Christian one.¹²

Perhaps more directly influential on Licona's thought and work, as well as approach, is that of Richard Burridge, a British classical scholar and Anglican priest who popularized the idea that the Gospel genre, in the latter's work *What Are the Gospels? A comparison with Graeco-*

¹¹ Charles H. Talbert, "The Concept of Immortals in Mediterranean Antiquity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94/3 (September 1975) 436.

¹² Charles H. Talbert, "The Myth of a Descending-Ascending Redeemer in Mediterranean Antiquity," *New Testament Studies* 22/4 (July 1976) 418-440.

Roman Biography. Burridge is an Anglican Priest and the Reverend Canon Professor at Dean of King's College London since 1994, and received a personal Chair in Biblical Interpretation in 2008. After obtaining a first-class honors degree from the University of Oxford in classics, and training as a teacher at the University of Nottingham, his first post was as a Classics teacher at Sevenoaks School. He then combined theological training for ordination with a doctorate on Gospel genre (also from the University of Nottingham, 1989), and was ordained to the Anglican priesthood in 1986. After working as a curate in a parish in Bromley, Kent, Professor Burridge spent seven years as Lazenby Chaplain at the University of Exeter, where he also lectured in Theology and Classics. In 2013, Burridge was awarded the Ratzinger Prize for Theology by Pope Francis, in recognition of his work on the Gospels.

**The Premise of *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*:
Acceptance of Historical-Critical Ideologies, Especially Greco-Roman *Bioi* as the
Explanation for Gospel Material Differences**

The premise of Licona's newest work, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, is that to understand the kind and nature of historiography (writing of history) that is present in the canonical Gospels one must investigate and be familiar with Greco-Roman biographies of the times in which they were written, for the Gospels are directly linked to these types of ancient literature as a product of their times in which they were written. The publisher summarizes,

Anyone who reads the Gospels carefully will notice that there are differences in the manner in which they report the same events. These differences have led many conservative Christians to resort to harmonization efforts that are often quite strained, sometimes to the point of absurdity. Many people have concluded the Gospels are hopelessly contradictory and therefore historically unreliable as accounts of Jesus. The majority of New Testament scholars now hold that most if not all of the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography and that this genre permitted some flexibility in the way in which historical events were narrated. However, few scholars have undertaken a robust discussion of how this plays out in Gospel pericopes (self-contained passages). *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* provides a fresh approach to the question by examining

the works of Plutarch, a Greek essayist who lived in the first and second centuries CE. Michael R. Licona discovers three-dozen pericopes narrated two or more times in Plutarch's *Lives*, identifies differences between the accounts, and analyzes these differences in light of compositional devices identified by classical scholars as commonly employed by ancient authors. The book then applies the same approach to nineteen pericopes that are narrated in two or more Gospels, demonstrating that the major differences found there likely result from the same compositional devices employed by Plutarch.¹³

The key term in the above quote is "flexibility" and "compositional devices" for reading Licona's work makes the word "flexibility" cover a large range of assertions that many would find troubling. Importantly, Licona rejects classical forms of harmonization as "misguided," instead preferring to explain the canonical gospels from the perspective of the historiography of ancient writers, especially Plutarch and his work *Lives*. On the back flap of the book cover is,

Showing both the strained harmonizations and the hasty dismissals of the Gospels as reliable accounts to be misguided, Licona invites readers to approach them in light of their biographical genre and in that way to gain a clearer understanding of why they differ.¹⁴

Dismissal of Grammatico-Historical Hermeneutics

This rejection of classical grammatico-historical harmonization is very evident in Licona's work and such rejection is also reinforced in the foreword when Craig Evans, Distinguished Professor of Christian Origins and Dean of the School of Christian Thought Houston Baptist University, and colleague of Licona, starts an immediate negative tone in the Foreword of the book, wards of criticism from "naïve conservatives who rely on simplistic harmonizations and pat answers that really do not do justice to the phenomena."¹⁵ Apparently, evangelical critical scholars like Evans brands anyone who raises concerns regarding Licona's analogy of the Gospels to the phenomena of Greco-Roman biography as somehow lacking in

¹³ https://www.amazon.com/dp/0190264268/ref=rdr_ext_tmb introduction by Oxford on website as well as cover of book.

¹⁴ https://www.amazon.com/dp/0190264268/ref=rdr_ext_tmb introduction by Oxford on website as well as cover of book.

¹⁵ Greg Evans, "'Foreword,'" in Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, x.

scholarship in daring disagree with Licona's approach, or for that matter, evangelical critical scholarship's growing assessment that the Gospels are patterned after the genre of Greco-Roman *bioi*. Furthermore, he wants the readers of the book to have an "open and teachable mind"¹⁶ even though Evans's mind is clearly closed on the issue. Such pathetic name calling is also done by Licona when he remarks that he was "scolded on the Internet by ultra-conservative Christians" who disagreed with his approach. He also indicates that many evangelical critical scholars "who regard the Gospels as inspired and trustworthy, but are troubled by their apparent discrepancies, should be encouraged by Dr. Licona's careful, informed study."¹⁷ One wonders about Evans statement that appears contradictory that "inspired and trustworthy" Gospels cause some of these scholars to be "troubled by apparent discrepancies."¹⁸ In response, the evidence shows that those who are confident in the Gospels trustworthiness will be vastly more troubled by Licona's approach to resolving alleged discrepancies through the application of the genre of Greco-Roman *bioi* than any "apparent discrepancies" that one may find troubling.

The views of Licona also have a circle of support from other evangelical critical scholars. Licona writes that the following New Testament evangelical critical scholars have assisted him in the development of the book in the "Acknowledgements" section,

I likewise wish to express my thanks to the following New Testament scholars for their part in this work: to Darrell Bock and Craig Keener for reviewing the entire manuscript except for chapter 5 and the conclusion; to Craig Blomberg and Darrell Bock for reading a paper I presented in 2015 at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, which became the basis for chapter 5, and for providing papers to it, which provided helpful ideas; to Craig Blomberg, Darrell Bock, Lynn Cohick, Gary Habermas, Randy Richards, and Dan Wallace for showing an interest in the thesis of this book while providing critical feedback to ideas they allowed me to run by them.¹⁹

¹⁶ Evans, "Foreword," x.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., xiii.

Licona also mentions apologist "William Lane Craig . . . who encouraged me to push forward with this research . . . and to Craig Evans, Craig Keener . . . Dan Wallace, all of whom encouraged me to pursue truth no matter where it led when my observations made me uncomfortable."²⁰ The latter word "uncomfortable" used by Wallace would imply that even Licona had reservations about his own approach contained in the book as to its impact on Gospel trustworthiness.

Licona's Approach Specified

Licona describes the purpose of his book noting,

This volume will pursue the identification of several techniques employed in the writing of ancient history and biography that can be gleaned from compositional textbooks and inferred from observations of the differences in how Plutarch reported the same events in nine of his *Lives*. We will also observe how the employment of these techniques by the evangelists would result in precisely the types of differences we often observe in the Gospels 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.²¹

He continues, "For our purposes, we only need to recognize that the New Testament Gospels bear a 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."²² Furthermore,

[A]ncient authors took fewer liberties when writing histories than when writing biographies. However, there are plenty of exceptions when even the more careful historians of that era engaged in writing history using the same liberties we observe in biographical writing. A history was meant to illustrate past events whereas a biography was meant to serve as a literary portrait of its main character. Accordingly, if an adopting or bending of details would serve to make a historical point or illuminate the qualities of the main character in a manner that rendered them clearer, the historian and the biographer were free to do so, since their

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 3 (italics added).

²² Ibid., 5.

accounts would be 'true enough'" and "Ancient historians and biographers varied in their commitment to historical accuracy."²³

Licona imposes this idea upon the Gospels in his debate with Ehrman reflects this idea when he tweeted the following "Tweet this! The Gospels paint literary portraits of Jesus that are 'true enough.' @MichaelLicona."²⁴ What is disturbing is the expression "true enough." This phrase is rather ambiguous and set forth without any real content by Licona. Furthermore, who is to decide what is "true enough" and when or where the Gospels are "true enough." To describe the Gospels as being "true enough" lends to the idea that apparently in places the Gospels are deficient in their information, perhaps falling short of common standard of truth.

Licona chose Plutarch's Lives because this work is alleged to be similar to the Gospels (especially the Synoptics Matthew, Mark and Luke) in that in its several biographies, they frequently cover the same ground, creating a number of parallels or "synoptic" accounts. One wonders about Licona's entirely arbitrary decision to find in Plutarch the Gospels' "standard" for accuracy of the Gospel accounts. After all, hundreds of ancient forms of Greco-Roman *bioi* have been survived to the present day, each one differing in historical accuracy and reportage. In the 1990s Darrell Bock touted the Gospel records as comparable to the Greco-Roman Historical Tradition of Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War in his chapter on "The Words of Jesus in the Gospels: Live, Jive, or Memorex?"²⁵ Which one of these ancient authors is the standard? How are those standards chosen? Which evangelical critical scholar(s) decide or is such a decision arbitrarily based on the consensus of these evangelical scholars' hubris in deciding the standard for the canonical Gospels. What if some other ancient writer is chosen who

²³ Ibid., 6.

²⁴ <http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/licona-major-statement/>

²⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus Under Fire Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*. Eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 74-99 (note especially p. 78-79).

has a different historical level of alleged accuracy. Such decisions to compare the Gospels to Greco-Roman *bioi* are subjective and fleeting based on some nebulous form of consensus. In 1999, Daniel Wallace also has touted Thucydides as a standard for the Gospels, claiming,

Now, regarding ancient historiography: Commentators on Luke or Acts routinely note that Luke patterned his historiographical method after that of Thucydides. Thucydides has been called the greatest historian that ever lived" (Macauley). "Thucydides can be seen, even today, as a historian's historian." He learned from the master, Herodotus, and bettered him in his diligence and accuracy. Demosthenes, the great orator, copied out Thucydides' *History* eight times; Dio Cassius, Philistus, Arrian Procopius; Tacitus, and Sallust all emulated him. His translator offers this praise: . . . We are accustomed to admire among Thucydides' great qualities as historian, his impartiality his trustworthiness, vivid description, sense of contrast, conciseness, epigrammatic sententiousness, reserve, pathos. . . . Historians sometimes criticise his attitude, but they all accept his statements of fact." Thucydides is by no means the typical historian; he reached the pinnacle of his discipline and became a model for historians to follow, though few attained the high mark that he epitomized.²⁶

Licona, Bock and Wallace all seem to think by "consensus" of critical scholarship as well as revealing how arbitrary these standards can change direction. Which all of these evangelical critical scholars that subjective consensus changes as to which ancient writer is the "standard" for the Gospels. All these proponents of Greco-Roman *bioi* as the standard for the Gospels actually do is relegate the Word of God, especially the canonical Gospels, to mere human standards of reportage. The Gospel record promise that "the Spirit of truth" would bring all things to the Apostolic writers' memory hardly finds this comparison adequate (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:4-6). This latter point reflects a greatly changing consensus among this group as to what inspiration and inerrancy mean. The definition and character of these vital doctrines is clearly undergoing

²⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, "An Apologia for a Broad View of Ipsissima Vox," 51st Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Danvers, MA (18 November 1999) 3. For the quote within Wallace declaring Thucydides as the "historian's historian" see Robert E. Frykenberg, *History and Belief: The Foundations of Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 187.

radical modification by these evangelical critical scholars who would compare divinely inspired Gospels to mere human standards of historiography.

