

Review of Michael Licona's *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*

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Abstract: Michael Licona's *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* purports to show that the Gospels have been influenced by literary devices allegedly used in Greco-Roman literature. The devices that Licona believes he has found in Greco-Roman biography involve altering chronology, fabricating details, and changing other facts. His attempts to apply these ideas to the Gospels do not succeed. Repeatedly, the claim that a biblical passage manifests a fact-altering "compositional device" fails to satisfy the significant burden of proof borne by such a complex claim. Licona often overlooks much simpler explanations or rejects them too hastily. Sometimes he (following other New Testament critics) conjectures factual change or invention by a Gospel author when there is not even any apparent discrepancy between accounts. Sometimes he conjectures the invention of entire scenes or incidents. These issues are important to Christians who are interested in whether or not we can know about Jesus in a reliable way from the Gospels. It is therefore necessary to look into Licona's claims in detail rather than accepting them lightly. Since they cannot stand up under investigation, the traditional view of the Gospels—that their authors intended them as factually truthful reports—has not been undermined by his work.

Review Essay: *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn From Ancient Biography*, Michael R. Licona (Oxford University Press, 2017).

1. Fictionalizing Literary Devices

The aim of *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, according to its author, is to "investigate compositional devices that are often inferred by classical 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."¹ Later in the introduction he refers to these devices and their role

¹ Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 2-3. Page numbers are taken from the Kindle edition and correspond closely to the paper edition. Subsequent page references to this work will be indicated by parenthetical page numbers in the text.

confidently as “literary devices that contribute to the presence of differences in the Gospels.” (p. 8)

What does Michael Licona mean by “compositional devices” and “literary devices”? Has he established their existence and acceptance in the cultural context in which the Gospels were written, and has he established their contribution to differences in the Gospels? I will argue that, when Licona’s claims refer to the alteration of literal fact on the part of the authors, the answer to both of these questions is “no.” Licona fails to establish the existence and acceptance, even in non-biblical literature, of the fictionalizing devices he defines, and he fails *a fortiori* to establish that the authors of the Gospels ever employed such devices.

The term “fictionalization” is my own, not Licona’s. But a number of quotations will serve to show that he is, indeed, arguing that most of the “compositional devices” he has in mind involved the deliberate alteration of fact in a way that would (in the document itself) have been indistinguishable from accurate reportage. For example, Licona gives the following definition:

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. (p. 20)

The word “knowingly” is especially notable. It is extremely important to realize that this type of “compression” does not merely mean telling an incident briefly, hastily, or while leaving out details. Rather, it involves *deliberately* writing *as if* the incident took place over a shorter period of time than was actually the case. For example, Licona attributes this type of fictionalization to Luke by saying that “Luke compresses all of the appearances and the ascension to have occurred on the same day as Jesus’s resurrection,” despite the fact that Luke knew that they really took place over a much longer period of forty days (p. 177, 180).

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. (p. 20)

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. (p. 20)

Note the word “knowingly” here again. Licona states (p. 192) that both Mark and Matthew use “explicit chronologies” that are in conflict and that one or the other of them must be “responsible for altering the chronology.” In other words, such an alteration of fact is deliberate, not a mere accidental impression given by an inexplicit manner of writing. He also defines “conflation” in a fictionalizing fashion.

It is important to bear in mind that in none of these cases is Licona alleging that the original audience would have recognized some “tag” in a passage that would distinguish factual alteration from the parts of the narrative that the author intended to be taken as literally true. While Licona asserts (without conspicuous argument) that readers would not have been disturbed if they had learned that an author deliberately bent the facts (p. 17), he makes it quite clear that

readers would not in general have been able to *tell* whether such a device was being used.² On the contrary, he repeatedly indicates that they would have been led to an *incorrect* literal belief by such a device in a given passage. For example, concerning Plutarch he expressly says that “Plutarch gives the reader the impression that...” events took place in one order in one of his *Lives* while giving readers a contradictory impression elsewhere (p. 50). When arguing that John changed the relationship between Jesus’ death and the beginning of Passover for theological reasons, he says, “John *appears deliberate in his attempts to lead his readers to think* the Last Supper was not a Passover meal” (p. 156, 163, emphasis added) even though, per the synoptics, it was in fact a Passover meal. The phrase “appears deliberate in his attempts to lead his readers to think” makes it unequivocally clear that this “device” was not meant to be recognized by some indication in the passage when audiences of the period read or heard it. In addition, phrases such as “narrated as though” or “describes as though” appear throughout the book (pp. 39, 46, 55, 157, 177).

Both Licona’s explicit definitions of his devices and his consistent language indicate that the use of these devices was (on his theory) both a deliberate change of facts and also normally invisible in the passage in question, often making it difficult both for the original audience and for us to know what happened.

Licona also includes in his list a broadly defined “compositional device” that involves simply making things up:

Expansion of Narrative Details:...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.” (p. 20)

In an illuminating footnote to this definition, Licona adds,

I have here conflated two compositional devices described by [classical scholar Christopher] Pelling...”the *expansion* of inadequate material, normally by the fabrication of circumstantial detail” and “the *fabrication of a context.*” (p. 228, n. 34, emphasis in original)

Licona does not balk at the term “fabrication” when used by classicist Pelling to describe one of the compositional devices.

These quotations indicate at the outset that the phrase “fictionalizing literary device,” which will feature prominently in this review, accurately represents what Licona believes he has found in the Gospels. The examples in what follows will amply illustrate that point as well.

² On this page Licona says, “[Plutarch] does not bend [facts] 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.” This is the sheerest obfuscation, since again and again he is quite clear that, if his theories are correct, Plutarch has indeed deliberately misled readers *about literal facts*. The phrase “does not bend to mislead” merely means that Licona is redefining “mislead” on this page in such a way that we are not supposed to *call it* “bending to mislead,” since Plutarch is doing so in order to “emphasize an important deeper truth.” That the author would be knowingly misleading at the *literal* level is unequivocal throughout Licona’s book, as my evidence throughout this review will amply demonstrate.

As I shall show in the examples below, despite Licona's reference to "minor details" when he speaks of "fabrication" and "expansion" of the narrative, at times he strongly suggests that the Gospel authors fabricated incidents or sayings that do not reasonably fall into the category of "minor details"; in other cases he treats fabrication of entire incidents as a highly credible option though he may have some preference for another conclusion. There are places in the book where none of the specific devices allegedly found in Plutarch are even clearly connected with the Gospel fictionalization in question; in those cases he falls back upon a broad category such as "redacting the tradition" or "literary artistry."

One other point is in order when considering the list of alleged literary devices. Licona gives names to some "devices" that are not fictionalizing and that, in fact, have been known and used by traditional harmonizers for a long time. They therefore do not need to come from a study of Greco-Roman literature nor, for that matter, from a particularly literary approach to the Gospels, nor do they constitute new insights. The most prominent of these in the book is what Licona calls "spotlighting."

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. (p. 20)

In other words, "spotlighting" is just talking about one person in a scene and not mentioning others, which in itself implies no intention to make readers think that others were not present. Such a so-called device occurs, for example, in the Gospels' accounts of the blind men healed near Jericho. Matthew 20:29ff mentions two blind men whereas Mark 10:46ff mentions only one, named Bartimaeus. Licona considers the possibility that Mark was "shining his literary spotlight" on one of these (p. 135), while both were present, but this is hardly a new idea for which the study of Plutarch is particularly helpful. The 19th-century preacher Alexander McLaren long ago noted in *Expositions of Holy Scripture (in loc.)* that "[t]he greater includes the less; silence is not contradiction" and also that Bartimaeus might have been known to Mark's readers. This has long been a widely accepted harmonization. Moreover, Licona treats several other complex ideas about this passage, including fictionalizing theories, as if they are equally probable.³ Licona's labeling a well-known type of harmonization as "spotlighting," a Greco-Roman "compositional device," does not add to our understanding of the Gospels, but it does serve to give the impression that there are far more, and more legitimate, unique compositional devices in the Gospels taken from Greco-Roman literature than there actually are. By the use of such concepts as "spotlighting" and "substitution of a synonym" Licona fills out the book with material that does nothing to support his more original, controversial thesis about the Gospels' use of fictionalizing literary devices.

When it comes to these, Licona considers the evidence so decisive that he insists that readers of Scripture must simply *accept* that they are present in the Gospels. He likens this new understanding to the acquisition of new glasses; it causes "initial discomfort," but one must adjust (pp. 200-201). This review will argue that this claim has not been established.

³ One of the theories suggested by Licona is that Matthew may have invented the second blind man at Jericho to compensate for not having told a completely different story, found in Mark, about Jesus' healing a different blind man. In the course of evaluating that theory Licona raises as apparently quite plausible the idea that Matthew may (instead) have entirely invented a different healing of two blind men in Matthew 9 in order to emphasize Jesus' Messiahship (pp. 134-135). In that case, he supposedly would have felt no need to compensate in chapter 20.

2. Greco-Roman Literature

There is a large literature on the genre of the Gospels, much of it in recent years claiming that the Gospels are “Greco-Roman biography.” Some who make this claim are under the impression that it strongly supports the literal historicity of the Gospels.⁴ But in the work of Licona, the claim has the effect of setting both a “floor” and a “ceiling” for the historicity of the Gospels. Licona repeatedly claims that, because the Gospels “are Greco-Roman *bioi*,” their individual authors *definitely* felt free to invent and alter facts, though he believes that this genre renders the documents at least somewhat historical as well (pp. 200-202).⁵

One of the most influential authors claiming that the Gospels are, specifically, Greco-Roman biography has been the classicist and moderately liberal New Testament scholar Richard Burridge. It is interesting to notice in Burridge’s seminal work *What Are the Gospels?* how little time he spends arguing that the Gospel authors were directly influenced by Greco-Roman literature and wrote in that genre consciously. He asserts that Luke and Matthew were doing so but theorizes that Mark may have fallen into the “genre” more or less by accident, which, even by Burridge’s own account, casts doubt on the usefulness of the designation for discussing Mark’s intentions.⁶ Burridge’s method involves noting broad “family resemblances” between and among works, such as length, concentration on a single individual and his character, the number of verbs with the main character as their subject, the mixture of stories, sayings, etc., used to illustrate this person’s character, and the like.⁷ Burridge repeatedly says that the genre was flexible and diverse, containing works having varied relationships to historical accuracy.⁸

Many if not all of these features would be well explained by the desire of an author to write an historical work of a medium length, focused on a particular person, in an age not deeply interested in psychoanalysis. In some cases, the fact that an author possessed the information in question would be sufficient to explain his including it, without any desire to follow the conventions of a specific Greco-Roman genre. This point would apply to information about the main character’s infancy and genealogy, though Burridge cites Matthew’s and Luke’s inclusion of this information as an argument for their consciously writing *bioi*.⁹ If Matthew and Luke

⁴ See, for example, the allusion to this theory by Douglas Moo (when the theory was less widely held) in his debate with Robert Gundry in the pages of *JETS*. Douglas J. Moo, “Once Again, ‘Matthew and Midrash’: A Rejoinder to Robert Gundry,” *JETS* 26 (1983), p. 68. Gundry claimed that Matthew was “midrash” and hence contained a great deal of fabrication. Moo suggested that Matthew might be Greco-Roman biography instead and hence literally historical.

⁵ As many of the examples below will show, it is increasingly difficult to tell just *how low* Licona’s “floor” is for the historicity of the Gospels. How much ahistorical material do they contain, even (or especially) given their alleged *bios* genre? Licona apparently considers that quite a lot of what they appear to assert might be ahistorical. As of now it seems that he will maintain the historical intention of assertions that *overlap* in multiple Gospels, at least when described at a high level of generality and when there is no alleged contradiction among the Gospels on the extremely broad point at issue.

⁶ Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison With Greco-Roman Biography* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 240-246. “Mark’s biographical genre may be a natural, if unconscious, consequence of his decision to present his Christian message with such a concentration on the life, deeds and words of Jesus of Nazareth” (p. 246).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 40, 42.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 105, 184.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 246. Nor does the alleged fact that Matthew “corrects” Mark’s Greek writing style, also cited here by Burridge, tell us much about whether or not Matthew was influenced by writers such as Plutarch. For Luke, Burridge leans heavily on the presence of the preface to Theophilus, but see the quotation by Hemer below. In the case of John, Burridge (who does not seem to acknowledge Johannine authorship) simply alludes to the alleged

believed that they had true information, not otherwise published, about the miraculous conception and genealogy of the Savior of the world who was also the Jewish Messiah, they would have been very likely to include it in their Gospels.

The inference from broad family resemblances to literary influence and/or membership in a relatively narrow literary class is far weaker than is usually recognized in discussing this topic; the argument for an objective, informative sense in which the Gospels *are* Greco-Roman *bioi* has been oversold.

Moreover, one simply cannot move from a loose family resemblance based upon such features, grouping works into a “flexible” genre, to a rigid conclusion that the individual Gospel authors considered themselves licensed to fictionalize. Yet that is what Licona does repeatedly. In the context of discussing the Gospels, he says,

Authorial intent often eludes us, and the motives behind the reports are often difficult to determine. This is a challenge when we consider the four earliest extant biographies of Jesus, known as the canonical Gospels. There is somewhat of a consensus...that the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bios*)....Because *bios* was a flexible genre, it is often difficult to determine where history ends and legend begins.¹⁰

In other words, if the Gospels are Greco-Roman biography, that in and of itself means that we will find it difficult to determine whether their reports have an historical intention and where history ends and legend begins.