Another disturbing factor is that Plutarch is not always considered even to be an accurate historian. This is a matter of subjective judgment fraught with subjective analysis as to who would be the "consensus" for historical accuracy to form a basis to compare the Gospels. Who is to decide? Bart Ehrman insightfully noted the following in his debate with Licona that constitutes a devastating reply to advocates of the Gospels being compared to Plutarch or, for that matter, any form of Greco-Roman *bioi*:

[Even if Matthew's account of Jesus were as good as Plutarch's of Romulus—that wouldn't make it reliable.—@BartEhrman](#)

I should point out that if even if Matthew's account of Jesus were as good as Plutarch's account of Romulus, that would definitely not make it very reliable! Many of Plutarch's *Lives* are notoriously unreliable, historically. It's kind of like saying that I must have been a good tennis player because I was at least as good as everyone else in my high school. But what if no one in my high school was any good in tennis? We can't say that Matthew must be reliable because he is at least as good as skilled Plutarch — which by the way, he is not, as any classicist will tell you — unless we know how reliable Plutarch is.²⁷

Ehrman continues to highlight the difficulty of any comparison of the Gospels to standards of Greco-Roman *bioi*,

But does that mean that we can then conclude that these books [the Gospels] *are* accurate? That seems to be Mike's position — that if the Gospels are as accurate as Plutarch or Suetonius, then they can be seen as accurate. I think a lot of readers will think that this is somewhat skirting the real issue and changing the terms of our debate. Most readers, when they want to know if the Gospel accounts "tell it like it was" — that is, that the Gospels narrate events that actually happened in the way that they are described — they are not asking whether the Gospels are "as good as" some other books. They simply want to know: Did this event happen? And did it happen in the way the Gospels say it did? They do *not* want to know if Matthew's account of Jesus is about as good as Plutarch's account of Romulus. Most people don't know that Plutarch *wrote* a *Life of Romulus*. Why would they care of

²⁷ <http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

Matthew's Gospel is as good as a book they've never heard of? They want to know whether Matthew's account accurately describes what happened in Jesus's life.²⁸

Once a comparison is made of the Gospels to any ancient Greco-Roman writer, that standard is immediately subject to marked speculation as to his or her reliability as well as the legitimacy of any comparison.

Licona's Operating Premise: A Syllogism

Since Licona anchors his hermeneutical assumptions for interpretation and understanding of the text of the Gospels ("differences in the manner in which they port the same events") in Greco-Roman biography, especially Plutarch's *Lives*.²⁹ An apparent syllogism for his thinking may be presented as follows:

Premise One: Ancient biography [e.g. Plutarch] is a mixture of truth, fact but also legend, creative [made-up] embellishment, historical accuracy and inaccuracy, imprecision, confusion etc. etc.

Premise Two: The Gospels are ancient biography [on the level of Plutarch's *Lives*] Licona chose Plutarch's *Lives* because this work is assumed to be similar to the Gospels (especially the Synoptics Matthew, Mark and Luke) in that in its several biographies, they frequently cover the same ground, creating a number of parallels or "synoptic" accounts.

Conclusion: The canonical Gospels [e.g. like Plutarch] is a mixture of truth, legend, creative [made-up] embellishment, historical accuracy and inaccuracy, imprecision, and confusion, etc.

A couple of preliminary remarks here are important. Licona cannot claim inductive logic for his premise but he has *a priori* assumed that the Gospels are to be interpreted in the grid of Greco-Roman *bioi* and then the data derived in the Gospels comes from this already assumed premise. In other words, he sees with "Greco-Roman colored" glasses even prior to his study. While he presents his interpretation of the data in the Gospel, his a prior assumption drives him

²⁸ <http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/>

²⁹ Ibid., 6-8.

to see in the Gospels similarities to Greco-Roman *bioi*. He dismisses traditional harmonization of his selected passages in the Gospels as non-relevant.³⁰ Even more troubling in his comparison of the canonical Gospels is his admission that "liberties" were taken by ancient authors.

Second, the question of whether the Gospels are truly an instance of the genre of Greco-Roman biography is highly questionable. In spite of Licona's speculative approach, as will be seen, data can be demonstrated that would cast grave suspicion on this opening premise. His major support for this assumption is scholarly assumption. Willard Swartley, in his *Israel's Scripture Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels*, presents an excellent case for the Gospels as anchored to "common structures and themes rooted in the Israel's stories about itself. Common to the synoptic stories are traditions about Israel's past that defined it throughout the centuries: Exodus and Sinai, Way/Conquest, Temple, and Kingship."³¹ Strategically, Licona's fatal flaw is he has anchored his hermeneutical approach to the wrong pattern. Instead of Greco-Roman *bioi* the Gospels, as will be seen in this review, stem from the theme of promise (prophecy in the OT) and fulfillment in Jesus in the New Testament.

Licona's Consensus Thinking is Subjective and Fleeting

Another troubling aspect to Licona's thinking in both *The Resurrection* and *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* is his background philosophical approach for accepting the concept of Greco-Roman *bioi* in the Gospels. His acceptance of this thinking regarding the Gospels as *bioi* revolves around "consensus." "Today, a growing majority of scholars regard the Gospels as Greco-Roman biography."³² In his previous work, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (2010)

³⁰ For instance, many of these data points in Licona may be resolved without any assumption of Greco-Roman Bio

³¹ Willard M. Swartley, *Israel's Scripture Traditions and the Synoptic Gospels Story Shaping Story* (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 1994). Quote from back cover of the book.

³² Ibid.

he has a predominance of a similar thinking track that involves "The Role of a Consensus."³³

Although he appears aware of the danger of "consensus" noting that "a consensus can be reached due to shared biases, convictions, objectives and a lack of knowledge" and "while a scholarly consensus can have the positive impact of keeping creativity from going off the deep end, a fear of losing respect from a large segment of the academic community can be a hindrance to breakthroughs in knowledge,"³⁴ his own acceptance of Greco-Roman *bioi* appears largely driven by his own acceptance of the consensus of current scholarship rather than any objective evidence that the Gospels present the characteristics of *bioi*. He argues, "the consensus of scholarship has shifted significantly from the opinion held by the Jesus Seminar; This shift was initiated by Charles Talbert's work followed by the more comprehensive and influential work by Richard Burridge."³⁵

Consensus thinking is even in his mind about Jesus's miracle working:

If the nearly universal consensus of scholars is correct that Jesus's earliest followers remembered him as a miracle-worker and exorcist, he very likely performed acts that led to these memories. Of course, that is not to say we can know those acts were divine miracles and exorcisms. Nor is it to say the events occurred precisely as described in the Gospels. It is to say that there are probably historical events that lay behind many of the stories of miracles and exorcisms we read in the Gospels. Even many of those holding that some of the stories have been substantially revised and embellished maintain that historical kernels lay behind them."³⁶

Consensus is in his mind regarding his own synoptic hypothesis that undergirds many of his conclusions: "a majority of scholars hold the Two-Document Hypothesis" Most hold the *Two-Source Hypothesis*, or Two-Document Hypothesis, which states that Matthew and Luke used Mark as their primary source and supplemented Mark with at least one other source . . . I

³³ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 64.

³⁴ Licona, *The Resurrection*, 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

³⁶ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 118.

assume Markan priority in this study and that Matthew and Luke often use Mark as their source . . . I often use Two-Source terminology."³⁷

Why is "consensus" so disturbing? In the history of theological scholarship, the "consensus," especially among historical, critical scholarship has been vastly in error the vast majority of its rise to dominance. Often the majority "consensus" is overturned in succeeding generations. Many times the consensus is swept away by another theological "consensus" that usurps its place. What happens when this consensus is replaced by another, and another?

Frankly, the Two-Source Hypothesis is fraught with difficulties that Licona apparently ignores or is unaware of. No one in early church history ever stated that Mark occurred first; it was the most neglected Gospel among church fathers; its alleged "Q" document has never existed except in hypothetical postulation to save the hypothesis from rejection.³⁸ Strong evidence exists to show that modern synoptic theories arose from a low- or no-view of inspiration of the Gospels.³⁹ A significantly large portion of Licona's assertions regarding the comparisons of the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke rest precariously on a tenuous proposal. As will be seen, if that proposal has no substance, then neither does Licona's attempts at linking the Synoptic Gospels to Greco-Roman *bioi* have substance. If this majority rule in his mind is wrong, especially in terms of Greco-Roman *bioi* and the Two-Source hypothesis that stimulates his observations, then his entire work is cast into grave doubt. Moreover, one wonders if his conclusions are centered in his thinking habit of current "consensus" rather than in any objective analysis of data. A significance weakness that correlates with this is that he too readily

³⁷ Ibid., 113, 118.

³⁸ For further information, see F. David Farnell, "The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church: A Testimony to the Priority of Matthew's Gospel," MJS Spring 1999 10/1 (Spring 1999) 53-86.

³⁹ For further information, see F. David Farnell "How Views of Inspiration Have Impacted Synoptic Problem Discussions 13/1 (Spring 2002) 33-64.

dismisses other alternative theories as the motivation for Gospel composition, while marching on to see in the Gospels what he has already determined to be his pre-arranged conclusions.

According to Licona, the Gospels share the following characteristics with Greco-Roman *bioi*. He asserts that "The Gospels contain many of the characteristics of Greco-Roman biography."⁴⁰ He cites the following examples:

1. They are written in continuous prose narrative.
2. Stories, logia, anecdotes, and speeches are combined to form a narrative.
3. The life of the main character is not always covered in chronological sequence.
4. Attention is focused on a main character rather than on an era, event, or government as in a history.
5. Little to no attention is provided for psychological analyses of the main character.
6. We learn something of the main character's ancestry and then move rapidly along to the inauguration of his public life.
7. Ancient biographies were of the same general length, with shorter works being under 10,000 words, medium length between 10,000 and 25,000 words, and longer length over 25,000 words. Because a scroll would normally hold a maximum of 25,000 words, most biographies fell in the medium length category so they could be read in a single sitting.
8. 25 to 33 percent of the verbs are "dominated by the subject, while another 15 to 30 percent occur in sayings, speeches or quotations from the person."
9. Lives of philosophers and teachers are usually "arranged topically around collections of material to display their ideas and teachings."
10. The main subject's character is illuminated through his words and deeds as a model for readers either to emulate or to avoid.⁴¹

Several responses can be made to these assertions. First, these characteristics are so broad as to be meaningless or at least lacking in enough data to make any tight connection of the Gospels to Greco-Roman *bioi*. They are so general that a large variety of historiography from various periods of time could be used to make an alleged link to Greco-Roman historiography. Second, these characteristics describe cited, especially 1-6, 8-10 fully describe the pattern of the Old Testament writings. For example, Genesis-Deuteronomy, Judges, Joshua, Judges, Ruth 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, Daniel, Ruth, etc. all could be cited to contain "continuous prose narrative"

⁴⁰ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

(Genesis 1-11 as it covers the times from creation to Abraham; Exodus as it covers the time of Israel's foundation as a nation to its entrance into the Promised Land; Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy as they cover narrative of Israel's progression and failure), "stories, logia, anecdotes, speeches to form a narrative (Genesis 12-50 as it covers testimony to the Patriarchs stories, logia, anecdotes [Genesis 12, 15, 22; Joseph's descent and experience in Egypt and his conversations and adventures [Gen. 37-45]); Moses experience in Egypt [Ex. 1-2] at the burning Bush [Ex. 3], his conversation with God [Ex. 3-Deuteronomy]. Daniel would be a book whose life is "not always covered in chronological sequence [Daniel 1-6 vs. 7-12]; Ecclesiastes is focused on a main character, i.e. The Preacher, rather than on an era, event or government as in a history. Ezra and Malachi pays "little attention . . . "for psychological analysis of the main character" to name only a few in the OT. The life of Abraham, Moses, David, Samuel, Solomon, Sampson, Gideon etc. "all exhibit "something of the main character's ancestry and then move rapidly to the inauguration of his public life."

Furthermore, similar statistics could be generated in the characteristics of the Old Testament as to percentage of "verbs" "dominated by the subject, while another similar percentage occurring in "sayings, speeches or quotations from another person" (Genesis-Deuteronomy with main characters; Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, etc. all fit these characteristics. Lives of teachers or philosophers "arranged topically around collections of material to display their ideas and teachings" is readily seen in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Job, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Isaiah, Ezekiel.

Most of the books in the Old Testament "illuminate" the main subject's character, words, and deeds as a model for readers to emulate (Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Daniel) as well as to avoid, with the Old Testament providing ample examples in their history books of the

tragedy of main characters that failed to live a life of obedience and faith (1 Samuel has Saul; 1-2 Kings as well as 1-2 Chronicles with, for example, Manasseh and many other lives of failed Kings of both the Southern and Northern Kingdom. Furthermore, these characteristics are more on the nature of any historical or moral writing that draws lessons from the characters covered or the nature or purpose in the writing rather than being a unique characteristic especially of Greco-Roman biography.

As to the length limitations of Greco-Roman biography, the physical nature of the materials used to upon limited all forms of writing of that day rather than being special to Greco-Roman biography. Luke-Acts naturally would be divided because scrolls became unwieldy if too large simply because of the writing materials rather than uniqueness of the subject of the writing.

A second reason that Licona cites is that "no clear examples of biographies of Jewish sages" existed around the time of Jesus. He asserts that "there are no Rabbinic parallels to the Gospels."⁴² One may respond simply that the abundance of connection of the Gospels to the examples in the Old Testament materials cited render the necessity of rabbinic parallels mute. Furthermore, Second Temple Judaism in its characteristics with the oral law that violated the Old Testament teachings ("teachings of the elders"—see Matt. 15:9) render any rabbinical teaching hardly an example that the New Testament should emulate. In the thinking of the Gospels, clearly Jesus is viewed as the fulfillment of the Messianic promises of the Old Testament. Their model would have been the Old Testament, therefore, rather than the corrupt state of rabbinics in terms of promise (Old Testament) and fulfillment (Messiah Jesus in the Gospels).

This promise and fulfillment theme dominates the New Testament Gospels. Licona readily admits that (1) Plutarch was wealthy: "born into a wealthy family in Chaeronea" and (2)

⁴² Ibid., 4.

because of that wealth was provided with the opportunity to study rhetoric and then "became a philosopher of the Academy founded by Plato."⁴³ One would hardly be able to speak of the writers of the Gospels in such a manner, nor were such educational opportunities available to the Jewish writers of Matthew, Mark and John.

The pattern of the many Old Testament writings would have been readily familiar in Acts when Peter and John appeared on trial before the Sanhedrin to answer for the healing of the lame man. In Acts 4:13, "Now as they observed the *a*confidence of *b*Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and *began* to recognize them as having been with Jesus." Here the terms "uneducated" (ἀγράμματοί) and "untrained" (ιδιώται) would hardly raise any confidence in ideas that Galilean fishermen would have been skilled in the Greek art of literature or be able to compose the Gospels (i.e. John) in a similar form to Hellenistic works of the time period. The observation of "uneducated" would be suggestive of men who had little formal training in Jewish methods, let alone Greek literary style, for it strongly implies that the impression Peter and John on the judging body was that their speech as well as appearance lacked any formal education familiar to this elite group, i.e. Peter and John were rather from common Jewish class. Here is a rather insulting observation that the original Apostles (i.e., John) were hardly from the upper class of Jewish society who composed the Gospels! While hardly unintelligent as individuals, a strong implication exists that these Jewish followers of Jesus demonstrated marked dissimilarity with the culture of the upper crust, for they had been blue collar hard laborers most of their life (e.g. Matt 4:18-22; Luke 5:10) most likely with little time to enjoy Jewish, let alone, Greek literary culture. Jesus chose men to write the Gospels who were clearly were without wealth, standing or means to appreciate the wider

⁴³ Ibid., 15.

literary field or more refined literary nuances of Greco-Roman *bioi* (1 Cor. 1:18-31—"not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God." Moreover, even with the more literary accounts of Luke-Acts admittedly, the more educated Luke's writing were firmly anchored to the Old Testament prophetic revelation and eyewitness accounts of Jews whose culture had little standing with the Roman world as a whole.⁴⁴

Because "Greco-Roman was a broad and flexible genre" with its admitted "hybrid" form, makes any assertions of similarity or particular uniqueness quite precarious. In essence, the most natural motivation and pattern for the Gospels was not Greco-Roman *bioi* but the pattern found in the Old Testament writings. Licona's assertion that "[f]or our purposes, we only need to recognize that the New Testament Gospels bear a strong affinity to Greco-Roman biography" is at the very least a hasty generalization as well as fraught with difficulties. Similarity does not prove origin. This writer has placed a graph⁴⁵ representing the connection of the Gospels to the Old Testament at the end of this article.

Another Fatal Flaw of the Greco-Roman *Bioi* Comparison

Licona, in analyzing Plutarch, states that the following "compositional devices" are seen in his writings. The following quote is lengthy but necessary to cite to demonstrate the weakness of Licona's position:

⁴⁴ This thought will be developed further in a forthcoming book by this author titled, *Battle for the Gospels*.

⁴⁵ Once again, this graph will be further developed further in a forthcoming book by this author titled, *Battle for the Gospels*.

[C]lassical scholars have recognized a number of compositional devices that are “practically universal in ancient historiography.” Although not always identified by the same terms, the following are some of the compositional devices we will observe in Plutarch’s *Lives*, at least the nine *Lives* we will be considering.

1. *Transferral*: When an author knowingly attributes words or deeds to a person that actually belonged to another person, the author has transferred the words or deeds.
2. *Displacement*: When an author knowingly uproots an event from its original context and transplants it in another, the author has displaced the event. Displacement has some similarities with telescoping, which is the presentation of an event as having occurred either earlier or more recently than it actually occurred. Plutarch displaces events and even occasionally informs us he has done so. In *Cat. Min.* 25.5, having told the story of Hortensius’s request of Cato that he be allowed to marry Cato’s wife, Marcia, Plutarch adds, “All this happened later, but as I had mentioned the women of Cato’s family it seemed sensible to include it here.”
3. *Conflation*: When an author combines elements from two or more events or people and narrates them as one, the author has conflated them. Accordingly, some displacement and/or transferral will always occur in the conflation of stories.
4. *Compression*: When an author knowingly portrays events over a shorter period of time than the actual time it took for those events to occur, the author has compressed the story. *Spotlighting*: When an author focuses attention on a person so that the person’s involvement in a scene is clearly described, whereas mention of others who were likewise involved is neglected, the author has shined his literary spotlight on that person. Think of a theatrical performance. During an act in which several are simultaneously on the stage, the lights go out and a spotlight shines on a particular actor. Others are present but are unseen. In literary spotlighting, the author only mentions one of the people present but knows of the others.
5. *Simplification*: When an author adapts material by omitting or altering details that may complicate the overall narrative, the author has simplified the story.
6. *Expansion of Narrative Details*: A well-written biography would inform, teach, and be beautifully composed. If minor details were unknown, they could be invented to improve the narrative while maintaining historical verisimilitude. In many instances, the added details reflect plausible circumstances. This has been called “creative reconstruction” and “free composition.”
7. *Paraphrasing*: Plutarch often paraphrased using many of the techniques described in the compositional textbooks. I had initially considered creating a synopsis of Plutarch’s parallel pericopes that we will be examining in the next chapter, which would be arranged in a manner similar to Kurt Aland’s *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*. However, I decided against including a synopsis because Plutarch paraphrases so often; plus we do not observe in his *Lives* anything close to the near “copy and paste” method that is very often employed by Matthew and Luke.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 19-20.