He concludes directly from the genre that the individual authors would have considered themselves at liberty to invent speeches and change other material, and he tries to use this concession to answer objections based upon alleged Gospel contradictions.

This objection is not nearly as strong as Ehrman supposes. Responsible method requires that historians take genre into consideration. I have noted above that that there is now somewhat of a consensus...that the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography (*bioi*) and that this genre offered biographers a great deal of flexibility to rearrange material [and] invent speeches to communicate the teachings...of the subject.¹¹

This is what is known in philosophical circles as a scope error. From “The members of this church constitute a diverse group” it is a fallacy to conclude that a certain member of the church is a diverse *individual*. Similarly, from “Greco-Roman *bios* was a flexible genre” it is a fallacy to conclude that the author of any individual work considered himself, in virtue of this broad genre membership alone, to have a “flexible” relationship to historical truth.¹²

connections in the fourth Gospel to Greek philosophical ideas and argues weakly from there that the possibly plural authors or editors would have realized the parallels with *bioi* in the Gospel they were creating.

¹⁰ Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 593.

¹² Burridge himself makes a similar scope error on pp. 259-260 of *What Are the Gospels?*, though he at least qualifies it, saying that the “discovery that the Gospels are *bioi* may give an indication of the freedom each of the evangelists has in constructing a portrait of Jesus.” Elsewhere Burridge is prone to sweeping statements to the effect that ancient people *generally* considered fabrication to be entirely legitimate within putatively historical works. He applies these generalizations to the Gospels, particularly to John. See Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus: A Symbolic Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 169-170. But these dubious overgeneralizations about all

In neither of these places, nor anywhere else, does Licona consider the possibility that the Gospels could have these broad genre characteristics while *never* considering themselves licensed to fictionalize. As the examples in this review will show, he sometimes suggests on the flimsiest of pretexts that they did so. He goes so far as to imply that we should expect, based on this genre identification alone, that the Gospels *do* contain the (fictionalizing) devices he has listed.

The majority of New Testament scholars agree that, at minimum, the Gospels share much in common with the genre of Greco-Roman biography. Therefore, it should be of no surprise to observe the Gospel authors using the compositional devices that were part-and-parcel of that genre. In fact, we should be surprised if we did *not* observe it. (emphasis in original)¹³

But this rigid conclusion that all such documents should be expected to contain fictionalization simply does not follow. It is certainly open to question, especially given independent evidence for the traditional authorship of the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, whether three out of four of these authors (at least) would have had opportunity to be influenced by such works as Plutarch's *Lives*. Beyond that, there is simply no reason to think that a Gospel author, even if he consciously wrote in such a general form, held himself to a relatively *low* standard of literal historical accuracy. Nothing that Burridge or anyone else has argued has shown that each and every author writing "in" the genre of "Greco-Roman *bios*" considered himself thereby licensed to invent and change facts. It is fully possible that an author such as Luke, who may have been exposed to Greco-Roman literature, would have used a form that manifested such family resemblances as a vehicle for conveying information that he intended to be *entirely* literally true.

The late Colin Hemer, who was already aware of the *bios* thesis, makes the point well.

The Gospel at least is, on the face of it, a [*bios*]. But from the perspective of our theme we need to measure Luke-Acts by a more exacting historical standard than that of Plutarch. The relevance of biography to this question is largely negative. It is another kindred strand in the ancient cultural complex. It testifies to the existence of an anecdotal or encomiastic tradition of the interest in personality....There are certainly parallels between Luke-Acts and features of history, biography and technical literature. But those parallels are neither exclusive nor subject to control. They are fluid, relevant to the

ancient people (which can be refuted from both inside and outside the Gospels) should not be confused with an argument that Burridge has provided concerning specific conventions of Greco-Roman *bioi*. See Lydia McGrew, "Let Ancient People Speak For Themselves," January 15, 2018, <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/01/let_ancient_people_speak_for_t.html> and "Hoaxer or Historical Witness: The Johannine Dilemma," September 11, 2017, <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/09/hoaxer_or_historical_witness_t.html>

¹³ Jonathan Peterson, "Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? An Interview With Michael R. Licona," *Bible Gateway Blog*, June 27, 2017. <<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/06/why-are-there-differences-in-the-gospels-an-interview-with-michael-r-licona/>> In his earlier book, Licona had said rightly that "Each Evangelist will need to be judged by his performance" (*The Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 204) and even placed a footnote reference to the page of Colin Hemer quoted here, but both in practice and in other theoretical statements that is not at all how he proceeds. In the Bible Gateway interview he even goes so far as to say (as I will quote below) that the genre assumption should be prioritized over harmonization, so that we should look for literary devices before attempting to harmonize.

general milieu, if perhaps partly in reaction against it and hard to place accurately within it. Most of the New Testament is perhaps best seen as a popular literature, imperfectly representative of any defined literary type, and motivated by a dominant theological purpose scarcely paralleled in pagan writing. If Luke is a partial exception, aspiring to a more formal style in addressing a man presumably of some literary education, his type is still somewhat free and mixed, a concisely effective vehicle for what he had to say, drawing on a flexible use of the style most natural to him. The uninitiated reader might have taken the Gospel at first sight for a biography, but soon have found it an unusual one, and then have been moved by the impact of the double work in directions other than the normal reactions to biography or history. It is my contention that one of the inevitable questions posed as a result of the document was whether it really happened. Ancient biography, no less than ancient historiography, may need to serve as a historical source. The question here is whether the work is a good source. And it needs to be measured by the stricter rather than the laxer measure. Rigorous concepts of history existed in Luke's world: Luke must be judged by his performance rather than on the slippery ground of parallels.¹⁴

The identification of the Gospels with Greco-Roman *bioi*, even if it were not an overly strong and undersupported thesis (as it is), would not limit the evangelists' standards of literal truthfulness; therefore, the historian has to check the accuracy of the documents by more direct investigation.

The same is true, interestingly enough, even of the paradigmatic Greco-Roman *bioi*, Plutarch's *Lives*. A great deal of Licona's case for the objective existence of accepted fictionalizing compositional devices in the first century is inductive, resting on his claim to have found such devices within Plutarch. If he cannot even get over that hurdle, his thesis that the Gospels contain such devices is severely undermined. Plutarch is supposed to provide a kind of independent baseline for the existence and frequency of fictionalizing devices. But does Licona provide good evidence that Plutarch deliberately fictionalized in these ways?

As a matter of fact, he does not. Again and again it becomes evident that Licona, following the same tendency he exhibits to avoid natural harmonization in the Gospels (see later sections), has attributed contradiction and fictionalization to Plutarch on the basis of rigid reading and a lack of real-world imagination. Here I will give only two examples from Plutarch and only briefly. I have discussed these examples at more length elsewhere, along with others from Plutarch and one alleged example of a literary device in Tacitus.¹⁵

One historical incident in which Licona claims to have found a literary device in Plutarch concerns a time period when the great orator Cicero had been exiled from Rome and the politician Pompey was deciding that he needed to change his political focus and support having Cicero's banishment reversed. (When one puts a name or abbreviation of a name in italics, that usage refers to the title of one of Plutarch's *Lives*. The un-italicized name refers to the person.) Licona says that Plutarch, in *Pompey*, compresses and conflates the account of the series of events leading up to the vote to have Cicero returned.

¹⁴ Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad H. Gempf (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989), pp. 93-94.

¹⁵ Lydia McGrew, "On Some Examples in Plutarch," October 6, 2017, <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/10/on_some_examples_in_plutarch.html>

In *Cic.* 33.1-5, Pompey's actions to recall Cicero from banishment occurred in three stages: (1) Pompey and Cicero's friends attempted to have Cicero returned, but Clodius opposed them. (2) After Clodius's time in office expired, violence occurred in the Forum on 23 January 57 where Cicero's brother (among others) was injured and believed to have been killed. (3) In response, one of the tribunes prosecuted Clodius for violence, and many people began changing their minds and came from the cities surrounding Rome to join Pompey. With these, Pompey drove Clodius from the Forum and summoned the people for a vote, which occurred on 4 August 57. However, when Plutarch tells the same story in *Pomp.* 49.1-4, he compresses and conflates the action into one stage: Pompey escorted Cicero's brother with the people into the Forum, where some were wounded, others killed, and Clodius was defeated. (pp. 51-52)

(The dates given here by Licona do not occur in the cited portions of Plutarch.) The idea of this "compression and conflation into one stage" is this: Supposedly in *Pompey* Plutarch deliberately gives the impression that several "stages" of Pompey's actions all took place very close together in time, even on the same day, when in fact, as recounted in *Cicero*, they took place over a much longer period of time. But nothing of the kind is the case.

I will not quote Plutarch's *Pompey* at length here. The entire translated texts of the relevant *Lives* are available in full for English-language readers.¹⁶ It is, in fact, quite difficult to see where Licona gets the idea of any tension between the two accounts; they dovetail quite well. Plutarch's account of Pompey's actions to recall Cicero in *Pompey* is merely less detailed. Here is a relevant section:

To Culleo, however, who urged him to divorce Julia and exchange the friendship of Caesar for that of the senate, he would not listen, but he yielded to the arguments of those who thought he ought to bring Cicero back, who was the greatest enemy of Clodius and most beloved in the senate, and he escorted Cicero's brother, who was a petitioner for his return, with a large force into the forum...*Pompey* 49.3

The time indicators here are simply indefinite. It does not say precisely *when* Pompey yielded to the arguments of those who wanted to bring Cicero back or how that decision related temporally to his marching into the forum with a large force, accompanied by Cicero's brother. Plutarch mentions Pompey's decision to try to have Cicero recalled just before the description of his violent and successful confrontation with Clodius (Cicero's enemy) in the forum. But this proximity of narrative need not at all imply that Pompey's decision to support Cicero was made *immediately* before he marched out with a crowd and drove Clodius out of the forum. Indeed, any such impulsiveness would be contrary to the rather indecisive character of Pompey as Plutarch portrays it in this section of his *Life*. As for Cicero's brother, his triumphant presence (recounted in *Pompey*) in the final confrontation with Clodius in the forum is not only compatible with but mutually confirmatory with his having been injured in mob violence earlier, as described in *Cicero* 33.4. It would have been good political theater to bring him along for the dramatic confrontation if the people knew that he had been injured earlier and if the earlier violence were attributed to the absence of Cicero's influence in Rome. And he would doubtless have wanted to be in on this triumph over Clodius. The two accounts in Plutarch are not only

¹⁶See <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/plutarch/lives/pompey*.html> and <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/plutarch/lives/cicero*.html>

harmonizable but easily so. They do not present any argument for the existence of fictionalizing literary devices, accepted in Plutarch's time.

A second example concerns some insults leveled at Julius Caesar during a time when he was at odds with the Roman Senate.

In *Caes.* 30.2, Scipio introduced a motion that Caesar be declared a public enemy if he did not disarm by a certain date....In *Caes.* 30. 3, Lentulus the consul said there was a need for arms against a bandit....In *Pomp.* 58.4, Marcellus called Caesar a bandit and urged that he be declared a public enemy if he refused to lay down his arms....Plutarch appears to conflate the *logia* uttered against Caesar by Scipio and Lentulus and transfer them to Marcellus. (p. 64)

The pseudo-technical term *logia* here merely confuses matters. Licona is alleging that Plutarch either knew that Marcellus *did not* utter the words he attributes to him in *Pompey* or at least that he had not the slightest reason to believe that he did, but that for some unknown reason Plutarch combined words uttered by other people and put them into Marcellus's mouth. This is meant to be a clear example of the fictionalizing device of "transferral" and hence evidence that such a formal device was known and accepted in Plutarch's time. But this is an extremely weak argument for a quite unnecessarily complex conclusion. Anyone familiar with political discourse knows that political allies often say the same things! This is where a phrase such as "talking points" comes from. It is by no means a strained harmonization to think that Lentulus, Scipio, and Marcellus all said at least approximately what Plutarch attributes to them. They may even have been consciously copying one another or the "party line" among Caesar's opponents. Again, this is not a difficult harmonization but a rather obvious one. Licona's jumping to so complex a conclusion as a "literary device" of transferral in these passages is both epistemologically unwarranted and, unfortunately, typical of his method.

I have read Licona's Plutarch sections carefully and looked up example after example of alleged fictionalizing devices in Plutarch; time and again, one finds that Licona overlooks perfectly plausible interpretations of the passages and favors instead those that create an unnecessary tension or contradiction. Sometimes he attributes a specific chronological ordering to Plutarch when Plutarch is being non-specific or (similarly) alleges that Plutarch places an event *on* a specific day when Plutarch says nothing of the sort.

Ironically, Licona's rigid chronological assumptions are themselves anachronistic, despite his implication (p. 201) that it is traditional harmonizers who often impose anachronistic notions of truth on ancient authors. Though Licona is well aware of the fact (p. 190), he does not always remember that ancient authors were somewhat more inclined than we are to narrate without indicating a specific chronology for events happening around the same time.¹⁷ He will also often underestimate the probability that something generally similar (such as the words against Caesar) may well have happened more than once, though such repeated event-types are by no means uncommon in the real world and are not implausible in these cases.

It cannot be emphasized too often that harmonization is not a *religious* enterprise but rather a feature of good historical practice. Mainstream New Testament critics consider most harmonizations implausible or strained, including many that reflect ordinary human patterns of

¹⁷ See Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), pp. 62-63 and John Wenham, *Easter Enigma: Are the Resurrection Accounts in Conflict?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), pp. 77-78.

behavior. Licona exemplifies such a bias in his reading of Plutarch; his default method in practice is anti-harmonistic, which is a poor way of doing history.