Based on this comparison, Licona then proceeds to describe the following phenomena to the Gospel writers because they are found in Plutarch: "New Testament Gospels bear a strong affinity to Greco-Roman biography . . . we should not be surprised when the evangelist employ compositional devices similar to those used by ancient biographers"⁴⁷ However, as always the proverb of the DEVIL IN THE DETAILS of compositional devices, is very evident.

Because of this comparison to Plutarch and *Bioi* as a whole, Licona characterizes the Gospels as "true enough." In his debate with Ehrman online, he tweeted,

Tweet this!

[The Gospels paint literary portraits of Jesus that are "true enough."
@MichaelLicona](#)⁴⁸

One wonders how such statements square with John 14:26; 16:13 or 1 John 4:4-6 that the New Testament writers would be led to remember "all things" in Jesus's ministry, as well as the Holy Spirit teaching them "all things" as well as "reminding" them of "everything" Jesus taught. The promise of Spirit-energized minds does not match any description of the Gospels being on a level of "true enough." The same may be said when Licona characterizes Plutarch or Greco-Roman *bioi* as a whole in doing the following:

The historical accuracy of ancient literature may be viewed in a manner similar to what we observe in movie theaters today. Some movies claim at the beginning to be "based on true events" while others claim to be "inspired by true events." The latter will involve more dramatic license than the former. Even in the former, however, we expect reenacted conversations to be redacted to varying degrees for clarity, dramatic impact, and artistic improvement.⁴⁹

Licona, using Plutarch's *Lives* as the basis of his comparison of Gospel phenomena, asserts that "Plutarch willing to sacrifice precise historical truth in order to provide greater

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁸ <http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/michael-licona-interview/>

⁴⁹ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 6.

illumination of his main character's moral qualities."⁵⁰ At another place, Licona describes Plutarch as having "made factual errors on occasion" and "less than perfect understanding of the Roman political system and faulty memory. While we should not make light of the errors, the importance of their presence should not be exaggerated."⁵¹ Again, Plutarch "occasionally bends the facts to support the portrait he is painting—a portrait that is largely true though not always entirely so in the details. He does not bend to mislead his readers but rather to emphasize an important deeper truth about his main character that readers can now grasp more fully and emulate." Again, "he had no commitment to present the facts with photographic accuracy or legal precision; nor would his intended readers have expected that of him or of any biographer."⁵² Again, Plutarch's commitment to the truth in his *Lives* is genuine but qualified.⁵³ "Plutarch takes liberties with his sources that would make us uncomfortable in modern biography, adding details or scenes in order to construct what must have happened, or to emphasize a quality that may not have been as matured in the main character as he portrays, or to improve the story for the delight of his readers. This mixture of history and conjecture presents a challenge for historians who desire to get behind such 'improvements' to the *real* person or event."⁵⁴ He then concurs with other classicists on Plutarch when he notes,

There are limits to the extent Plutarch would go to accomplish his biographical objective. Conjecture is present, but it is "never very extensive." While Plutarch felt free to invent an occasional scene, he did not invent entire episodes. He does not engage in lying by attributing to the subject of his Life behavior that would have been foreign to that person. He does not engage in deliberate falsehood. When compared to other biographers of his day, Plutarch is less concerned than some to preserve precise historical truth and more concerned than others. Pelling observes, 'On the whole Plutarch seems to belong with the more scrupulous group; and we can certainly see him operating in a similar way to the great historians who survive.'

⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18.

In sum, ancient biographers, including Plutarch, did not always write as we would today because their objectives of writing biography differed somewhat from the objectives of modern biography. They would sacrifice a degree of precise historical truth in order to accomplish their objectives. Accordingly, modern readers must be prepared to recalibrate their expectations when reading ancient biography and history. There are similarities, but there are also important differences.⁵⁵

In reply to Licona's description of Plutarch's characteristics as a biographer, it is NON-SEQUENTUR to say if Plutarch did it, or Greco-Roman biographers as a whole, then evangelists would have employed such tactics. Plutarch could not claim inspiration. Of course this is putting a hedge around NT Gospels as many evangelical, critical scholars would reply. The patent truth is that such characteristics would relegate the Gospels to a very imperfect faulty record of Jesus's life and sayings, unless of course, Licona is implying this already to the Gospel record.

But Licona does not stop with these characteristics, for he clearly states regarding these alleged "compositional devices" that, "literary conventions in place for reporting speeches that were almost universally adopted by those writing history and biography. For the most part, the author did not provide a transcript of a speech but rather the gist of what was spoken on the occasion. If the content was unknown . . . license to creatively reconstruct what must have been said given the occasion and the person. Historians were expected to depict the spirit of the actual message or, at the very minimum, narrate a speech that was likely to have occurred on such an occasion with historical verisimilitude."⁵⁶ "Compositional devices that are practically universal in ancient historiography."

He relates the following regarding his purpose:

Various biographers of the era in which Plutarch and the evangelists wrote varied in their commitment to accuracy. 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

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 18.

the evangelists employed similar devices. Accordingly, I am making no suggestion that the evangelists were more or less accurate than Plutarch.⁵⁷

A Summary of Plutarch's Historiography Characteristics in *Lives*

A "grocery list" of Plutarch's characteristics as a writer also reveal Licona's low view of the canonical Gospels as he describes Plutarch's writings, especially as listed in the summary sections of the periscopes he analyzed in Plutarch. The following are merely a small part of Licona's perception of the historiography of Plutarch and/or Greco-Roman *bioi* (the numbering reflected is the reviewer's and not Licona's) if Plutarch, or any Greco-Roman biographer of choice, is indeed the "standard" for the Gospels:

1. "displaced events"; "faulty memory"; "the gist" "bends the facts to support the portrait he is painting—a portrait that is largely true though not always entirely so in the details."⁵⁸
2. "transfer action and/or counsel from one person to the other"⁵⁹
3. "narrative chronologies . . . that are in conflict"⁶⁰
4. "Plutarch has numerical errors on two occasions"⁶¹
5. "Plutarch has displaced events, conflated them, transferred what one person said to another, and shined his literary spotlight on occasion"⁶²
6. "redacted a statement in Caesar in a manner that is less favorable to its main character"⁶³
7. "Plutarch inverts the order of events, displaces them, and transplants them in Pompey"⁶⁴
8. "Plutarch transfers or inflects"⁶⁵
9. "Numerical differences are present"; "How many did Caesar conquer?"⁶⁶
10. "[E]rrs in the spelling of a name"⁶⁷
11. "[O]mitting details in order to cast a different and slightly distorted picture pertaining to why Caesar fought Ptolemy"⁶⁸
12. "[C]hanges a statement to a question (or vice versa)"⁶⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17, 20, 44, 67.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁶¹ Ibid., 57.

⁶² Ibid., 67.

⁶³ Ibid., 69.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 72-73.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 83.

13. "Plutarch portrays motivations differently and in a manner that favors the main character of a Life"⁷⁰
14. "[D]isplaces an element of one event from its original context, whether known or unknown, and transplants it in another context to which it is conflicted"⁷¹
15. "[A]ncient historians and biographers may craft peripheral details in a narrative and connect events synthetically in order for to produce a narrative that flows smoothly. This may especially be present when numerous details were unknown."⁷² [i.e., concocted events]
16. "Plutarch may have transferred the action of one character to another in order to avoid confusion in Caesar"⁷³
17. "[R]edacts elements of a story in order to support the portrait he is painting"⁷⁴
18. "[N]umerical differences exist in Cicero, Brutus, and Antony" [two hundred vs. three hundred, so would be error.]⁷⁵
19. "[P]rovides differing reports" [that conflict with other reporting he has done].⁷⁶
20. "transferal" one way reported in conflict with another way; "Brutus ordered Hortensius to execute Gaius, whereas in Ant. 22.4, Brutus does the deed"⁷⁷
21. "In light of instructions for good literature writing by Lucian and Quintilian, we determined that historians were permitted to craft peripheral details and connect events synthetically in order to produce a narrative that flows smoothly. We deduced that this might have been practiced especially when numerous details were unknown, and we suspect that this may be the reason behind many of the differences that appear when Plutarch reports the same pericope in multiple *Lives*."⁷⁸
22. "On occasion, Plutarch errs. Only rarely do his accounts disagree on so many details that we are left puzzled and entirely unaware of what he was doing (e.g., pericope #23)."⁷⁹
23. "The differences we observe almost always could have resulted from Plutarch's use of the compositional devices that have been noted by classical scholars for some time and who have contended that these were standard conventions for writing history and biography of that day and were practiced by virtually all. Moreover, these differences appear to occur only in the peripheral details. And we must consider the possibility that, in many instances, the differences result from Plutarch's recalling the story from memory rather than checking his source(s) and even what he had written earlier in another Life.

With these observations in mind, we will now turn our attention to the Gospels in the New Testament and assess a number of pericopes that appear in two or more of them."⁸⁰

⁷⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁷¹ Ibid., 91.

⁷² Ibid., 91.

⁷³ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 110-11.

24. We will look for differences in how they report the same story and assess whether it seems likely that the authors were using compositional devices similar to those employed by Plutarch."⁸¹

Application of "Compositional Devices" found in Plutarch *Lives* to the Data of the Gospels

After identifying the canonical Gospels as having a similar historiography to Plutarch's *Lives* and identifying these "compositional devices" that he has discovered in this work, Licona then imposes this framework upon "parallel periscopes in the Canonical Gospels."⁸² He analyzes what he alleges are "nineteen periscopes that appear on two or more occasions throughout the canonical Gospels" that, to his perspective, display "the same type of compositional devices described in the compositional textbooks and from the periscopes we [e.g., Licona] examined in Plutarch's *Lives*." Unsurprisingly, Licona marked bias for his endeavor "finds" the same type of compositional devices in the Gospels that he has presumed were there. His analysis offers little in any objective basis for his conclusions, for he assumes what he is so confident in finding, i.e., he begs the question and assumes that these compositional devices are really there without objective analysis as to whether the Gospel writers actually did use these assumed devices.

One of the primary bases for his discovery of these compositional devices is his operation from the perspective of the Two-Source hypothesis. If, however, as has been discussed, the Two-Source hypothesis is dubious, then much of the substance of Licona's alleged similarities becomes highly suspect. None of these nineteen examples that Licona cites require or need to be explained at all by any of these alleged compositional devices that he has discovered in Plutarch. The distinct impression given in his book is that Licona is so overzealous to prove his thesis of the similarities of the phenomena of the canonical Gospels to Greco-Roman *bioi* like that found in Plutarch's *Lives* that he frankly discounts any other possible explanation. All of them are well

⁸¹ Ibid., 111.