There are a few cases listed by Licona where there is an apparent discrepancy between two of Plutarch's accounts, or between Plutarch and some other historian, that cannot be resolved by such simple means. But here it must be remembered that (a) no one is (or should be) alleging that Plutarch never committed errors and (b) Licona's discussion of Plutarch is meant to provide solid, *independent* evidence from secular literature of the existence of accepted literary devices at the time involving deliberate fictionalization. Licona should therefore consider far more often than he does a possibility that he only occasionally brings up—namely, that Plutarch made an error. Plutarch may have forgotten his notes or what he wrote in an earlier account or may have received different information between writing different versions of the story.¹⁸

Finally, even if there were occasions (which would be extremely difficult to show in any event) in which Plutarch deliberately altered the facts, propaganda and carelessness about the truth are not literary devices. We have deceptive, careless, and propagandistic authors in our own day, including writers of news and history, but their existence does not create accepted literary devices of “conflation,” “transferral,” “displacement,” and the like. Even if one were to conclude that some ancient author was a deliberate truth-bender (as no doubt some were, just as some modern authors are), one could not justifiably infer that we should expect to find similar behavior in writers who are, both by their religious priorities and by their explicit statements, deeply committed to the truth.

The old saying goes, “When you see hoofprints, think horses, not zebras.” Licona consistently forgets this principle of simplicity and jumps from his own conclusion that two or more of Plutarch's accounts cannot be easily harmonized to the conclusion that objective literary devices *existed* in that day, widely accepted, involving the deliberate, invisible alteration of fact. He then makes the further unjustified jump to the assumption that the Gospel authors would have considered themselves licensed to make such factual changes. These inferential leaps are far too strong for the evidence on which they rest.

If harmonizable variations or even appearances of minor discrepancy in Plutarch, or between Plutarch and some other historical document, constitute evidence of such literary devices, then *any* appearance of a minor discrepancy throughout history is evidence of a widely accepted fictionalizing literary device. But that would be an absurd conclusion. Human recorded history is full of harmonizable variations and apparent discrepancies as a result of far more common causes. There is nothing unusual about the passages Licona cites in this regard.

In sum, Licona approaches his interpretation of Greco-Roman history with a bias against normal historical harmonization; removing it would take care of many or most of his examples. In the remaining cases, he fails to consider simple hypotheses that reflect our knowledge of human nature and sources of possible error, preferring the unnecessarily complex theory that Plutarch is engaging in a widely accepted literary exercise.

¹⁸ Licona makes an attempt (p. 19) to anticipate this objection by leaning most upon several *Lives* that modern historians believe were all composed *around* the same time, circa AD 110 and a bit later. But this is a poor argument. New evidence can be obtained in a day, and forgetfulness, especially on minor points, can easily occur very quickly. Nor should we assume that Plutarch had literally open before him various parallel passages of his *Lives* so that he could either retain consistency between them or deliberately change things. That Plutarch did not arduously check all parallel passages is probable in and of itself and especially likely given the absence of large tables for the use of scribes in this time period. See Lydia McGrew, “What Was Writing Like in the 1st Century?” <<http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2015/04/what-was-writing-like-in-1st-century.html>>

Greco-Roman parallels, then, cannot establish the literary devices Licona alleges. Let us look at his interpretations of the Gospels themselves to see if he succeeds in finding fictionalizing devices there.

3. Utterly Unforced Errors

In this section I will give several examples of cases where Licona hypothesizes fictionalization on the part of the Gospel authors for virtually no reason whatsoever. I must emphasize that these are not instances where there is even any appearance of discrepancy between the accounts. There may be a difference in the extremely weak sense that one Gospel mentions something that another does not, but one scarcely even needs to use the term “harmonization” to describe what it would mean to take the accounts to be literally true.

Concerning John the Baptist, Licona raises, entirely gratuitously, the possibility that John the evangelist fictionally attributed to John the statement that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

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 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. (p. 121)

The problem that I am raising here is not that this hypothesis is impious but that it is historically pointless and should not (from an epistemic point of view) be raised at all. If John is given *any credibility at all* in his own right as an historical reporter, why would the mere fact that he alone records John the Baptist’s quotation of Isaiah 40:3 call into question the historicity of that incident? Does everything in history need to be recounted two or more times in order to be accepted? On the contrary, the variations among the Gospels are part of what marks them as authentic and accurate. One would more reasonably hypothesize that the synoptic authors quote Isaiah’s words concerning John the Baptist *because* John the Baptist had applied these words to himself, causing the Isaiah passage to come to mind when, say, Peter was telling Mark about the Baptist’s ministry. In that sense, the synoptics and John are mutually reinforcing concerning the association of that prophecy with John the Baptist.

Licona (in a rather unusual admission) actually goes on to say that John the Baptist might really have said the words.

And there is no reason why John the Baptist could not have made such a claim about himself and the Synoptics chose to communicate the role of John the Baptist by citing the Scriptures he allegedly fulfilled. (p. 121)

Yes, exactly. But if “there is no reason” why the event could not have happened as John recounts it, then Licona’s epistemic stance is inexplicable. Here is what he says in full:

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 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 and the Synoptics chose to communicate the role of John the Baptist by citing the Scriptures he allegedly fulfilled. (p. 121, emphasis added)

It is impossible to know? Why? The explanation to which the reader is driven is that Licona is giving far too much *probability* to the bare *possibility* that John the evangelist is putting words into the mouth of John the Baptist. This is historically irresponsible—an utterly unforced error.

When he comes to the crucifixion, Licona borrows from Dan B. Wallace the utterly unforced error of suggesting that Jesus never spoke the words, “I thirst.” Instead, this saying of Jesus is supposedly John’s theological “redaction” of the literal words, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Virtually all specialists of John’s Gospel acknowledge that the evangelist often adapted the traditions about Jesus. These two utterances of Jesus may be an instance when we can observe the extent to which John redacted existing tradition. For the next-to-last logion, it appears that John has redacted “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” (Mark // Matthew) to say, “I am thirsty.” Daniel Wallace proposes that since every occurrence of “thirst” in John carries the meaning of being devoid of God’s Spirit, the evangelist has reworked what Jesus said “into an entirely different form.” It is “a dynamic equivalent transformation” of what we read in Mark // Matthew. Accordingly, in John, Jesus is stating that God has abandoned him. In Mark 15:34, Jesus quotes Ps. 22:1: “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?”...John has redacted Jesus’s words but has retained their meaning. (pp. 165-166)¹⁹

The only faint hint of an argument for this rather large fictionalization consists of the ordering of the words from the cross in John and the synoptics and the claim about other uses of “thirst” in the Gospel of John. But these are weak reeds on which to support so strong a claim. Jesus could easily have said both “I thirst” and “My God, why have you forsaken me?” None of the evangelists claims to give an exhaustive account of Jesus’ words from the cross, and he had plenty of time to utter much more than all of what is recorded. There is no reason at all to try to match up Jesus’ words from the cross so that the second-to-last saying from the cross recorded in one Gospel must be somehow *the same as* the second-to-last recorded in another Gospel.

To say that “I thirst” “retains the meaning” of “My God, why have you forsaken me” is sheer word-play. Jesus’ cry of thirst is, on the face of it, a direct mention of specific physical suffering; “My God, why have you forsaken me” is not. It alludes only indirectly to the sufferings recorded in Psalm 22.

As for the references to spiritual thirst elsewhere in the Gospel of John, how do they support a fictionalization conclusion? It would be ludicrous to think that, since Jesus sometimes uses thirst metaphorically, he never expressed literal thirst! Jesus, as fully human, presumably was thirsty on many occasions in his life, and terrible dehydration was a known part of the sufferings of flogging followed by crucifixion. Or are we to believe that John would not *report*

¹⁹ Licona’s reference to two utterances arises from another theory that he adopts from Wallace: The claim that Jesus never literally said, “It is finished” and that this is John’s “redaction” of “Into thy hands I commit my spirit.” (pp. 165-166)

the literal statement, “I thirst” since he reports Jesus’ use of thirst as a spiritual metaphor elsewhere? Why think such a thing? If John knew that “I thirst” was never uttered by Jesus, he went to some trouble to invent a scene that would mislead his readers, since John 19:29 states that the bystanders offered him sour wine, apparently in response to his cry of thirst.

The last example of an utterly unforced error I will give in this section concerns an appearance of Jesus after the resurrection. Licona suggests for no apparent reason that John entirely invented the incident in which Jesus breathes on his disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Ghost.”

Pertaining to Jesus’s breathing on his disciples and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22), perhaps John, knowing he would not be writing a sequel as had Luke, desired to allude to the event at Pentecost. So he wove mention of the ascension into his communications with Mary Magdalene (20:17) and of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost into his communications with his male disciples (20:22). (p. 180)

While he’s at it, Licona suggests (with equal lack of evidence) that Jesus never mentioned the ascension to Mary Magdalene and that that was also an invention of John’s.

Why should we doubt that (if Jesus rose from the dead and met with his disciples at all) Jesus breathed on his disciples and uttered these words? Why should we not assume that John reports it because (at a minimum) he *believes* that it actually happened? Is there some discrepancy with some other Gospel? Is there any argument at all for questioning this specific incident or thinking that John invented it? Licona casts doubt upon the historicity of the event on a scholarly whim. It scarcely counts as a reason for him to present a theory about John’s desire to “allude” to Pentecost because John would not be writing a sequel. Such a suggestion is particularly strange given the explicit teachings of Jesus in John 14 and 16 about the coming of the Comforter. Why, even if John *were* the sort of author given to random acts of fabrication (and we have no reason to believe that he was), would he have felt a need, in addition to reporting these teachings, to make up a cryptic scene in which Jesus breathes on his disciples and tells them to receive the Holy Ghost? It is not even clear how the scene “alludes” to Pentecost in any meaningful sense. If anything, it raises theological questions such as whether the disciples received the Holy Spirit in the same sense as they did on Pentecost. Why would John raise such questions if he knew that the scene never occurred? The term “allude” with the phrase “wove mention” serve as a weak stand-in for a motive and an even weaker stand-in for an argument.²⁰

I note here that neither the invention of words of Jesus on the cross as a theological “redaction” nor the fabrication of Jesus’ breathing on his disciples corresponds to any specific, named device that Licona claims to have found in Plutarch. Neither of these counts as the mere filling in of some *minor detail*. These are not transferral, displacement, spotlighting, paraphrase, compression, nor conflation. They are fiction, pure and simple.²¹ Having untethered the Gospels

²⁰ For more of such errors, see Lydia McGrew, “Licona Gospel Examples Part I: Utterly Unforced Errors,” *What’s Wrong With the World*, October 31, 2017.

<http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/10/licona_gospel_examples_part_i.html>

²¹ They are also alleged fiction in passages with potential theological ramifications. Jesus’ expression of thirst helps to show his humanity in a concrete fashion. The meaning of Jesus’ breathing on his disciples and his words afterwards (about power to forgive or retain sins) have been debated between Protestants and Catholics.

from the intention of historical accuracy, Licona deems himself free to raise and accept other fictionalization theories, even those that go beyond the devices he has alleged.^{22,23}

4. Manufactured problems based on time

I have already mentioned Licona's rigid approach to time in historical works. In order to create temporal devices such as displacement and compression, one must claim that the author of a document was stating or implying a temporal ordering or a specific period of time contrary to fact. One cannot say that the order or length of time has been *changed* unless at least an implicit chronology is present in both documents and differs between them. Yet oddly enough, we are supposed to understand that this was not *really* deception since it was a "literary device," even if the author went to some trouble in his document to give the appearance of a factually incorrect chronology. (See the quotation above about John's "appearing deliberate in his attempts to lead his readers to believe" that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal even if it was.)

Licona's insistence that authors are implying temporal sequence and time length when their temporal indications are indefinite adds to his misperception that they are actively altering literal historical facts.

As Craig Blomberg has pointed out, when a Gospel author uses an indefinite Greek connective such as *kai* or *de*, this should not be taken in itself to indicate a temporal ordering.²⁴

²² Though he does not mention this in *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, Licona has elsewhere speculated that the non-overlapping portions of both Luke's and Matthew's infancy narratives might be "midrash" and hence invented. This would presumably include the star, the shepherds, the flight to Egypt, the presentation in the Temple, and the slaughter of the innocents—these all being non-overlapping. This is an incorrect use of the term "midrash." See N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 95. In this matter Licona's conjecture (which he does not say that he believes but which he presents as a "plausible" hypothesis) goes even beyond Robert Gundry's earlier claim that Matthew's infancy narrative was mostly invention; Licona's conjecture extends to Luke as well. (See Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art*: Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1982, pp. 20-37.) Licona admits that he was unable to find any Greco-Roman literary device to help him in categorizing the infancy stories, but he nonetheless considers seriously the possibility that they are to no small degree fabricated. "Licona Responds to Ehrman on New Testament Reliability," 2016 <<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/licona-detailed-response/>>

²³ I also consider it to be an unforced error to claim that John moved the cleansing of the Temple. There is no contradiction between John and the synoptics on this matter. The synoptics simply record a different incident from the one recounted in John. I do not discuss this example in the body of this review in part because that fictionalization hypothesis is (unfortunately) more widely accepted already, even among evangelicals, and because it would be somewhat controversial (though it shouldn't be) to say that there is no appearance of discrepancy between John and the synoptics on this incident. The fictionalization of the time of the cleansing is endorsed by Craig Keener, who engages in *a priori* history to contradict John's *prima facie* factual first-century account. (Keener asserts that the religious leaders would not have allowed Jesus' ministry to continue for three years after he cleansed the Temple.) Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 518-519, see footnotes 240 and 241, p. 518. William Lane Craig states that it is "artificial" to think that Jesus cleansed the Temple twice. "Doctrine of Revelation: Part 7," Reasonable Faith, December 24, 2014.