⁸² Ibid., 112-184.

capable of being explained by simple, as well as traditional views, of harmonization that Licona summarily dismisses.

Due to length limitation, only a few strategic examples need be cited that overturn Licona's case of "discovering" such Greco-Roman *bioi* devices. Regarding the Gospel of John, however, based in his Synoptic approach of the Two-Source hypothesis, Licona is dismissive of the historical substance of the Gospel of John as a whole. He asserts that "John often chose to sacrifice accuracy on the ground level of precise reporting, preferring to provide his readers with an accurate, higher-level view of the person and mission Jesus."⁸³ This is immediately in conflict with the orthodox position on John from the early nascent church that John as an eyewitness to Jesus gave accurate historical reportage of the events, nor would the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy statement endorse such a view when it asserted in Article XVIII, "We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teachings or rejecting its claims to authorship." Furthermore, history is wedded to theology (Rom. 5:12-14). If the history is suspect, then any theological conclusions, no matter how "higher level," the view is, such "theology" cannot be true in any acceptable biblical sense.

A natural question to Licona's reasoning must be that if his assertion is true, then how does sacrificing accuracy on precise reporting produce accurate higher level view of person? What is interesting is that Licona places a footnote reference for this last statement to Richard Burridge's discussion of the Gospel of John. Burridge characterized John's Gospel with the terms "The High-Flying Eagle" reflecting the idea of "divine symbol" whereby John gives deeper

⁸³ Ibid., 115.

spiritual "truth" or "John brings in the vertical—Jesus is above and beyond all that."⁸⁴ It was Burridge, the popularizer of this "Greco-Roman" imposition on the Gospels, as well a British classicist in his undergraduate at Oxford who treated the Gospels more like the substance of mythological stories than that of historical documents. He did so because he too read the Gospels through the eyes of a classical perspective from the influence of his undergraduate education. Burridge said this about John 18:38 as he labeled the substance John's "high-flying" material as "myth,"

Even today, with all our technology of cameras and recorders and verbatim transcripts, there is still debate among academics about the meaning of historical truth, and differences in media between docu-drama and documentary, fiction and faction. We must not transfer these modern concepts to the ancient texts without considering their understandings of truth and myth, lies and fiction. To modern minds, "myth" means something untrue, a "fairy-story"; in the ancient world, myth was the medium whereby profound truth, more true than mere facts could ever be, was communicated. Unfortunately, the debate between so-called "conservatives" and "liberals" about authenticity is often conducted in twentieth century terms. As one student asked me, "Why does John keep fabricating material about Jesus despite his expressed concern for the "truth?" However, the negative connotation of fabrication is modern."⁸⁵ Licona operates from this basis of Burridge, for he alleges that John may well have made up or "created" the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate in John,

The discussions between Jesus and Pilate are described in much greater detail in John (18:33–38; 19:8–11) than in the Synoptics. It could be suggested that much of the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus is a Johannine creation, since the Synoptic narratives do not suggest that anyone else was present to overhear the exchanges,

⁸⁴ Richard A. Burridge, "The High-Flying Eagle—John's Jesus," in *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 133-164.

⁸⁵ Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?*, 169.

much less any of Jesus's disciples. Of course, this suggestion can neither be confirmed nor disconfirmed.⁸⁶

One is left wondering whether the whole substance in John's record is imaginative creation since if one possibility is allowed, why not the whole?

This thinking then goes over into his discussion of Luke, when Licona comments,

[I]t is worth observing what Luke 23:3–4 says: “Pilate asked Jesus, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ And Jesus answered, ‘Yes.’ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, ‘I find no cause for guilt in this man.’” Luke’s report seems implausible if read independently of John. Would the Roman governor respond in such a manner after Jesus had just affirmed himself as a king? Yet Pilate’s response to Jesus’s claim to be a king is entirely plausible if a dialogue had occurred between the two that was at least somewhat similar to what we read in John. Since John was probably written after Luke and is largely independent of Luke, both evangelists must have known a tradition such as we read in John. Whether John received detailed information from someone who had been present at Jesus’s dialogue with Pilate or whether he knew a very basic gist of what was said and creatively reconstructed the dialogue with literary artistry is impossible to know.⁸⁷

Complicating this profess bias that lies latent in Licona and others who advocate Greco-Roman *bioi*, is his need to support his thesis by postulating hypothetical documents behind the Gospels,

"In many cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if an evangelist has altered his source or is using another. We must also be open to the possibility that there were multiple recensions of the Gospels and that Luke used an earlier or later recension of Mark than one possessed by Matthew"

He invents multiple recensions out of a hat to make his hypothesis work: subjectivity of sources!,

In many cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine if an evangelist has altered his source or is using another. We must also be open to the possibility that there were multiple recensions of the Gospels and that Luke used an earlier or later recension of Mark than the one possessed by Matthew. Different recensions may have existed for a variety of reasons, such as multiple drafts or authorial redaction to accommodate a different recipient.

⁸⁶ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 116.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Where is autograph? What happened to these drafts. No textual evidence whatsoever. When his textual theory cannot explain phenomena in Gospels, he resorts to allowing hypothesis of multiple editions or drafts of gospels or authorial redaction to "accommodate" a different recipient."

He allows for possibility that John may have used creative dialogue creation from basic "gist":

It is also possible, perhaps probable, that some differences may carry the appearance of being in greater tension with one another than is actually the case because the Gospel narratives are not exhaustive. The discussions between Jesus and Pilate are described in much greater detail in John (18:33–38; 19:8–11) than in the Synoptics. It could be suggested that much of the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus is a Johannine creation, since the Synoptic narratives do not suggest that anyone else was present to overhear the exchanges, much less any of Jesus's disciples. Of course, this suggestion can neither be confirmed nor disconfirmed. However, it is worth observing what Luke 23:3–4 says:

"Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' And Jesus answered, 'Yes.' Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, 'I find no cause for guilt in this man.' " Luke's report seems implausible if read independently of John. Would the Roman governor respond in such a manner after Jesus had just affirmed himself as a king? Yet Pilate's response to Jesus's claim to be a king is entirely plausible if a dialogue had occurred between the two that was at least somewhat similar to what we read in John. Since John was probably written after Luke and is largely independent of Luke,

both evangelists must have known a tradition such as we read in John. Whether John received detailed information from someone who had been present at Jesus's dialogue with Pilate or whether he knew a very basic gist of what was said and creatively reconstructed the dialogue with literary artistry is impossible to know."

Complicating this treatment of the Gospels historical material, Licona allows for "displacing of periscope from its original context, redacting it, transplanting it placed where thought fitting or what he terms "cross pollination"—taking elements from one area and adding to another part of the Gospel:

When a story with striking similarities appears in different contexts and contains differences, it is often difficult to discern whether (a) we are reading about two similar but different events and a few of the details from one have cross-pollinated to the other; (b) one of the evangelists displaced the periscope from its original

context, redacted it, and transplanted it in another; (c) the pericope was free-floating outside of any context and each evangelist planted it where he thought fitting; or (d) we are reading a "stump speech" that Jesus gave on many occasions.⁸⁸

He admits to conjecture, "much of what an ancient author did and why he did it will remain in the realm of informed guesswork for modern historians . . . I am only surmising some of their compositional techniques, given what we have learned from the compositional textbooks, a few other sources, and the rare opportunities where we can compare how an ancient author redacted the source we know he used."⁸⁹ Again, one is left in grave doubt as to the historical nature of the only four accounts of Jesus's life.

Licona also alleges that his approach maintains "largely neutral of partisan theological and philosophical commitments."⁹⁰ Yet, his entire approach is replete with philosophical elements that apparently Licona is ignorant of, especially since he approaches through historical-critical ideologies that stem from a hostile, philosophical takeover of the Gospel text or unwilling to admit.⁹¹ He goes on to argue that "I will rarely offer comments pertaining to the historicity of an event or logion and/or its possible theological implications."⁹² Yet, his whole proffering of "compositional devices" being used in the Gospels like Plutarch's *Lives* brings massive doubt as well as suspicion on the historical substance of the Gospel material. Licona admits he is in the camp that "tend to view miracle reports appearing in the Gospel narratives with more confidence in their historicity" and that "I have unashamedly chosen membership in the later account." His method and approach, however, again contradicts such an association.

His tepid affirmation of the possibility of miracles in the Gospels is reflected in the following statement, being based once again in "consensus" thinking,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 117.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁹¹ See F. David Farnell, "Philosophical and Theological Bent of Historical Criticism," *The Jesus Crisis*, 85-131; idem. "How Views of Inspiration Have Impacted Synoptic Problem Discussions."

⁹² Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 118.

If the nearly universal consensus of scholars is correct that Jesus's earliest followers remembered him as a miracle-worker and exorcist, he very likely performed acts that led to these memories. Of course, that is not to say we can know those acts were divine miracles and exorcisms. Nor is it to say the events occurred precisely as described in the Gospels. It is to say that there are probably historical events that lay behind many of the stories of miracles and exorcisms we read in the Gospels. Even many of those holding that some of the stories have been substantially revised and embellished maintain that historical kernels lay behind them.⁹³

He then hedges his proposal with the following caveat, "My proposed solutions are tentative."⁹⁴

However, even his "tentative" solutions to the Gospel phenomena have profoundly negative impact on the trustworthiness of the Gospels' records of Jesus lie.

Perhaps more strategically, every one of these nineteen pericopes cited by Licona that allegedly display "compositional devices" are well capable of being explained without presupposing any such creative devices. Simple harmonization explains every last one of them. The following examples are not exhaustive but merely representative of Licona's attempt at "compositional devices" as applied to the Gospels. One is encouraged to read Licona's work and determine whether any alleged "compositional devices" are need, or, for that matter, even valid.

Examples of Licona's Approach Solved Through Simple Harmonization

The first example, #1 (#13–16, 18), is John the Baptist and Jesus at Jesus's Baptism (Mark 1:2–11; Matt. 3:1–17; Luke 3:1–18, 21–22; John 1:19–34). Licona asserts that "[t]here are numerous differences within this pericope, and it will quickly become apparent that the evangelists employed many of the devices found in the compositional textbooks discussed in chapter 1."⁹⁵

Licona argues, "Whereas the Synoptic authors tell their readers that John the Baptist is the messenger of whom Isaiah spoke, John 1:23 narrates John the Baptist claiming he is the

⁹³ Ibid. (underlining added).