<<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-3/s3-doctrine-of-revelation/doctrine-of-revelation-part-7/>> But one should consider (by analogy) that it would *not* be artificial to think that an abortion opponent stood outside the same clinic holding a sign on two different occasions or even engaged more than once in some more dramatic form of protest. Concerning the Temple cleansing, Licona makes one unique argument: He makes a poor analogy between John's allegedly moving the cleansing of the Temple by several years, on the one hand, and Matthew's division of his genealogy of Jesus into three groups of fourteen, on the other, implying that the latter bolsters the plausibility of the former via the fact that Licona can refer to both as "literary artistry" (pp. 195-196).

²⁴ Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament*, pp. 62-63.

Authors at that time, including the Gospel authors, used somewhat more frequently than modern authors do what one might call “and...and” chronology or (even more informally) “chunking things in.” This is a narrative of events that happen (often) around the same time, connected by words like “and,” without thereby meaning to imply (or being taken to imply by the original audience) that one is saying that the events happened in that order or that one happened immediately after the other. Children in our own time are especially given to this form of narration. If a child said, telling about his day, “We went to the park, and we went to the museum, and we saw a squirrel,” you should not conclude with any high degree of confidence that he saw a squirrel *only after* going to the museum. A similar issue has arisen concerning Plutarch, above, when he merely says that various events happened while not indicating precisely how close in time they were to each other.

Licona does not recognize this point as often as he should and hence finds tensions or temporal changes in the Gospels where they are not present. In this way he produces an artificial tension between Luke and Mark concerning the repentance of the thief on the cross:

Mark 15:32b and Matt. 27:44 state that the two thieves who had been crucified on each side of Jesus also reviled him. But Luke 23:39–40 states that one of the thieves rebuked the other, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same death sentence? And we rightly so. For we are getting what we deserve for the deeds we did. But this man did nothing wrong.” Then he said to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Does Mark // Matthew or Luke or both preserve the true account of the thieves? The tension vanishes if we propose that both thieves initially reviled Jesus but one later had a change of heart and repented. Such is plausible given deathbed conversions. On the other hand, all three Synoptics place the response of the thieves in the same location of their narrative: The three have just been crucified, lots were cast for Jesus’s clothing, the Jewish leaders are mocking him, and even one or both thieves mock him. This is immediately followed by darkness covering the land beginning at noon. Thus, Luke appears to be reporting the same incident as Mark // Matthew. Luke may have displaced the act of the repentant thief from a later time that day, or Mark—followed by Matthew—left the thief unrepentant in order to highlight Jesus being rejected by all. As a historical question, it is impossible to determine what occurred with the available data. Accordingly, it would appear that either displacement or the altering or omission of narrative details has occurred. (p. 165)

The alleged discrepancy here arises from the fact that Mark says that thieves, plural, mocked Jesus while Luke says that one thief repented and rebuked the other. For a brief moment, Licona acknowledges that this apparent discrepancy vanishes if we propose that the repentance of one of the thieves occurred at a later time than the mocking. This is quite correct. Jesus and the thieves were, after all, on their crosses for hours. But Licona then reinstates the claim of discrepancy by insisting that all three of the synoptics must be relating words of any and all thieves as taking place *at the same time*. (“[A]ll three Synoptics place the response of the thieves in the same location of their narrative.” “Thus, Luke appears to be reporting the same incident as Mark//Matthew.”) He therefore concludes that either Mark or Luke has deliberately bent the facts in some way. Either Luke knew that the thief repented but did so *later in the day* and, for some unknown reason, *moved* his repentance to a point earlier in time to make it appear to happen at the same time that the other thief reviled Jesus. Alternatively, perhaps Mark knew

about the repentant thief but deliberately *suppressed* his dialogue with Jesus to make it look like Jesus was “rejected by all,” even though he was *not* rejected by all, since one thief accepted him. Because he has introduced these complex fictionalizing theories as his only options, Licona throws up his hands and concludes that “it is impossible to determine what occurred with the available data.”

This is all unnecessary and hyper-complicated. To say that the synoptics “place the response of the thieves in the same location in their narrative” and then to imply that “the three have just been crucified” is a wooden reading of the relevant texts. Here is Mark:

And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him. And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. (Mark 15:24-32)²⁵

Mark notes the third hour, the sixth hour, and the ninth hour, but within those time constraints does not tell us exactly when the thieves reviled Jesus or the passersby mocked him. The many “and” connections scattered throughout the passage give no more precise indications. One presumes from Mark that these mockings took place at least between the third and the sixth hour; they probably happened more than once over a period of time. Mocking and reviling need not be one-time events.

Here is Luke:

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.” One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed. (Luke 23:32-45a)

²⁵ Quotations from Scripture are from the ESV unless stated otherwise.

Licona's insistence on a tension requires that Luke places the thief's repentance *early* in the crucifixion and that Mark's narrative of the reviling places it *at that same time*. But by no means is that the case. Mark does not tell at what time or times during (presumably) the first three hours of Jesus' crucifixion the reviling took place. Luke does not tell at what point during that same period one thief's repentance took place. Three hours is a long time for the thief to be hanging on the cross, easily allowing him to have second thoughts about his treatment of Jesus. If one were to strain to find temporal indicators in Luke concerning the repentant thief, the fact that the statement, "It was now about the sixth hour" comes immediately after Jesus' dialogue with the thief might place their discussion toward the *end* of the first several hours of the crucifixion rather than when "the three have just been crucified." (The word translated "now" is *édé*, which can also be translated "already.") If Luke is saying that the thief repented after several hours of the crucifixion had passed, this would *support* the natural harmonization that Licona is resisting. But even that is probably an over-reading. Luke simply does not say precisely when the thief repented.

Licona's statement that "Luke appears to be reporting the same incident as Mark // Matthew" betrays unclear thinking. These were not atomic *incidents*. Here, as in the attempt to change "My God, why have you forsaken me?" into "I thirst," we see at work the curiously wooden and static mindset of the redactive critic. The words from the cross must be made to match up in number between John and the synoptics, even at the cost of developing strained theories about John's invention. The interactions with the thieves are assumed to take place all at the same time. Similarly, Licona's suggestion that Mark might have deliberately suppressed the repentance of the thief, rather than simply not having heard about it, arises from a failure of imagination concerning the human sources of the Gospels. One person could have been standing near the cross at the time when Jesus said something (such as "I thirst") or had a dialogue with one thief, while a different person was not near enough at that moment to hear that part of what occurred.

The next over-reading concerning time that I will discuss is related to the resurrection account in Luke, and a little background is in order. A natural harmonization of the accounts in Matthew 28 and John 20 concerning the actions of the women on Easter morning is that the women did not all stay together throughout that morning. This point will be relevant to an example in the next section—Licona's insistence that either Matthew or John has deliberately "displaced" Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene. Matthew 28 does not describe the apparently private meeting between Jesus and Mary Magdalene recounted in John 20, which takes place at the tomb, but Matthew does tell about Jesus' meeting with a group of women who had left the empty tomb and were running to tell the disciples. Any apparent discrepancy here is resolved if we conclude that Mary Magdalene left the group, as one might gather from John, immediately upon seeing that the stone had been taken away. John then follows Mary Magdalene's line of experience as she runs to fetch Peter and the beloved disciple, comes back with them or just behind them, and eventually meets Jesus at the tomb after the two male disciples have left in puzzlement. Matthew 28, on the other hand, follows the line of experience of the other women, though Matthew does not list all of the women who were there on that morning. They enter the empty tomb, meet the angels, run to tell the disciples, and meet Jesus on their way from the tomb, all without Mary Magdalene. Matthew does not mention and may not have been told that Mary Magdalene had already left the group by this time, though Matthew makes no false *statement* on that matter. This is the kind of thing that happens frequently in normal witness

reporting and also in real life. People do not always remain with the group they set out with, and reporters do not always know or mention all details.

Licona considers and explicitly rejects this harmonization, a point I will return to in the next section. One of his reasons for doing so concerns neither Matthew nor John but rather Luke, and specifically Licona's insistence on time ordering in Luke. Here is the relevant portion of Luke 24:

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing; and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." And they remembered His words, and returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at what had happened. (Luke 24:1-12, NASB)

Licona says that this passage rules out the above proposed harmonization of John and Matthew:

[This harmonization] does not square with Luke 24:1–12, since Peter ran to the tomb when the women (including Mary Magdalene; vv. 9–10) made the announcement to the disciples. (p. 255, n.144)

In other words, Licona takes Luke to be saying that Peter went to the tomb *only after all of the women had spoken to him*. This would be incompatible with the above harmonization, because that hypothesis separates the women and concludes that (as John records) Peter and John came back to the tomb after Mary Magdalene, but not all of the other women, had reported the empty tomb. The other women, according to that harmonization, probably spoke with the disciples at a somewhat later time, presumably as soon as they could do so on Sunday.

But Licona's interpretation requires a fairly rigid reading of Luke's wording. It is true that Luke *narrates* Peter's visit to the tomb only after he narrates that the larger number of women spoke to the apostles. But the connectives both at "and reported all these things" and at "But Peter..." are not definite as to time. The former is merely *kai*. The latter is *de*. The connection between Peter's going to the tomb and the widespread skepticism toward the women's story is more logical than temporal; the male disciples disbelieved the women, but Peter at least went to the tomb to see what he could see. The verb after the list of the women is progressive—"were telling these things," imperfect in the Greek, which is also compatible with an on-going set of events. So too is the indefinite description of their audience. They spoke "to the eleven and to all the rest." It could be that "all the rest" to whom the women reported were not in the same place at the same time and that the women "were telling these things" to the

disciples at various times in the day. The hypothesis that the disciples were not all together early on Easter morning would fit well with John 20:2, which mentions only Peter and the beloved disciple as those to whom Mary Magdalene ran at first.

While the passage in Luke would be *consistent* with the conclusion that all the women reported to all the disciples at the same time and that Peter got up and went to the tomb only subsequently, by no means does it *demand* that reading.

Again, harmonization is not an esoteric, religious activity but rather a part of responsible historical investigation. Since the best interpretation of our other evidence (the accounts in Matthew and John) leads us to conclude that the women did *not* all speak to Peter at the same time, before he went to the tomb, and since the non-specific terminology of Luke 24:1-12 readily allows for this possibility, it is simply incorrect to say that the harmonization “does not square” with Luke 24. Luke, it seems, is engaging in the not-very-literary device of “chunking things in”—summarizing the activities of the women and Peter on Easter Day, but without giving them a precise temporal ordering.

The next example of Licona’s over-reading also concerns Luke. As noted above when explaining what Licona means by his device of “compression,” Licona believes that Luke deliberately gives the impression, contrary to fact, that Jesus appeared to his followers over a period of less than twenty-four hours after his resurrection and that he ascended on Easter Sunday.²⁶ Licona even argues that Luke *knew* that he was giving a false impression, since Acts 1 expressly states that Jesus showed himself to his disciples over a period of forty days. This would be a rather major fictionalization in Luke, though those who advocate this interpretation do not always acknowledge that point. The difference between forty days and less than twenty-four hours is not a mere *detail* in the resurrection narrative. Such a variation, in the nature of the case, would make a difference to the quantity of the disciples’ evidence that Jesus was risen.

Licona argues for Luke’s “compression” by alleging a contradiction on the question of how long Jesus was on earth after his resurrection:

There is a difference pertaining to the length of time Jesus remained with his disciples after his resurrection....[I]n John there is an absolute minimum of nine days in which Jesus remained on earth after his resurrection. In Luke 24:1–53, Jesus’s resurrection, all of his appearances, and his ascension to heaven are narrated as though having occurred on that Sunday. That Luke compressed the events in this manner is clear, since in the sequel to his Gospel, Luke says Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of forty days before ascending to heaven (Acts 1:3–9). (p. 177)

And more briefly:

As we observed above, Luke compresses all of the appearances and the ascension to have occurred on the same day as Jesus’s resurrection. (p. 180)

²⁶ No one who takes this position ever seems to provide a credible motive for this rather radical act of fictionalization on Luke’s part. *Why* would Luke have wanted to give the impression that all of the events happened on Easter Sunday, especially if he planned to contradict this very claim in Acts 1? Perhaps interpreters who accept this idea are simply not taking the trouble to distinguish between a desire to finish his Gospel quickly and a desire to *make it look like* Jesus was on earth for less than twenty-four hours after his resurrection. The distinction is a crucial one, and the latter requires far more in the way of motive than the former.

In his older book he states, “In [Luke’s] Gospel, all of the appearances and the ascension occur on Easter.”²⁷

In the context of the second quotation (pp. 177-180) Licona is theorizing that perhaps Luke also manipulated the words of the angel at the tomb to eliminate a reference to Jesus’ meeting his disciples in Galilee. Since Luke was planning fictionally to put all the events after the resurrection on Sunday, he would leave no time for a trip to Galilee. In this way one fictionalization theory begets another, progressively undermining the reliability of the account.

It is especially remarkable that Licona uses Luke’s narrative in Acts 1 to argue that Luke must have knowingly fictionalized in Luke 24. Since it is quite obvious that Luke and Acts were not published at the same time and that Acts is later (the prefaces to Theophilus make this plain), Licona’s implication that what Luke knew when he wrote Acts 1 must be the *same* as what he knew when he wrote Luke 24 is completely unjustified. I am not saying that Luke believed when he wrote his Gospel that Jesus appeared to his disciples on only one day after the resurrection. As I shall argue, his narrative contains strong hints that the events must have taken longer than that. But he may simply not have yet gathered all relevant information about *precisely* how long Jesus did remain on earth. His narrative at the end of the Gospel also seems rather hasty, perhaps indicating that he was running out of scroll. We must make a clear distinction between, on the one hand, haste and non-specific time notes combined with leaving out some events and, on the other hand, “compression” in the sense of deliberately *making it look like* events took only one day when they actually took forty days. These two authorial approaches are not only distinguishable but *incompatible*. One involves no intention to indicate a specific time period while the other involves the intention to imply a *factually false* time period. It is the latter that Licona is explicitly attributing to Luke.

Luke’s notes of time in Luke 24 are indefinite, while Acts 1 may well reflect his conscientious concern to make the fuller information he had gained in the meanwhile available to Theophilus. His emphasis upon the “many proofs” (Acts 1:3) that Jesus gave his disciples over forty days is noteworthy in this connection. But this is far from the picture of Luke as an author who massages his chronological facts in a literary manner.

Licona’s strong language goes far beyond anything that can be sustained by the narrative in Luke. To say that all of these events “occur on the same day as Jesus’ resurrection” is simply not borne out by the text. In the scene on the road to Emmaus, the two men expressly urge Jesus to stay with them because it is already getting on toward evening and the day is far spent (Luke 24:28). They recognize him in the breaking of bread at the evening meal and then, after he disappears, they hurry back to Jerusalem, which is a six or seven mile walk, as Luke notes (vs. 13). They excitedly tell the other disciples what has happened and receive from them the news that Jesus has appeared to Cephas. While they are conversing, Jesus appears among them. He shows his hands and feet and eats with them, illustrating that he is not a ghost (vss. 36-43).

Various translations begin vs. 44, about further things Jesus said to the disciples, with different English words. The ESV begins with “then,” but in fact there is no such temporal indicator. The NASB begins the verse with “now,” which is also unfortunate. The connective, in fact, is *de*, which is quite indefinite as to time. In the NASB, verses 44-45 say,

Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures...

²⁷ Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, p. 596, n. 449.

But the Greek gives no reason to insist that this conversation occurred on the same occasion as the appearance recorded just before that. In fact, verses 44 to the end of the book are quite rushed:

Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. While He was blessing them, He parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising God.

The connective at verse 50, “And he led them out,” is also the non-committal *de*. John Wenham’s comment on the language of the passage is apt:

These ‘thens’ [in the RSV at verses 44 and 50] give a much sharper suggestion of chronological continuity than the Greek justifies. The paragraphs are linked by a weak connective non-temporal particle (*de*) which would be better left untranslated.²⁸

Luke’s narrative in these verses is notably brief, and in that minimal sense only (not in the fictionalizing sense) may be said to be “compressed.” Far more than indicating that everything occurred on Easter day, the passage up to the end of the book reads like an abbreviated summary of events beginning on Easter and for some unspecified time thereafter. The day was already somewhat spent when the disciples sat down to eat with Jesus at Emmaus, followed by their walk (an hour or two) back to Jerusalem, followed by the first appearance of Jesus there. After this (if it were all on one day) Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures about the prophecies concerning himself. Presumably what Luke records here was nowhere near the whole of what Jesus had to say on that fascinating topic, making it (if this were on the same day) one of the first long Sunday evening sermons!²⁹ And only *after that* did they go to Bethany. Sundown around the first of April in that part of the world occurs about 7 p.m. It would have been rather dark for a walk back out to Bethany. And how would the disciples have seen Jesus received up to heaven? When one thinks about the matter in detail, one realizes that this is not even a case where Luke, taken by himself, sounds quite naturally like he is “placing” all of the events on the same day.

The times and days on which things happen are not irrelevant, and the attempt of a witness or history writer to get them right is important. Specifics concerning timing—time of year, number of days, years, and so forth—can provide opportunity for confirming the reliability

²⁸ John Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, p. 107.

²⁹ I owe this point to Timothy McGrew.

of the Gospels.³⁰ It is not a small matter if the evangelists had not the slightest qualm about deliberately altering the day or time at which something happened. In multiple ways such a lack of concern for literal fact would affect their ability to serve as witnesses to the “main events” that they attest.³¹ No one would think that a witness in court could be trusted about much if he blithely admitted that he well knew that an event took place on Saturday but moved it, in his testimony, to Wednesday instead for reasons of “literary artistry.” We should therefore look carefully at any claim that the Gospel authors re-ordered events at will; we should not let such a claim pass with little scrutiny as concerning merely a matter of detail. Licona’s examples of alleged temporal fictionalization do not stand up to careful examination.³²

4. Refusals to accept reasonable harmonization

I have discussed several refusals on Licona’s part to accept quite reasonable harmonizations related to time as well as several of his unforced errors where “harmonization” is scarcely even the right term for refraining from gratuitous suggestions of fabrication. Here I will discuss several more examples illustrating his marked bias against harmonization and in favor of fictionalization.

Both Licona’s tendency to over-read, taking all possible implications of an account for assertions by the author, and his bias against additive harmonization are evident in his discussion of the accounts of the healing of the man with a withered hand. Licona postulates a discrepancy between the account of this healing in Matthew 12, on the one hand, and Mark’s and Luke’s, on the other. The alleged contradiction concerns the question of whether the Pharisees spoke to Jesus or not.

Matthew 12:9-13 records that they asked Jesus a question:

Departing from there, He went into their synagogue. And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse Him. And He said to them, “What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good

³⁰ For example, the time of year when the feeding of the five thousand occurs participates in two undesigned coincidences that confirm the account in both John and the synoptics. See Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2017), pp. 63-67. John’s statement that Jesus came to Bethany six days before Passover is connected with the Passion Week account in Mark. *Hidden in Plain View*, pp. 113-118. The Jews’ exclamation recorded in John 2:20 that it has taken forty-six years to build the Temple is connected to an external confirmation, which also serves to confirm the idea that Jesus cleansed the Temple at this time. See William Sanday, *The Authorship and Historical Character of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1872), pp. 64-67. It is also part of a dialogue concerning Jesus’ “raising up the Temple” in three days that is confirmed by an undesigned coincidence. See *Hidden in Plain View*, pp. 70-73.

³¹ In this paragraph I am emphasizing witness credibility. But there is also this point: If Luke really were narrating Jesus’ ascension on the same day as his resurrection, this would cut out of the “narrative world” of Luke’s Gospel much of the additional evidence that the other Gospels, including John and Matthew, offer for the most important main event of all—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

³² For discussion of more over-readings in Licona’s book, see Lydia McGrew, “Licona Gospel Examples III: Over-Reading,” <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/11/licona_gospel_examples_iii_ove.html> and “Licona Gospel Examples IV: More Over-Reading,” <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/11/licona_gospel_examples_iv_more.html>.

on the Sabbath.” Then He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other.

Mark 3:1-5 does not record any question from the Pharisees to Jesus.

He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

Luke 6:6-10, which may be dependent upon Mark at this point, gives the strongest impression (taken in isolation) that the leaders were silent throughout, since it emphasizes that Jesus knew their thoughts. But even Luke does not assert that they never spoke.

On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” After looking around at them all, He said to him, “Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was restored.

Licona is certainly not saying that Matthew is dependent upon Luke for this story but rather on Mark. Licona combines Luke’s and Mark’s accounts and states a contradiction.

Most interesting is that in Mark 3:2–5 and Luke 6:7—the Pharisees are portrayed as being silent throughout the entire event while observing Jesus to see if he would heal the man, thereby breaking the Sabbath and providing them with grounds to accuse him. But Jesus knew their thoughts and asked them whether it was lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to save a life. In Matt. 12:10–13, the Pharisees were not silent. Instead, Matthew takes the thoughts of the Pharisees and converts them into a dialogue with Jesus[.] (p. 128)

But neither Mark nor Luke states that the Pharisees were “silent throughout the entire event,” and Mark, in particular, emphasizes that they remained silent when Jesus questioned *them*. We have other incidents in the Gospels where the Pharisees ask Jesus a question, he asks them a tough question in reply, and they do not answer the latter. In Mark 11:27-33 there is such a dialogue in which Jesus puts them to silence by asking if the baptism of John the Baptist was from heaven or of men. In Matthew 22:34-46 the Pharisees ask Jesus a question about the greatest commandment. He answers it but then goes on to ask the famous questions about whose son the Christ is and why David calls the Messiah “Lord.” After that, no one asks him any further questions. It would fit with this pattern if the Pharisees did ask Jesus whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath and if Jesus, in reply, asked them a “gotcha” question—whether it is lawful to do

good or evil on the Sabbath, to save or destroy life—resulting in their annoyed and uncomfortable silence. This does not mean that Mark knew of the further exchange. Peter, as Mark’s human source, may have remembered only a portion of the exchange.

If one takes Matthean authorship with any seriousness at all, one should acknowledge that Matthew might have had his own memories of this incident. But, as is often the case, the hypothesis that Matthew *remembered* additional details of the incident, such as an initial question by some of the Pharisees present, is treated as utterly off the table in Licona’s rigidly redactive analysis. He doesn’t even mention it and instead assumes that Matthew redacts Mark in a way that had no factual justification. He jumps to the conclusion that Matthew, trying to follow “compositional devices,” has “tak[en] the thoughts of the Pharisees and convert[ed] them into a dialogue.”

Licona’s discussion of this incident also includes an utterly unforced error. He implies that Matthew may have falsely stated that Jesus made the comment about pulling a sheep out of a pit on the basis of a tradition about another event, recorded only in Luke.

Luke reports this story as well as a different one in Luke 14:1–6, although there are similarities between both. In the second story Jesus was dining at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees on a Sabbath. Because there was a man with dropsy in attendance, they watched Jesus closely to see if he would break the Sabbath and heal the man. Jesus asked the lawyers and Pharisees who were present, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” When they were silent, Jesus healed the man, sent him away, and said to them, “Which of you having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath will not immediately pull him up?” (Luke 14:5). Matthew provides a similar *logion* of Jesus in our earlier pericope: “What man among you who having only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath will not take hold of it and lift it out?” (Matt. 12:11). It could be that Matthew knew of both stories and, given his tendency to abbreviate, redacted portions of Luke’s second story and then conflated those portions with the first story....However, teachers in antiquity as well as today often vary an illustration, anecdote, parable, or fable. Accordingly, as is often the case, it is difficult if not impossible to discern whether an author is reporting a separate event or has heavily redacted an existing one. (pp. 128-129)

Again, the use of the term *logion* lends a false air of technicality to this unnecessary suggestion. As in the discussion of John the Baptist and the voice crying in the wilderness, Licona momentarily acknowledges that this hypothesis of fictionalization by Matthew fills no interpretive need, since Jesus may have made a similar (but by no means identical) point on more than one occasion.³³ But he concludes from this *not* that the *prima facie* case is that Jesus uttered what is recorded in Matthew but rather says, “Accordingly...it is difficult if not impossible” to tell what Jesus said on the occasion. How does such agnosticism follow from the data? Again, this is not how an historian operates if he is giving the individual documents any reasonable degree of credibility.

My remaining examples in this review concern, once more, the resurrection. As noted above, Matthew 28:1 mentions that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb with “the other Mary.” Matthew lists no other women with them, and he does not mention, and may not have known, that Mary ran back to Peter and John immediately upon seeing the stone rolled away, as is

³³ Jesus makes a fiercer comment along the same lines, using a quite different comparison, in John 7:21-24. See Lydia McGrew, “Ecce Homo: Only One Jesus,” <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/01/ecce_homo.html>.

reasonably inferred from John 20:1-2. Thus, when Matthew says in verse 8 that *they* left the tomb quickly and in verse 9 that Jesus met *them*, it is an understandable reading of Matthew, taken in isolation, that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were the only women present and that they stayed together throughout these events. That interpretation would seem to contradict John. But Matthew does not *assert* this; he indicates that a group of not less than two women left the tomb and met Jesus as they were running to tell the disciples. I discussed above an entirely reasonable historical harmonization of these accounts that also fits well with the fact (stated by both Luke and Mark) that there were more than two women who came to the tomb initially: Mary Magdalene left the group immediately upon seeing the stone rolled away, and thereafter John recounts her experiences while Matthew recounts the experiences of the other women.

As noted above, Licona rejects this harmonization. Part of his argument concerns Luke 24, already discussed. His other argument is this: “Yet these scenarios are not at all the impression readers receive when reading Matt. 28:1–10.” (p. 255, n. 144) In this endnote Licona is jointly evaluating the harmonization under consideration here and a less plausible suggestion by Gleason Archer, which is not quite fair to the former. Moreover, this argument shows that Licona does not understand how harmonization works, though he states (earlier in the endnote) that harmonization is sometimes legitimate but can “go too far.” Why does he think that this harmonization “goes too far”? In part, because that is not the *impression* one would gain from Matthew *taken in isolation*. But that, of course, is simply the condition that makes it necessary to harmonize in the first place! If the first impressions of two or more documents did not present at least *some* apparent discrepancy or tension, why would we speak of harmonizing them?

It is a destructive assumption of liberal biblical criticism that the Gospels, or any other human testimonial documents, should be interpreted in isolation, incorporating all the implications that one might spin out both from what they say and from what they do not say, kept in hermetically sealed rooms, and declared to be insurmountably contradictory because these first impressions appear to be in conflict. Furthermore, it is assumed that we must not use even a modicum of imagination to think of a scenario in which the information in both accounts is true but incomplete. Such a procedure is not good reasoning. It is not good history. It is not good biblical criticism.