⁹⁴ Ibid., 119.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 120.

messenger of whom Isaiah spoke. All four Gospels give the same message while 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."⁹⁶ One is left wondering whether John actually said this or not as recorded in John, especially since John "answered them saying" in 1:25. The simple harmonization is that the Gospel writers and John both made this claim for John. No compositional device is needed.

Again, "Matthew 3:7 or Luke 3:7 changed the recipient being addressed." In Matthew 3:7 it is addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees, while in Luke 3:7 it is addressed to the multitudes. No change creatively in recipients is needed. The natural explanation is that Matthew focused attention particularly on John's condemnation of the Pharisees and Sadducees, while Luke was aware that John's condemnation was, at times, more broad.

In the third example, #3—Man with Withered Hand (Mark 3:1-6; Matt 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11), Licona alleges, "It is possible that Matthew locates this event on a different day than Luke."⁹⁷ While it is true that Luke uses "another [ἑτέρω σαββάτῳ] Sabbath" the other Gospels do not provide enough specificity to make any such conclusion that there is a conflict on which Sabbath this occurred. Both Matthew and Mark have no clear markers to supply such a dislocation or factual error. No such conclusion is necessary since the information supplied in Matthew or Mark. The context of Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-3:6 and Luke 6:1-11) gives primary focus on a series of Sabbath controversies (plucking grain and healing) rather than on identifying any specific Sabbath such conflicts occurred.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 121.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 129.

Licona alleges that "Matthew converts Jesus's one-sided address to the Jewish leaders into a dialogue." No such creative conversion is necessary at all. Matthew focuses his attention the style of rabbinic debate that actually took place between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees—question and counter-question, while Luke focuses more on Jesus interaction, rather than on the Pharisees. No such conversion need to be postulated as taking place. Gundry noted this when he commented, "Jesus following question becomes a counter question in the style of a rabbinic debate . . . Matthew . . . juxtaposes the counter question alongside the Pharisees question."⁹⁸

The dialogue can be simply harmonized as follows, reflecting this rabbinic style of questioning that actually, historically occurred—no creation needed of dialogue. Each gospel writer is giving a supplementary description from varying but not conflicting perspectives:

1. The Pharisees and their scribes institute a rabbinic questioning dialogue with Jesus, anticipating Jesus's action of about to heal the man with the withered hand: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath so that they might accuse him." (Matt. 12:9). Jesus has a habit of doing such things on the Sabbath and this irritates them (as seen in the previous periscope of Matt 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5 when he and his disciples violated the rabbinical rules of the Sabbath)
2. Jesus knows their thoughts against him that they were trying to seek an occasion to accuse him (Luke 6:7-8) and defiantly tells the man to come to him and stand in Mark 3:3 and Luke 6:8.
3. Jesus then uses the rabbinical style and directs their question directly back onto them, saying "What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:11-12) and gives back their question again and repeats also "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or do harm?" thus repeating their original question to him (Matt. 12:12b) as also reflected in Mark 3:4 and Luke 6:9).
4. The Pharisees and scribes will not answer Jesus's same question in rabbinical style of back and forth that they had posed to Jesus; they remain silent (Mark 3:4). They expect him to answer, but he wants them to answer their own question to highlight their inconsistency.
5. Jesus then tells the man to stretch out his hand and heals him (Matt 12:13; Mark 3:5; Luke 6:10).

⁹⁸ Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution*. 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 226.

No creative "compositional" dialogue like Plutarch need be proffered. The whole conversation took place, with no Gospel writer making up conversations necessary.

Another example is Licona's take on the Gadarene Demonaics (Mark 5:1; Matt :28-34; Luke 8:26-39). Licona notes, "Matthew may have used a different source or illustrated multiple demons through creating an additional person or conflated two stories."⁹⁹ Here Licona posits a compositional device where he believes that since Mark has one demon, while Matthew has two, that Matthew made up another demon creatively. The obvious replies to this are: (1) Licona is driven by his Two-Source theory. Since he believes Matthew used Mark and Mark has one demon, then Matthew has made up another for some purpose. However, if Markan priority is not true, and it is not, then Mark has merely left out one demon and focuses instead on the action of the leading character who was possessed living among the tombs, i.e. there were two demons. It is merely a matter of perspective of each writer, with one supplying additional supplementary information that two demons existed in this story. Nothing need be made up. Yet, Licona asserts that "Furthermore, for reasons unknown to us, Matthew doubles up elsewhere when the other Gospels present one figure. A blind beggar in Mark 10:46–52 and Luke 18:35–43 becomes two beggars in Matt. 20:29–34.³⁸ A donkey in Mark 11:1–11 // Luke 19:29–34 // John 12:12–15 becomes a donkey and her colt in Matt. 21:1–11.¹⁰⁰ The simple answer is that this is no mystery: there were two of each and Matthew includes that information. Since he assumes Markan priority one would guess that for some reason, Mark only mentions one as a habit!

Carson's comment here is relevant, "the best explanation is that Matthew had independent knowledge of the second man. Mention of only one by the other Gospel writers is not

⁹⁹ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 132.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.

problematic. Not only was one sufficient for the purposes at hand, but where one person is more remarkable or prominent, it is not uncommon for the Gospels to mention only that one."¹⁰¹

However, Licona does not stop there. He relates, "[t]here is another possible solution. Matthew is prone to abbreviate stories found in Mark Perhaps Matthew has doubled up the demoniac in order to compensate for not telling the story of Jesus healing another demoniac mentioned earlier in Mark 1:21-28."¹⁰² One is left wondering whether the Gospels are able to convey any real substance of what actually happened when Licona allows for the possibility of stories being combined. Why did not Matthew tell the story in Mark 1:21-28? While ultimate reasons are unknown, the most patent answer is that Matthew was NOT using Mark, nor is he required to include any such story. The reasons for inclusion or exclusion of stories are left to the unknown thinking and/or purposes of an author that is immaterial to this discussion nor can ultimately be determined. Another example of "compositional creativity" is Licona's take on Jairus's Daughter in Mark 5:21-43; Matt 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56). He asserts that

In Mark 5:30, Jesus asked, "Who touched my garments?" In Luke 8:45 he asked, "Who touched me?" In Mark 5:39, Jesus said to those mourning, "Why the commotion and weeping? The child did not die but is sleeping." In Luke 8:52, he said, "Do not weep. For she did not die but is sleeping." Luke changed Jesus's question in Mark to a statement. In Matt. 9:24, he said, "Leave. For the girl did not die but is sleeping." Matthew likewise changed Jesus's question in Mark to a command.¹⁰³

A simple harmonization may be offered as a reasonable explanation without any such creativity or change: both question and statement are natural. Jesus said both. In the situation of mourning, Jesus's interruption of the process and the crowd's focus on grief ("tumult"—Mark

¹⁰¹ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 217.

¹⁰² Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 132.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

5:38) may well have resulted in Jesus's catching their attention in this manner. The incredulity of the crowd in that they "laughed at him, knowing he was dead" (Luke 8:53) may well have required Jesus to both question them and make statements that are similar. They frankly didn't believe what he was saying. Furthermore, such speculation on Licona's part is being driven by his synoptic hypothesis of the priority of Mark and postulating that Mark is original so Matthew or Luke has changed it. If his synoptic hypothesis is wrong, so is his speculation ill-founded as to the others changing Mark's presentation into something else.

Licona also allows for the possibility of "doublets" that he defines as "[o]ne original tradition appears in two different settings within the same book as though occurring on separate occasions."¹⁰⁴ In the story of the two Blind Men—Mark 10:46-52—he proposes the possibility that this is a doublets,

The most striking difference, however, pertains to the number of blind men in this pericope. There is one in Mark and Luke, whereas there are two in Matthew. Thus, Mark and Luke have the beggar cry out, "Son of David, have mercy on me," and Matthew has, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" As we observed in the preceding pericope, Matthew, who was given to abbreviating Mark, may have doubled up on the number of blind men in order to include another story from Mark 8:22–26 of Jesus healing the blind that Matthew will not otherwise mention."

Licona believes in doublets as a possibility in another place,

But Matthew 20:29-34 may have a doublet in 9:27-31. In that context, Jesus healed a leper (8:1–4), healed a paralyzed man (8:5–13), healed others and cast out demons (8:14–17), healed two demoniacs (8:28–34), healed another paralytic (9:1–8), raised a dead girl (9:18–26), healed two blind men (9:27–31), and healed a demoniac who was mute (9:32–34). John the Baptist was imprisoned and appeared to be in doubt about Jesus. So he sent a few of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?" (11:3). Jesus told them, "Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame are walking, lepers are cleaned and the deaf hear, even the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (11:4–5). John the Baptist could thus be assured Jesus was the Messiah, since he was doing the very things expected of the Messiah (Isa. 61:1; 4Q521). Accordingly, Matthew may have included the doublet (although with variations) he would repeat later in 20:29–34 to provide an example of Jesus healing

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 267.

the blind as evidence for Jesus being the Messiah.⁴⁹ If the healing of two blind men in Matt. 9 is a doublet, it could weaken the proposal that Matthew added another blind man to Bartimaeus in order to account for another story of Jesus healing the blind man mentioned in Mark but not covered in Matthew. But there was no need to do so if Matthew twice narrated this story of Jesus healing two blind men.

Once again, such speculation depends on the validity of his speculative synoptic theory. Also, one wonders about his concept of the historical integrity of the Gospels in proposing that the writers would present an event as if it happened in this way and yet it did not by placing it in different contexts as if one event were two.

Licona also asserts an alleged chronological imprecision on Luke's part: "Luke shows a disinterest in chronological precision and inverts events as he does elsewhere (Matt. 4:5–11 // Luke 4:5–13; Matt. 12:41–42 // Luke 11:31–32; Matt. 27:50–51 // Luke 23:45–46).¹⁰⁵ He continues,

In Mark 10:46, Jesus had come to Jericho and was now leaving the city when the blind beggar cried out to him. In Matt. 20:29, he was also leaving Jericho. But in Luke 18:35, Jesus was approaching Jericho. Various solutions to this difference in Luke have been proposed. If Luke is using Mark as his primary source at this point, which he appears to be doing given the order of the preceding events, he may have preferred to narrate the event prior to Jesus entering Jericho and then include a story unique to Luke about a tax collector in that city named Zacchaeus. Of course, Luke could have narrated Jesus healing the blind beggar after the story of Zacchaeus in order to maintain chronological accuracy with Mark. However, as we have observed elsewhere, chronological precision does not appear to have been very important to ancient biographers, including Luke.¹⁰⁶

In reply, it should be noted that (1) this again is based on Licona's use of Mark as the other Synoptics' primary source; (2) Luke's prologue suggests an interest in chronology otherwise 1:2-4—"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; (3) while the Gospel writers did

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 134-35.

not have to write exacting chronology at times, depending on the purpose, it does not mean that they were careless either; (4) The differences in these accounts argue strongly for separate, eyewitness accounts and their differing perspectives that are most likely complementary rather than conflicting.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand and the events surrounding it also highlights Licona's thinking (Mark 6:31-56; Matt 14:13-36; Luke 9:10b-17; John 6:-1-25). In one video, Licona "probably Mark is confused" regarding the chronology of the events.¹⁰⁷ After this event, Licona back-tracked and related that "we sometimes make statements that do not necessarily reflect our thinking precisely and that, given more time to think about our wording carefully, we'd say things differently. That is what you heard in that McLatchie interview with my comments related to Mark being confused. So, please go with what I wrote in the article as a more precise articulation of my view."¹⁰⁸

Licona also faults the memory of the apostles regarding the events of the feeding. For him, in trying to reconcile the differences in the movements of Jesus and his disciples during the feeding of the multitudes, he argues "[either John slightly compresses or one or more of the evangelists artistically weave elements into their narrative that were not remembered in a precise manner."¹⁰⁹ He argues that in this account, "The largest difference concerns the location where Jesus fed the five thousand"¹¹⁰ He continues,

Harmonizing the accounts in order to reconcile the differing details pertaining to the location of the feeding is difficult. Luke places it at or very close to Bethsaida, whereas Mark places it anywhere but Bethsaida, since after the feeding Jesus tells his disciples to cross over to Bethsaida. Matthew, Mark, and John tell us they landed on the west side of the lake, and John tells us that is where they had intended to land. Accordingly, it will not work to harmonize the accounts by asserting the

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UPg-QpBxq8>.

¹⁰⁸ <http://freethinkingministries.com/inerrancy-debate/>

¹⁰⁹ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 139.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

disciples intended to go to Bethsaida but were blown off course and landed in Capernaum."¹¹¹

Yet, one wonders about Licona's view of inspiration when he can posit "confusion" on the part of the Gospel writers. Very reasonable harmonizations can solve any alleged confusion on the part of the four-fold account of the Gospels.¹¹²

Furthermore, even evangelical critical scholar Stanley Porter seems to have no trouble harmonizing this account when he notes, "In conclusion, I argue that the apparent contradiction of Luke 18:35 with Mark 10:46 and Matt 20:29 is caused by a failure to appreciate the semantic range of Luke's use of ἐγγίζειν. This may be a verb of motion for Luke, but it seems much more likely that it is primarily a verb of location. Thus Luke 18:35 should be rendered "when he was in the vicinity of Jericho."¹¹³

Evangelical critical scholar Gundry also supports standard harmonization when he observes,

Mark writes 'toward Bethsaida' after 'to the other side.' Bethsaida causes a difficulty in that the other side turns out to be Gennesaret, a plain south of Capernaum on the west side of the Sea of Galilee, rather than a Bethsaida, a town on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee (see Mark 6:53). Mark's text may imply that after the disciples set out from a deserted place on the western side and gone some distance toward Bethsaida, the storm blew them backward--"the wind was against them" (Mark 6:48)--so that after Jesus calmed the storm they finally landed at Gennesaret.¹¹⁴

One observation is necessary here: to posit the potentiality of "imprecise memory" or confusion on the part of the Gospel writers on Licona's part is highly dubious as to his assertions that he stands on the side of "confidence" in the Gospel accounts.

Another take on Licona's part for compositional device usage is that found in the periscope on the question of who is greatest among the disciples (Mark 9:33–37; 10:13–16, 35–

¹¹¹ Ibid., 138-39.

¹¹² See <http://defendinginerrancy.com/was-mark-confused/>

¹¹³ Stanley E. Porter, "In the Vicinity of Jericho": Luke 18:35 in the Light of its Synoptic Parallels," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 (1992) 91-104 (quote from p. 104).

¹¹⁴ Gundry, *Matthew*, 296.

45; Matt. 18:1–6; 19:13–15; 20:20–28; Luke 9:46–48; 18:15–17; 22:24–30). Here Licona imposes a compositional device that asserts Matthew transfers [dialogue] by having the disciples initiate the discussion rather than Jesus, "Matthew transfers by having the disciples initiate the discussion rather than Jesus." In Mark 9:33-34, Jesus initiates a discussion of what they were discussing along the journey about who is greatest, while Matthew 18:1-5 has Jesus ask about "who is the greatest." From Licona's perspective, the Gospel writers apparently felt free change the reportage of the dialogue from one person to another as a creative composition. Yet, Carson has an excellent harmonization of these two places without any need for a Greco-Roman compositional device,

Mark 9:33-38 says that the disciples were disputing along the way, and when challenged they fell silent. Luke (9:46-48) says Jesus discerned their thoughts. It is not difficult or unnatural to support that Jesus detected their rivalry (Luke), challenged them, and thereby silenced them (Mark), and that they then blurted out their question (Matthew) or "alternatively Matthew uses this brief question to summarize what was on their mind."¹¹⁵

Harmonizing this through simple logic, the following may have likely occurred,

1. Mark has disciples disputing along the way about greatness—Jesus asks them, "What were you discussing along the way?" But they were silent; for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest.
2. Jesus detects rivalry in Luke 9:46—Jesus perceived the thought of their hearts.
3. In Matthew 18:1—the disciples finally ask Jesus the question. The silence lasts only for a while reflected in Mark 9:34, then they blurt out "Who is greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?"

The conclusion that naturally can be reached through simple harmonization is that no transference occurred. No need exists to postulate any compositional device, unless, as is in Licona's case, he is reading back into the Gospels what he must see in order to support his thesis.

Licona also allows for such a discussion of humility among the disciples to have been placed in areas of the Gospels where it did not actually occur. On this humility and greatest

¹¹⁵ Carson, *Matthew*, 396.

discussion, Licona argues, "we should expect that Jesus would have said it on many occasions It is unnecessary to suggest each evangelist redacted the tradition and placed it where he thought fitting, although such a solution is plausible and equally possible."¹¹⁶ He allows for this possibility of displacement because of Mark 10:35-37, with the occurrences of this a week earlier than the dispute along the way over greatest with the dispute of James and John about greatness as well as in Luke 22:24-27 when Jesus countered the disciples' argument over greatness at the Last Supper. Licona argues that "[i]f Mark is Luke's source for this tradition, Luke's redaction of and displacement of the tradition to a different context gives us an idea of Luke's flexibility with the tradition."¹¹⁷ Again, simple harmonization and common sense must come into the discussion. Due to the denseness of the disciples, such a dispute was experienced several times not just one (e.g., Matt 16:7; Mark 8:17-20).

In Licona's take on the cleansing of Temple, he allows for a compositional "displacement" whereby one cleansing becomes two, "John may have displaced the temple cleansing to the beginning of Jesus's ministry."¹¹⁸ Yet, even Licona admits wording differences in the story of the cleansing: "Jesus's words to those he drove out differ slightly among the Synoptics and even more in John."¹¹⁹

Once again, Carson presents a very reasonable case for two temple cleansings. No need for "The great majority of contemporary scholars believe there was only one cleansing of the temple and debate about whether the Synoptists or John put it at the right time in Jesus ministry. Although some argue that the event occurred early in Jesus ministry (John), more side with the Synoptics in placing it late. Certainly, we have ample evidence that the evangelists arranged

¹¹⁶ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 141.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

some material topically; yet there are, in this instance, numerous reasons for the possibility, indeed the likelihood, of two separate cleansings—something most commentators never seriously consider."¹²⁰ He then goes on to list the following very reasonable evidence for two,

1. Leon Morris (John, pp. 288ff) has shown the striking differences between the details John provides and those the Synoptics provide. If there was but one cleansing, some of these differences became surprising, if two cleansings, they became quite reasonable.
2. Those who hold that John's placing of the cleansing is topical usually assume that he does so to lead up to the saying, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19), part of his "replacement theme"—viz., that Jesus himself replaces much of the Jewish cultic milieu. But this view fails to provide any reason for shifting the temple's cleansing so as to make it an *early* theme in Jesus' ministry. Moreover, in this particular case the temple-replacement theme is reflected in the trial of Jesus in two of the Synoptics (Matt 26:61; Mark 14:58).
3. If the Synoptics fail to mention the earlier cleansing, this may go back to their omission of Jesus' entire early Judean ministry.
4. Some hold that if Jesus had inaugurated his ministry by cleansing the temple, the authorities would not have let him do it a second time. But two or three years have elapsed. The money changers and merchants, protected by the temple police, doubtless returned the day after the first cleansing. But it is doubtful that tight security would have been kept up for months and years. This second cleansing took a few dramatic minutes and could not have been prevented, and its prophetic symbolism spread throughout Jerusalem.
5. It is difficult to tell from the Gospels how much the cleansings(s) of the temple contributed to official action against Jesus, and to overstate the evidence is easy But a second cleansing as Passover drew near was far more likely to have led to the authorities' violent reaction than the first one."¹²¹

Licona also asserts that the Gospels present differing days of when the cleansing occurred, that is they conflict on the day it occurs: "The chronology of the events differs. All four Gospels narrate Jesus's triumphal entry on Sunday. In Mark, Jesus's temple cleansing occurs on the following day, Monday, while in Matthew and Luke, it appears to have occurred on Sunday. If Matthew and Luke have Sunday in mind, they or their source have probably compressed the story. This apparent discrepancy may be solved in noting that two trips on Jesus's part occurred to the temple in this time period—Mark makes these two clear, while Matthew and Luke compress.