In reality, it often happens that the first, isolated impressions that one gains from wholly truthful accounts appear to be in some tension and that the tension is resolved by further knowledge of what occurred. This is why, as the 19th-century theologian Johannes Ebrard pointed out, “[T]here is much greater fear of being too timid than too bold, in resorting to hypotheses for the solution of apparent discrepancies.”³⁴ Biblical critics often will reject even harmonizations that do *not* postulate strange or highly improbable events. There is nothing particularly improbable or strained about the idea that Mary Magdalene impulsively left the original group of women, and John provides clear evidence that she did. We must avoid that static, frozen approach that we have already noted and that too often characterizes the New Testament critic, whose world is constructed out of snapshots and stone statues. Real life is a moving picture.

What does Licona conclude concerning the alleged discrepancy between Matthew and John? He concludes that *either* Matthew deliberately “placed” Mary Magdalene’s meeting with Jesus along with the other women, though he knew that she had met Jesus first alone (as

³⁴ Johannes Ebrard, *The Gospel History: A Compendium of Critical Investigations in Support of the Historical Character of the Four Gospels* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1863), p. 60.

recounted in John), or else that John *invented* the entire scene in John 20. He puts this false dichotomy of fictionalizations slightly euphemistically, but that is what it amounts to:

The location of where Mary Magdalene first encountered Jesus differs. In John 20:14–18 she conversed with two angels at the tomb and then turned around and saw Jesus behind her, although she did not recognize him and thought he was the gardener....[Licona continues summarizing the account of the meeting with Jesus in John 20.] The story differs in Matt. 28:8–10 in which upon hearing the message of the angel at the tomb, the group of women, which included Mary Magdalene, left quickly with fear and trembling and ran to tell Jesus’s disciples. Jesus met them along the way and said, “Greetings!”... Thus, in Matthew, Mary Magdalene first encountered Jesus when she was running away from the tomb to deliver the angel’s message to the disciples, whereas in John it was at the tomb. Moreover, in Matthew, Jesus told the women to deliver the message to his male disciples that he is going ahead of them to Galilee, whereas in John the message is that he is going to his Father and God. At minimum, it appears that either Matthew or John has relocated the appearance to Mary Magdalene. (pp. 175-176)

To say that John or Matthew “relocates the appearance” is a somewhat unclear way of saying that, *inter alia*, John may have fabricated the entire scene in the garden of the tomb that Licona has spelled out in some detail. This is hardly a small matter. Licona has a way of wording explanations so that large inventions are treated as small details. As I have pointed out above, the deliberate alteration even of relatively minor details undermines a witness’s reliability rather seriously because it shows a wanton disregard for literal truth. But whether or not the scene in John 20 took place is not on any ordinary construal a *mere detail*, and to say that John might have “relocated the appearance” is almost misleading. It is not as though we are wondering whether *that very scene* between Jesus and Mary Magdalene took place right next to the tomb or a hundred yards away. Licona is suggesting that John may have invented it out of his imagination and put it in place of the *very different* scene described in Matthew. Or, alternatively, Matthew (Licona thinks) may have known quite well that Mary Magdalene was not with that group but, for reasons unknown, may have *deliberately tried* to give the false impression that she was. All of this is not only unnecessary but seriously detrimental to any sense of the authors’ truthfulness.

Nor is Licona entirely unaware of the radical nature of what he is saying, for he does not hesitate to draw a moral for his readers: “This shows the extent to which at least one of the evangelists or the sources from which he drew felt free to craft the story” (p. 176). Indeed, that would be quite a *large* “extent” of “crafting,” and the theory of such “crafting” in these passages does not meet its burden of proof. Moreover, in the end Licona leaves it undecided as to whether it was John or Matthew who “crafted” in this instance.

In the next case of Licona’s unnecessary rejection of harmonization, he makes another of his more eyebrow-raising suggestions concerning Gospel fictionalization in the resurrection accounts. This time he decides in the end (without very good reason, on his own terms) to prefer the somewhat less radical fictionalization theory of the two, but he presents fictionalizations as the only viable options. It is instructive that he once again gives so much undeserved probability to the wholesale invention of entire, important incidents in the Gospel of John.

There is an alleged discrepancy between Luke and John concerning the number of main disciples who were present when Jesus first appeared to them after his resurrection. In Luke

24:33, the two disciples who have spoken to Jesus on the road to Emmaus return to Jerusalem to tell what has happened. Luke says, “And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together...” Verse 36 says, apparently of the same group, “As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them...” I am quite willing to grant that this is the same meeting between Jesus and his disciples described in John 20:19-24, though, as is typical with truthful accounts, each contains information that the other does not. The minor alleged discrepancy arises from the fact that Luke refers to “the eleven” as the main disciples present on this occasion, whereas John 20:24-25 emphasizes that Thomas was not present, leaving only ten main disciples present. This leads into the “Doubting Thomas” sequence described only in John; there is a second meeting with Jesus a week later in which Thomas acknowledges that Jesus is risen. Licona sees this discrepancy as irresolvable and makes a rather startling conjecture as a possible explanation:

Moreover, with Judas now dead, there were eleven main disciples. Thus Luke 24:33 can speak of Jesus’s first appearance to a group of his male disciples as including “the eleven and those with them.” However, John 20:19–24 tells us Thomas was absent during that event. Thus, only ten of the main disciples would have been present. Accordingly, either Luke conflated the first and second appearances to the male disciples, or John crafted the second appearance in order to rebuke those who, like Thomas, heard about Jesus’s resurrection and failed to believe. Some have suggested that the “eleven” may have been a way of referring to the core of the apostolic body. However, while scholars generally agree that “the Twelve” became a nickname for Jesus’s main disciples (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:5), there is no indication that “the eleven” was ever used in a similar sense. Thus, it seems more probable in this instance that Luke has conflated the first and second appearances of Jesus to his male disciples. (pp. 177-178)

On the basis of this minor potential difference in the number of disciples present, Licona suggests that John may have fabricated *the entire Doubting Thomas sequence*. His only alternative explanation is that Luke, knowing that there were two meetings in Jerusalem and that Thomas was absent on the first occasion, has deliberately narrated as if there were only one. He states categorically that one or the other of these is the true explanation. (“Conflation,” as Licona defines it, is not a matter of non-deliberate confusion on the part of the author but rather a matter of deliberately mixing information that the author knows was really separate. See definition on p. 20, where conflation is connected with “displacement,” which Licona has defined as deliberate. See also alleged examples of “conflation” on pp. 46, 52, 55, etc.)

Here Licona comes down narrowly on the side of the theory that Luke conflated rather than that Doubting Thomas is a figment of John’s imagination. In an exchange concerning his book, he has used the fact that he prefers the “Luke conflates” theory as a reason for some indignation about my having written that he hypothesizes that the whole Doubting Thomas sequence might be made up.³⁵ But that is precisely what he does. He does not merely raise that theory as a bare logical possibility and then reject it as enormously improbable. Epistemologically, he treats it very seriously indeed. He considers it sufficiently probable to warrant being listed as one of the *only two* possible “finalist” options and (notably) as more

³⁵ Michael Licona, “Are We Reading An Adapted Form of Jesus’ Teachings in John’s Gospel?” Risen Jesus, September 29, 2017. <<https://www.risenjesus.com/reading-adapted-form-jesus-teachings-johns-gospel>>

probable than the theory that “the eleven” was used by Luke not as a counting word but as a loose description of the entire group of disciples.

Licona defends his treatment of the theory that John invented Doubting Thomas on the grounds that as an historian he must not be bound by religious considerations in deciding which theories to consider.³⁶ But the problem here is not so much a matter of piety as of history and epistemology—a matter of evidence. No historian literally considers *all* logically possible theories, nor does Licona come close to considering all theories in this case.³⁷ Like a wise scientist, a good historian considers theories that have some degree of reasonable plausibility. Does our other knowledge of John as an author render him *so unreliable* that we consider it *this probable* that he would make up something *so evidentially important* to Jesus’ resurrection as the story of Thomas’s doubts and their resolution? (Thomas’s declaration, “My Lord and my God” is also highly relevant for Christology.) Does not such a theory about John’s theologically and evidentially important fabrication of entire incidents demand at least a somewhat better *historical* argument, especially given John’s explicit concern about the truth for which he is an eyewitness? (See, e.g., John 19:35, Acts 4:19-20, I John 1:1.) Either of Licona’s fictionalization theories here is highly complex. Epistemically, we should prefer a simpler alternative if one is available.

Nor is Licona’s reason for preferring the theory that Luke conflated cogent on its own terms. The only argument given is that there is no independent evidence for the use of “the eleven” as a term for the whole group of disciples, regardless of precise number. But the idea that Luke is using “the eleven” as a literal counting term is what sets up the alleged discrepancy in the first place. Rejecting a proposed harmonization concerning that matter does not provide a reason for preferring one of Licona’s two suggested options. According to the theory that John made up Doubting Thomas, Luke would be using “the eleven” in the literal sense as well, since there would be no reason to think that Thomas was absent on this first occasion. Licona seems merely confused on this point and believes that he has given a reason for preferring the somewhat less radical fictionalization theory, but his reasoning on that point is not logical.

Licona’s overestimate of the probability of fictionalization theories is evident in his one-line dismissal of the harmonization concerning Luke’s use of “the eleven.” Contra that argument, it should not be a great matter for concern if we have no other passages in which “the eleven” is unequivocally used to refer to a group less than a full eleven. Why should we expect to find such other evidence? Perhaps all of the eleven really were present on other occasions when the term happened to be used in written Scripture. Perhaps our failure to find other uses of it to refer to the group when a smaller number were present is an artifact of our not having multiple, independent accounts of a large number of other specific meetings of the disciples immediately after Jesus’ resurrection. Such a looser usage could readily have occurred at least as an occasional practice in the years between the events and Luke’s writing. Moreover, what else would such a usage look like than what we have before us? One putatively historical writer to whom we have reason to give some credibility (John) states that there were not a full eleven main disciples present on a certain occasion, while another writer to whom we should give some credibility (Luke) uses the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Licona (ibid.) tries to justify his high ranking of the Doubting Thomas fabrication theory on the grounds that as an historian he must be unconstrained by the theological assumption that “the Bible is God’s infallible Word.” But he does not even consider the possibility that Luke may simply not have been informed of Thomas’s absence at Jesus’ first appearance and may have written that “the eleven” were present on that occasion in the honest belief that that was literally the case. One may understandably not count that idea as, properly speaking, a harmonization, but it is certainly far simpler than either fictionalization theory in the *purely non-religious, historical terms* on which Licona is now taking his stand.

phrase “the eleven” for the group present. That is in itself *some* evidence for such a use of the phrase, at least on occasion, by a Christian of the period. And if “the eleven” were used for the group of main disciples who *eventually* did see Jesus after his resurrection (since Thomas did see him on the second occasion), then it is not terribly implausible that the term might sometimes be used for that group even when they were short by one or two members. But Licona dismisses the idea as if it is quite improbable.

Lest the point go unnoticed, the invention of an entire sequence such as the Doubting Thomas scenes does not correspond to any of the listed compositional devices that Licona claims to have found in Plutarch.

Licona’s skepticism about the sequence involving Thomas is not new. In a striking passage in his 2010 book on the resurrection he expresses skepticism as an historian concerning a wide swathe of the disciples’ reported appearance experiences:

We may likewise affirm that there was at least one occasion when a group of Jesus’ followers including “the Twelve” had such an experience. [He has described this above as an experience “that convinced them Jesus had risen from the dead and had appeared to them.”] Did other experiences reported by the Gospels occur as well, such as the appearances to the women, Thomas, the Emmaus disciples, and the multiple group appearances reported by the tradition in I Corinthians 15:3-7 and John? Where did these experiences occur? Historians may be going beyond what the data warrants in assigning a verdict with much confidence to these questions.³⁸

The point I am making here, again, is that such widespread doubt is *historically unwarranted*. If there are good reasons (and there are) to attribute the Gospels to eyewitnesses and companions of eyewitnesses and to take them to be historically conscientious and reliable, then there are good reasons to believe that these accounts of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances go back to the apostles themselves and to their associates, including the women and the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Hence, when we rationally conclude that the best explanation of the data, including those claims, is that Jesus really did rise from the dead, we are justified in concluding in the end that these scenes correspond to *veridical experiences* in which they did meet and talk with Jesus.

Licona introduces the above passage thus: “What may we conclude about the appearances to the disciples?”³⁹ Therefore, the tentativeness he expresses is supposedly the historically warranted state at the *conclusion* of investigation. One can, of course, understand that Licona would not want to start an argument for the resurrection with the assumption that the risen Jesus actually appeared to Thomas (for example), as that would be question-begging. But here he strongly implies that the accounts of the appearances to Thomas and others cannot, even as a record of the disciples’ claims, be an important part of our evidential basis and, moreover, that these appearances are not historically justified *conclusions*. Is it then only with the “eyes of faith” that Christians believe that Jesus appeared to Thomas, on the road to Emmaus, and to the group of disciples on multiple occasions rather than only once? Or should historically rigorous Christians think that we have only the *vaguest notion* of the content of the post-resurrection experiences, since it would be going beyond the objective data to rely on the Gospel accounts? How does this watering down of our information base about the *kinds* of experiences the

³⁸ *The Resurrection of Jesus*, p 372.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

disciples *claimed to have had* weaken the evidential case for the resurrection in the first place? I will return to that question in the next section.