¹²⁰ Carson, *Matthew*, 441.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Even Licona must admit "It is grammatically possible to read Matthew (with Mark) as having Jesus cleanse the temple on Monday." A harmonization may be presented as follows,

Mark, however, used more detailed, chronological language. On the first day, Jesus went into Jerusalem and the temple (Mark 11:1-11), then later that day He and His apostles departed for Bethany. "Now the next day, when they had come out of Bethany" (11:12, emp. added), Jesus again went into Jerusalem and into the temple. Unlike His trip to the temple the previous day, this time Jesus entered the temple "to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple" (Mark 11:15-18). Thus, Jesus actually made two trips to the temple: once on the day of His triumphal entry (Mark 11:11), then again "the next day" to cleanse the temple (Mark 11:12,15-18). In this instance, Mark's account is more sequential, while Matthew's is more of a summary.¹²²

And again,

Keep in mind that neither Matthew nor Mark was mistaken in his account. We often report events with the same variety. Sometimes we speak more chronologically, while at other times more generally. Consider the family that returns home to tell friends about a trip to Disney World. One family member may summarize everything they did while at Epcot, while another family member may speak more specifically about how they actually went to Epcot parts of two different days and were able to see all sorts of things. No one would be justified in alleging that either family member was mistaken. Likewise, Matthew and Mark's accounts are complementary—not contradictory.¹²³

The end result of this sampling is that no example that Licona provides of these compositional devices alleging paralleling Plutarch's *Lives* and the canonical Gospels are necessary, or even likely, conclusions.

Licona's Conclusions

Licona's "Conclusion"¹²⁴ section in his book is especially a must read for every Bible-believing person who is evaluating Licona's comparison of the Gospels with Plutarch's *Lives* and Greco-Roman biography. For the sake of summary, here are some quotes that should be listed from this section, that identifies alleged parallels between the Gospels and Greco-Roman *bioi*

¹²² <http://apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=11&article=2813>

¹²³ <http://apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=11&article=2813>

¹²⁴ Licona, *Why are There Differences in the Gospels?*, 197-202.

that he believes that have been established by his work and others (the numbering is the reviewer's, not Licona),

(1) "BY THE BEGINNING of the twenty-first century, a paradigm shift had occurred. No longer viewing the Gospels as *sui generis* (i.e., of a unique genre), the majority of New Testament scholars had embraced the view of Richard Burridge and others before him that the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography, as noted in our introduction. This genre permitted a degree of elasticity in how stories were reported."¹²⁵

RESPONSE—The pattern of the Gospels is NOT Greco-Roman *bioi* but the Old Testament. The Old Testament pattern contained in its 36 books of promise and fulfillment fully explains the writings found in the Gospels.

(2) Very little to date has been written pertaining to how reading the Gospels in view of their biographical genre can shed light on the multitude of differences in their reports. We sought in chapters 1–2 to identify specific compositional devices employed in ancient biographical literature."¹²⁶

RESPONSE—The canonical Gospels' usage of such devices has not been demonstrated by Licona. These compositional devices are easily explained by simple harmonization without any need for postulating of any such Greco-Roman compositional devices.

(3) We then turned our attention in chapter 3 to nine of Plutarch's *Lives*, which provide modern historians with a rare opportunity to examine how one author narrates the same story differently in different contexts. Like the Gospels, these *Lives* belong to Greco-Roman biography, were written in the same language, Greek, and were written within only a few decades of the Gospels. We identified thirty-six pericopes Plutarch narrates in two or more of the nine *Lives* and then observed that Plutarch compresses stories, conflates them, transfers what one character said to the lips of a different person, inverts the order of events, rounds numbers, simplifies, and displaces a story or an element of a story from its original context and then transplants it in a different one, occasionally using a synthetic chronology. The most common device we observed Plutarch using was literary spotlighting. Plutarch often adapts his narrative in accordance with the law of biographical relevance. He paraphrases logia and larger blocks of content. On most occasions, his paraphrasing appears to have no objective behind it other than to follow the literary conventions of his day. He occasionally crafts peripheral details in a creative reconstruction when they were unknown in order to move the narrative along smoothly or perhaps to assist him in making a point that was generally accurate pertaining to the situation though not technically precise. Still, even the crafted details are usually not far from the truth. Although Plutarch errs on occasion, the differences we observe almost always seem to result from Plutarch's use of the compositional devices that have

¹²⁵ Ibid., 197.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

been posited by classical scholars as being standard conventions for writing ancient history and biography.¹²⁷

RESPONSE: Plutarch's *Lives* are the WRONG paradigm for the Gospels, as is the whole of Greco-Roman *bioi*. Merely because Plutarch did these things is *non-sequitur* in asserting that the canonical Gospels did the same or similar literary devices. While Plutarch erred, the Gospels do not (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:4-6).

(4) Despite the fact that the evangelists employ many of the same compositional devices that were taught in the compositional textbooks and others that were employed by Plutarch, the extent of editing by the evangelists is minimal by ancient standards

Our analysis of thirty-six pericopes that appear on two or more occasions in Plutarch's *Lives* supports the conclusions of classical scholars that the type of compositional devices we have identified were standard practice in writing biographical literature in that era. When this background knowledge is added to the fact that the Gospels share close affinity to Greco-Roman biography, the same genre in which Plutarch's *Lives* fit, and that a significant amount of the differences in the Gospels can be easily understood in light of this background knowledge, it becomes quite plausible that the evangelists were aware of and made use of many of the compositional devices we inferred from Plutarch's *Lives* as well as those prescribed in the compositional textbooks. Thus, the suspicions of many New Testament scholars that the evangelists used compositional devices similar to those we have identified in this book are correct. Accordingly, we now have some more clearly defined and assured ideas pertaining to how the flexibility of ancient biography impacts our understanding of the Gospels.¹²⁸

RESPONSE: Licona has NOT proven his case whatsoever. He imposes his ideas upon the Gospels by merely refusing to perform simple harmonization, which harmonization provides ample evidence to dismiss any of his hypothetical "compositional devices."

CONCLUSION TO LICONA'S CASE FOR PLUTARCH'S LIVES AND GRECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY

Bart Ehrman perhaps sums up best any replies to Licona. In his debate with Licona, he offered some strategic points that cannot be refuted by Licona,

[If an author's willing to change the details of one story—why not other stories?—@BartEhrman](#)

¹²⁷ Ibid., 197-198.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 199-200

Greco-Roman *bioi* is the "pandora's box" whereby evangelical critical scholars undermine the historical integrity of the Gospels.

Again, Ehrman recognized that Licona does not follow the orthodox understanding of the Gospels as has been maintained through simple harmonization,

I would like to point out an interesting phenomenon, which I think is probably an empirical fact, that the only people who think the Gospels are absolutely accurate in every detail are Christian fundamentalists who are committed for theological reasons to thinking that the Bible cannot have any mistakes of any kind whatsoever because the authors were inspired to write exactly what happened in every detail. Mike is clearly not in that fundamentalist camp.¹²⁹

I AGREE WITH BART EHRMAN'S EVALUATION OF LICONA! Ehrman was once part of the "fundamentalist" (term often used in a highly pejorative sense by evangelical critical scholars) camp and recognizes aberration from it when he sees it.

Investigating this new "fad" by evangelical, critical scholars of Greco-Roman *bioi* reminded this reviewer of Luke's statement in Acts 17:21, "Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new." Evangelical critical scholars have become the new "Athenians" and join their Society of Biblical Literature friends in assaulting the Gospels' historicity. Evangelical Theological Society should now join with the Society of Biblical Literature, for no real differences exist. While ETS claims they follow inerrancy, and even use ICBI as a guide, such facts are contradicted by practice. Furthermore, a basic seminary dissertation goal of "expressing something new or new discovery" in a dissertation seems to be at odds with the New Testament goal of holding fast to faithfulness to the Word as expressed in Titus 1:9, "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict as well as 2 Timothy 2:2—"The things which

¹²⁹ <http://www.thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/ehrman-detailed-response/> [highlighting added]

you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”

NOTE: GRAPH TO BE INCLUDED AT END OF ARTICLE

MAJOR ELEMENTS COMMON TO OT/NT WRITING PATTERN CORRESPONDENCE	OLD TESTAMENT PATTERN FROM HISTORY, PROPHECY, and TYPOLOGY	NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN OF FULFILLMENT FROM OT HISTORY, PROPHECY, AND TYPOLOGY
Recording of Deeds and Words of God—Pattern of Jewish Memorization	Deuteronomy 6:4-6--SHEMA “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. Great Discourses of Moses (Pentateuch, e.g. Exod 33:12-23; 35:1-20)	Luke 1:1-4-careful reporting of Jesus's Deeds and Words as the Son of God; Mark 1:1—"beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God" Matthew/Luke centers on Great Discourses of Jesus (e.g. 5-7 Sermon on the Mount) John centers on Great teachings of Jesus (e.g. John 17—Jesus High Priestly Prayer)
Emphasis on Eyewitness Testimony to confirm matters	Deuteronomy 17:6-7; 19:15-20	Prologue of John 1:1-18; 1 John 1:1-3; Luke 1:1-4—"many who were eyewitnesses and servants of Word"; Acts 1:3—"many infallible proofs" John 12:41 cf. Isa 6—Isaiah saw His Glory
Emphasis on Selective, not Exhaustive, History	Number 15-19—38 ½ years of history summarized (Num. 20:1- "Then" restarts historical details; Between Ezra 6:22 and Neh. 7:1 is the period of Esther (493-474 BC); 1-2 Samuel; 1-2 Kings; 1-2; Chronicles	John 21:25—"Many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written; Jesus infancy covered (Matt. 1-3; Luke 1-3); Mark starts out with Jesus's ministry as adult, John details start with John the Baptist Ministry
Emphasis on Great Men of Faith KEY PEOPLE IN SALVATION HISTORY	Abraham in Gen. 12-50 (and his family) progeny); Exodus-Moses; Ruth; Esther; 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah,	Jesus as Son of God—John 1:1-3 Jesus as Davidic King and Messiah (Luke 1:32; 18:38) who fulfills OT promise of a Davidic Heir (Acts

	Esther	2:29-36)
Emphasis on Predictive Prophecy	Multitude of Predictions of Future King of Israel and His Kingdom; Deut. 19: Isaiah 53	Jesus seen as Fulfilment of OT prophecies; Matthew—"In other that the words of Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled" Acts 6
Emphasis on Words of Old Testament Saints formed pattern for Words of Jesus in New Testament	Abraham, Moses Samuel, David, Solomon, Ezra, Nehemiah, Major and Minor Prophets	Teaching and Preaching of Jesus (Sermon on Mount, Sending out of the Twelve and 70
Covenants of Old and New Testament	Mosaic Covenant as Preparation for New (Jer. 31:31-33; Ezek. 36:25-27)	Fulfilment of New Covenant Predictions in Jesus (Luke 22:20)
Emphasis One and Importance of OT Genealogy	Old Testament Emphasis Genealogy from Adam (Gen. 11:27) through Abraham to David () and his scions (Ezra)	Emphasis on Jesus's Genealogy as Promised King of Israel (Matt. 1; Luke 3)