The final example I will consider from Licona's book concerns the place of Jesus' first meeting with his male disciples. Licona insists that Matthew's description of a group meeting with Jesus in Galilee must be referring to the same occasion as Luke's description of a group meeting with Jesus in Jerusalem. Then, of course, there would be a contradiction as to place.

It is well known to those who harmonize the resurrection accounts that Matthew does not record any meetings with the disciples in Jerusalem but records a single meeting with Jesus in Galilee. Licona's statement of a discrepancy in the Gospels is quite definite:

A major difference in the resurrection narratives pertains to where Jesus first appeared to a group of his male disciples. Matthew and Mark locate this appearance in Galilee, whereas Luke and John place it in Jerusalem [...] (pp. 177-178)

This is a particularly surprising assertion concerning Mark, given that there is serious, conservative textual doubt about the long ending of Mark. Licona says that Mark "implies" that the first appearance was in Galilee (p. 180) despite the fact that, without the long ending, no appearances of Jesus are included in what we have of Mark at all. Licona's only argument on this point appears to be the emphasis of the angel on meeting Jesus in Galilee in Mark 16:7—a shaky basis for saying that Mark implies something contradictory to John and Luke.

Licona concludes a contradiction by combining arguments from silence and over-readings of Mark and Matthew. His arguments from silence, which are not strong, are these: "In fact, in Luke and John the words of neither the angels nor Jesus at the tomb provide any hint of any appearance in Galilee." And, "There is no hint [in Matthew] that the disciples delayed [in going to Galilee]" (p. 178). The silence of Luke, John, and Matthew is treated almost as strongly as an assertion of something contrary to what is said in the other documents. The documents are sealed off from one another, and we are not allowed to put together their positive assertions to harmonize. Both these and his over-readings follow a standard approach in mainstream New Testament criticism and have nothing whatsoever to do with literary devices that he has supposedly found in Plutarch.

In Matthew, the angel instructed the women to "go quickly" to the disciples with the message that Jesus had been raised and was going before them to Galilee, where they would see him (28:7). There was a sense of urgency since Jesus had already left for Galilee. (p. 178)

Where does Matthew say that the angel said that Jesus had already left for Galilee? Nowhere. Here is Matthew.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." (Matthew 28:5-7)

As a matter of fact, Jesus couldn't possibly have *already* left for Galilee when the angel speaks in Matthew, since he meets the women when they are leaving the tomb just a couple of verses later.

In both the message of Jesus and of the angel in Matthew, Licona emphasizes that the word "there" (e.g., "There they will see me") is placed in an emphatic position in the Greek. But there is no necessity to take this positioning of the term "there" to mean, "They will see me there first, and *none of them* will see me first *anywhere else*." Nor has that been the conclusion of many scholars knowledgeable in Greek. The point is especially relevant if the message to meet Jesus in Galilee was to be conveyed to a group larger than only the eleven.

It is entirely possible that the meeting in Galilee in Matthew 28 was the one that Paul says involved more than five hundred people at once (I Corinthians 15). We have no other candidate for this appearance in any of the other Gospels, and a meeting with a large group could fairly readily have taken place outdoors in the hills of Galilee without danger of being interrupted by the Jerusalem authorities. At a minimum, the meeting recounted in Matthew could have been with a larger group of Jesus' followers including the seventy. This would not preclude Jesus' meeting before that with smaller groups, such as with the eleven (minus Thomas and then with Thomas), the two on the road to Emmaus, and Peter. It might take some time and effort to get together a large group of Jesus' followers to meet him in Galilee, which could explain his desire to begin to get the word out quickly even though the meeting would not take place until more than a week later. Any emphasis on "there" in the message of the angel and of Jesus could apply most strongly to those who did not see Jesus in Jerusalem previously.

There is one interesting detail in Matthew that might (though I do not insist upon it) hint at earlier meetings between Jesus and the eleven. Matthew 28:16 says, "But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated." When had Jesus designated a particular mountain? It is possible that the message from either Jesus or the angel contained this information and that Matthew does not record it. It is also possible that Jesus had mentioned this detail earlier, perhaps at the point described in Matthew 26:32 when Jesus says, "After I have been raised, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." An interesting possibility is that Jesus designated this mountain when he met with the eleven in Jerusalem after his resurrection and that they were able to direct the gathering of the believers with this additional information.⁴⁰ Specific directions would have been easier for the disciples to take in during longer meetings with Jesus than for the shocked women to remember when first confronted with the fact of the resurrection.

The relatively low status of women at the time as witnesses also makes it highly questionable that a group of the male disciples would have undertaken a journey to Galilee to meet Jesus on the word of the women alone. In fact, Luke 24:11 states emphatically that the women's stories were *not* believed at first. Jesus wanted the women to act as messengers to spread the word of the meeting in Galilee, but their message almost certainly needed to be reinforced. Once the eleven were "on board" with the knowledge of the resurrection and the journey to Galilee, they and the women both could spread the word that Jesus wanted his followers to meet him there.

Matthew does not move immediately in chapter 28 from Jesus' appearance to the women to the disciples' leaving for Galilee. Verses 11-15 interject the ending of the story of the guard at the tomb, finishing with the statement that the Jews to this day promulgate the tale that the disciples stole the body. Verse 16 then goes *back* to talking about the disciples, beginning, "But

⁴⁰ This suggestion is made by Wenham, *Easter Enigma*, p. 113.

the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee...” Obviously, Matthew is not delivering a detailed, chronological account in any event.

Certainly Matthew emphasizes the meeting in Galilee and does not record one in Jerusalem. One might guess from Matthew *taken alone* that there was no earlier meeting in Jerusalem, though one would then wonder why the disciples went there based upon nothing more than the word of the women. One may be curious about the question of why Matthew does not clearly mention that the group in Galilee was larger, if that were the case. But, again, good historical practice requires putting together evidence and coming to the best conclusion based upon all evidence.

Here, John Wenham has a fascinating point based on the Greek of Matthew’s account. Matthew 28:17 reads, “When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful.” Wenham states that this “they did _____, but some did _____” construction in Greek “normally signifies a change of subject, and the standard grammar translates it... ‘but others’.” Wenham scrupulously admits that the language does not “demand that those mentioned in the first part of the sentence and the ‘others’ mentioned in the second part should be regarded as completely mutually exclusive, but it is natural to take them as referring to different groups.”⁴¹ Wenham continues,

It is evidently no part of Matthew’s plan to write either about the experiences of the men in Jerusalem or about the experiences of the wider company of believers in Galilee. But he chooses a form of words which neatly describes the faith of the eleven and hints at the presence of others with doubts.

On pages 178-179 Licona over-reads the fact that both Matthew and Luke mention some doubt or “disbelief for joy” on the part of the disciples. He takes this to be a strong argument that they were “recounting the same incident,” even though in nearly every other respect the circumstances differ. Not only do the events take place in different locations, as Licona himself is emphasizing. The meeting in Luke is unexpected; Jesus appears among them. The meeting in Matthew is by appointment; they go to a pre-determined location, and Jesus comes there as well. The meeting in Luke (also described in John) occurs on the evening of Easter, whereas the meeting in Matthew would have to have been at least several days later to allow for travel to Galilee. The meeting in Luke is indoors; that in Matthew is outdoors. But Licona spends a couple of pages (pp. 179-180) talking about the Greek words for unbelief or doubt, which (he admits) are *different words*, after stating,

The appearance in Galilee in Matt. 28:16–17 is almost certainly a parallel to the appearance in Jerusalem in Luke 24:36–49, which is narrated as the first appearance to the male disciples as a group. (p. 179)

Almost certainly? This is over-estimating the strength of one’s case with a vengeance. There is nothing “almost certain” about the matter. *Prima facie*, the two are *completely different meetings*. This is typical redaction-critical practice: Assert that two stories that are obviously quite different are “parallels” to each other—i.e., have no separate bases in reality. Then use the glaring differences (which should have blocked the inference that they are the same event in the

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 114.

first place) to claim a contradiction. Then make up a theory to explain the contradiction thus created. This is an extremely poor methodology.

Licona's argument from the Greek words is peculiar in this respect: One has difficulty figuring out how it is even *supposed* to support his conclusion that the two incidents are "almost certainly parallel." One can already tell from any good translation that both Matthew 28:17 and Luke 24:41 (as well as the statement that some thought they were seeing a ghost in Luke 24:37) indicate some manner of doubt or a feeling that the truth is too good to believe. Nothing is gained for Licona's argument by telling us, as he does, that the Greek word for "doubt" in Matthew 28 is used also for Peter's doubt when walking on the water in Matthew 14 and means to "have two thoughts." So what? Luke's word for their unbelieving joy is, as Licona acknowledges, a different Greek term. Licona argues, plausibly enough, that Luke's word has the connotation of finding something too good to be true, being filled with amazement, being confused by the difficulty in understanding how something is possible, etc. But what does this yield, argumentatively? Merely the conclusion that the words have sufficient range of meaning that they *could refer to similar emotions*. This is hardly enough to conclude, against all the evidence to the contrary in the accounts, that Matthew's account of the appearance in Galilee is "almost certainly a parallel to the appearance in Jerusalem" in Luke.

The mention of "doubt" in Matthew is best explained by the presence of some who had never seen Jesus before, and it is true that Matthew 28:16ff mentions only the eleven explicitly. But this is not a linguistic point. As noted above, a linguistic point made by John Wenham about these verses actually can be taken to hint at the presence of more people than just the eleven. The best explanation of all of the evidence put together is that the group in Galilee was larger.

What is Licona's explanation for the alleged discrepancy concerning the meetings in Galilee and in Jerusalem?

But why do Mark and Matthew do so while Luke and John locate it in Jerusalem? It is difficult to determine. Perhaps Mark and Matthew either preferred or knew only sources that located the appearance in Galilee, whereas the source(s) preferred by Luke and John put the appearance in Jerusalem. (p. 180)

This, of course, casts doubt upon both accounts. Here Licona actually considers (unusual in the book) the possibility that Matthew and John had *reasons* for what they report rather than merely fictionalizing for the sake of doing so, though he assumes that at least one of them must have been wrong. But the question then arises: Why, if Licona were taking Matthean and Johannine authorship with any seriousness at all, would he think that they were dependent upon a "source" for the *entire setting and circumstances* of so crucial an event as Jesus' first meeting with his disciples, which would have included themselves? Licona's use of redaction-critical assumptions is so ubiquitous that he does not even address this question. Could John and Matthew not remember where and when they first met Jesus after the resurrection and approximately what the meeting was like? This would have been the most important event in the disciples' lives. Surely they wouldn't have needed to rely on a source for at least the basics of what happened.

Throughout the book Licona makes the notion of eyewitness testimony theoretically powerless again and again, with almost no exceptions. If Matthew and Mark have differing details of a story, this is assumed to be due to factually unsupported redaction by Matthew. (An example is the story of the man with the withered hand, discussed above.) And the same for John and the synoptics. Here this pattern is particularly noticeable when Licona suggests that, for

entire scenes of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to his *own disciples*, Matthew and John are dependent on sources.

That this is a serious blow to the reliability of the resurrection accounts is evident from the fact that this creation of a discrepancy once again calls into question the Doubting Thomas sequence from a different angle. Here Licona does not say whether he thinks Matthew's account or John's is the true one, though he places them in conflict. He doesn't spell out the implications for the Doubting Thomas sequence and perhaps did not think of them, but they are quite clear: If Matthew and John are in conflict on the entire setting and circumstances of Jesus' first meeting with his disciples, and if (according to Licona's interpretation of Matthew) Jesus met all of his disciples in Galilee together first, then (according to Matthew) Doubting Thomas would be a fiction. Matthew also says that it was "the eleven" who met Jesus in Galilee, just as Luke uses the phrase "the eleven" for those who met Jesus in Jerusalem. Since Licona argues that "the eleven" is a literal counting phrase, for the sake of consistency he would have to place Matthew as well as Luke at odds with John concerning Doubting Thomas. Moreover, since Matthew's "source" is conjectured to be different from Luke's on the place and circumstances of the first meeting, this would be an *independent* attestation (on Licona's interpretation) to Thomas's *presence* at the first appearance. The entirety of John's detailed description of the first two post-resurrection appearances is cast into doubt by the claim that Matthew must be describing the first appearance to the male disciples as a group.

Because Licona expressly eschews attempts to harmonize the Easter accounts, being "more persuaded that one or more of the evangelists have creatively reconstructed the events of that watershed Sunday morning and the weeks that followed" (p. 256), he does not even always grapple with the ramifying effects of his widespread doubts about factuality.

If Licona had taken more seriously in this instance the idea that John and Matthew were eyewitnesses or even (more minimally) that they are factually reliable concerning the nature, context, and content of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, he would have had to take more seriously the possibilities for harmonization between Matthew and Luke/John such as I have discussed here.

Despite the fact that he is attributing the difference here in the first instance to the use of different sources rather than to bare fictionalization, Licona cannot miss the opportunity to attribute some pure fictionalization to Luke and Matthew. As mentioned earlier concerning Luke, he shifts the fictionalization move to their being (apparently) aware of the other source and suppressing or changing details to favor their preferred location for the first meeting. He combines this with his insistence on Luke's fictionalizing compression of all of the events onto a single day.

It is noteworthy that while in Mark // Matthew the disciples are instructed to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus, in Luke, Galilee is mentioned only as the location where Jesus had predicted his betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection. This is not as insignificant as it may appear at first look but is only one element of a larger picture involving redaction in the Synoptics. As we observed above, Luke compresses all of the appearances and the ascension to have occurred on the same day as Jesus's resurrection. So there is no time to have the disciples go to Galilee. Thus, Luke may have redacted the message of the angel in Mark // Matthew by eliminating a trip to Galilee. However, if the first appearance to the male disciples was in Jerusalem (per Luke and John), Mark // Matthew may have redacted the message to direct our focus on Galilee. (p. 180 emphasis added)

This theory does not even make much sense on its own terms, at least concerning Matthew. All of this redaction could have taken place only if the redactor were working with a version of the other source *as well as* with his own preferred source. But why, on Licona's theory, should one think that both evangelists had access to a contradictory version of the story? If "Matthew" was dependent on a source that did not include the appearances in Jerusalem but did describe an appearance in Galilee, why think that he might have "redacted the message [of the angel and Jesus] to focus our attention on Galilee"? Wouldn't it be simpler in that case to assume that he had only one line of evidence available to him? Licona cannot resist hypothesizing that an author has *all* versions of the story available and is fictionally suppressing and/or deliberately changing some of the material, even when he himself has conjectured that the evangelists might have been making use of differing sources in the first place.

Sociologically, it is unusual to have a book by an evangelical scholar that so consistently and systematically promotes Gospel fictionalization and that attempts to popularize the concept within conservative Christian circles. Licona's book is also unusual in that it makes a claim to be based on specialized research into the culture of the time when the Gospels were written. But in terms of the positions taken on the content of the Gospels, there is very little here that is new. Licona's arguments re-enact the old debate between higher critical scholars, who frequently "see" tensions or irresolvable contradictions, and harmonizers. He does not bring to the debate on, for example, harmonizing the Passion and Easter accounts any useful enlightenment based upon the extra work he has done on Greco-Roman literature. It is neither helpful nor convincing to assert repeatedly that the authors of the Gospels felt free to "vary the tradition" or "craft the story." Licona adds his own voice to the anti-harmonizers on these passages and many more and spends many pages calling the factual accuracy of the accounts into question from angles that were already familiar to scholars interested in the subject. Those already inclined to find most harmonizations strained are more likely to agree with Licona that there are contradictory accounts in the Gospels, though they still should not conclude that the authors have made deliberate alterations to the facts or that such alterations were widely culturally accepted. Those conclusions add unsupported, complex layers of conjecture. No one should accept Licona's arguments because of a mistaken idea that he has brought new and convincing evidence by cataloging Greco-Roman compositional devices and applying them to the Gospels.

5. Why It Matters: Defining Reliability Down

As I have pointed out throughout this essay, Licona's theories are strongly negatively relevant to the proposition that the Gospels are historically reliable. By the time he is finished discussing the resurrection of Jesus, the time, place, manner, and specific content of all of the resurrection appearances recounted in the Gospels have been called into question. Moreover, his approach allows almost any scene or assertion in the Gospels to be called into question unless it is asserted in multiple Gospels with nothing about it that Licona regards as a contradiction or tension. That Jesus appeared to a group of his disciples in Jerusalem *is* attested by both John and Luke, but for Licona that is still not enough to establish it, even as a claim of the apostles, since he insists quite unnecessarily that this claim stands in contradiction to Matthew and Mark. His practice also involves calling the Gospels' assertions into question frivolously even when there is no apparent contradiction.

This is all consistent with a statement in a recent interview with Bible Gateway:

Where I differ [from most evangelicals] is, I place a priority on genre over harmonization. So, *before seeking to harmonize Gospel texts*, one should read the Gospels in view of their biographical genre, which includes their authors' use of the various compositional devices commonly used when writing history and biography. Both of us see harmonization and compositional devices as solutions. Where we differ is which of these should be given priority. (emphasis added)⁴²

It is somewhat questionable whether most evangelicals accept fictionalizing devices in the sense that Licona does, but aside from that, his statement that he tries to find fictionalizations before even trying to harmonize is quite striking. Such a methodology betrays an extremely low view of the documents' reliability. If the individual accounts have positive credibility, we should be quite willing to harmonize them, since they could well both be true. Perhaps this statement of theory helps to explain Licona's utterly unforced errors. It appears that gratuitous suggestions of fictionalization may be, in colloquial terms, a feature rather than a bug in his method. By implication, such an approach involves the abandonment of any serious notion that the Gospels as *individual* documents are reliable. Indeed, it means assuming the opposite—that we should be *expecting* with a fairly high degree of frequency that the authors make things up and change facts.

As for his claim that he treats harmonization as one solution, it is one he seems rarely to adopt, particularly not in any case where a willingness to consider the texture of real life is required—which is to say, any case where harmonization is actually needed. And it is easy to see why he so often rejects harmonization as strained even when it is not. Once one is looking for fictionalizing devices before even trying to treat multiple accounts as true, one may easily never get around to harmonizing at all. Once a mere difference (even without apparent discrepancy) is seen as a place where one writer may well be making something up, why would one attempt to put the accounts together?

Licona also makes quite a strong statement about the frequency with which John changed literal facts in the service of a higher truth:

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 of Jesus. (p. 115, emphasis added)

If John did this often, it is hard to see how that would square with his being *factually* reliable. This low view of John's factual truthfulness does help to explain Licona's approach in many of the examples I have discussed.

It should be obvious that it matters whether or not we can take the Gospel authors to be trying to set down accurately (in an ordinary sense of that word) what occurred and what Jesus taught. Given the great importance of Jesus' life and teachings, we should want to know what they were like as historical reporters. Licona presents a picture of authors who think little of deliberately confusing their readers about facts and even inventing entire incidents. If this were true, it would make it extremely difficult to learn very much from their portrayals of Jesus, his

⁴² Bible Gateway Interview, June 27, 2017 < <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/06/why-are-there-differences-in-the-gospels-an-interview-with-michael-r-licona/>>

life, and his teachings. If instead they are truthful reporters in a normal sense of the word, on the literal, historical level, it is certainly worth our while to know that and, using evidence, to defend their reputation as the authors of our primary source documents about Jesus.

Remarkably, Licona is quite resistant to any suggestion that he does not take the Gospels to be reliable. In the same written debate with Bart Ehrman in which he speculated that all of the non-overlapping material in the infancy narratives might be invented (see footnote 22), he tries to define reliability in ancient documents and to assert that this concept of reliability applies to the Gospels.⁴³ Here are a few of his criteria:

We can verify numerous elements reported by an ancient author to be true in their essence though not necessarily in every detail.

But we have already seen that Licona considers things to be “details” that are actually whole incidents and that his concept of “true in their essence” is highly attenuated. This comes out in this very debate, on the very same page, when he treats all of the non-overlapping stories in Matthew and Luke about Jesus’ birth as “details outside of the story’s core,” where “the core” is simply *defined* as the overlap.

Another criterion of reliability that Licona gives is this:

We have reason to believe the author intended to write an accurate account of what occurred notwithstanding his use of compositional devices appropriate for the historical/biographical genre and the occasional appearance of errors and legend.

Given his concept of “compositional devices appropriate for the genre” and the liberties he attributes to authors, this takes away with the left hand what it gives with the right. What we have seen in many examples indicates that “accurate account” here simply cannot mean what would normally be meant by that phrase, once it is qualified in this way. And the random appearance of unvarnished legend in a putatively historical account must rather seriously call the document’s reliability into question, especially if it is difficult to tell which incidents are entirely legendary.

We have no good reasons to believe more than a very small percentage of stories reported by an ancient author are false.

If Licona followed such a statistical generalization with consistency in his own practice and applied it to the Gospels, he would not make utterly unforced errors and “prioritize genre over harmonization.” If no more than a very small percentage of stories reported by John are false, why think that John might have made up the story of Jesus’ breathing on his disciples? If no more than a very small percentage of stories reported by Matthew are false, why hypothesize that Matthew’s account of, say, the visit of the Magi might be fabricated as a “midrash,” especially since nothing in that non-overlapping story even appears to contradict anything in any other Gospels? If one thinks that no more than a very small percentage of Luke’s stories are false, why jump to the conclusion that Luke deliberately tried to give the impression that the ascension occurred on Easter, as opposed to narrating briefly and non-specifically? And so forth.

⁴³ “Licona Responds to Ehrman on New Testament Reliability,” <<https://thebestschools.org/special/ehrman-licona-dialogue-reliability-new-testament/licona-detailed-response/>>

Moreover, as in the reference to occasional legends in the other criterion, so here: If *entire stories* in a document are false, either because the ancient author knowingly made them up or accepted them in error, this must surely call the author's reliability into question, making this a fairly low bar for reliability. Licona's criteria of reliability either are worded in such a way that they do not really assert reliability, given the meaning he attaches to some of the terms, or they are not consistently applied to the Gospels.⁴⁴

A scholar is free, if he so chooses, to use a word in a non-standard way. But if he does so, he is likely to confuse his audience, and he should not expect others to acquiesce in his usage. Many Christian laymen and scholars are interested in the Gospels' high reliability in a far more common sense, having to do with *literal* historical accuracy, not making up scenes, not deliberately altering details, not accepting legends—in short, trying to get things literally right and succeeding in that enterprise. An “accurate, higher-level view of the person and mission of Jesus” is not what most of us are thinking of when we ask whether the Gospels are historically reliable.

It is also worth questioning the degree of objective probability that can accrue to events described at a high level of generality, when all specifics have been removed due to the documents' factual unreliability on anything beyond generic claims. Though all four gospels record that Mary Magdalene saw Jesus after his resurrection, why should we care about this agreement if the accounts appear to be unreliable concerning all *further* information about the meeting? Perhaps in that case their unanimity on Mary Magdalene's having seen Jesus is merely the result of a rumor to that effect in the Christian community when they were written, elaborated by the Gospel authors in different ways. Why think that any of the authors actually knew or spoke to Mary Magdalene herself or that they had any accurate information about her having met Jesus? Needless to say, that is not a position I am arguing for. I am merely pointing out that, when “overlap” among multiple accounts is achieved at the cost of eviscerating an event of most of its specific content, and when this is done explicitly by means of calling into question the factuality of the more specific content in the individual stories, what is called “multiply attested” by the end of the process may not be well-attested at all.⁴⁵

This point is especially true for the resurrection of Jesus itself. The case for the resurrection is greatly weakened if we have very little idea what the disciples even *claimed*

⁴⁴ Licona has claimed that “by no means” would the Gospels be unreliable even if views that he characterizes as going further than his own were true. Craig A. Evans has agreed with Bart Ehrman that neither the statement “Before Abraham was, I am” nor “I and the Father are one” were uttered by Jesus in an historically recognizable fashion. Rather, says Evans, such words should be seen as “he is confessions” of the “Johannine community.” See Lydia McGrew, “Jesus Never Said the ‘I Am’ Statements?” *Extra Thoughts*, September 28, 2017 <<http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2017/09/jesus-never-said-i-am-statements.html>> Licona, while not committing himself fully to Evans's position, says that he is agnostic on this matter; he presents a number of arguments intended to explain and defend Evans's views. He insists that even if all that Jesus said about his own deity were found in the traditions represented by the synoptics, while John went beyond these and made Jesus make more explicit claims to deity, John would nonetheless be historically reliable. <<https://www.risenjesus.com/reading-adapted-form-jesus-teachings-johns-gospel>> Needless to say, this represents an extremely confusing, non-standard use of the term “reliable.” It should also be needless to say that throwing out the historicity of these claims by Jesus to deity in the Gospel of John significantly weakens the biblical case for the deity of Christ. This, again, illustrates the importance of the integrity and normal reliability of the Gospel authors as historical reporters.

⁴⁵ Recent work in analytic philosophy on the concept of independent evidence is relevant to this point. The type of “independence” that arises merely from differing fictional embellishment is not helpful for confirming the overlapping content of reports. See Lydia McGrew, “Evidential Diversity and the Negation of H: A Probabilistic Account of the Value of Varied Evidence,” *Ergo* (2016) 3:10. <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ergo/12405314.0003.010?view=text;rgn=main>>

concerning when and how they saw Jesus, whether he was tangible, whether they spoke with him, and so forth. If a friend told you that he believed that his father had risen from the dead, you would naturally question him as to the nature of his experiences. If you could get no information beyond the claim that he “had a visual experience” that “led him to believe” that his father was alive, you would have very little to go on in deciding that so improbable an event had occurred. Perhaps your friend misinterpreted an hallucination or a dream. If a group of your friends said that they had collectively had such a visual experience, this would be somewhat better, but the issue would still be quite open to doubt if you could get nothing more specific. After all, if their experience were, say, that it seemed to them that a floating image of the dead man appeared in front of them without speaking for five minutes, *and nothing more*, a physical resurrection would *not* be the best explanation. Inferences to the best explanation always depend on the specifics of the data. The case for the resurrection is much stronger if we can argue, as we can, that the disciples claimed that Jesus spoke with them on multiple occasions, that he was tangible, that he ate with them, that he was with them over a period of several weeks, and so forth. Such specific claims, and the risks they took for making them, greatly narrow the possibilities for naturalistic explanations such as hallucination, delusion, or even a paranormal but non-miraculous event.⁴⁶

The skeptic of Christianity is in a far better position if he can say that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection are riddled with irresolvable contradictions and contain many fictional redactions and embellishments. But this is what Licona’s book positively asserts about the resurrection accounts.

A stark consideration is this: Christianity demands a complete commitment of life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, when God calls a man, he bids him come and die. The Christian apologist cannot fairly ask others to make that commitment unless he can provide a very strong argument for a miraculous claim.

Nor are details unimportant, even when the term is used with restraint. There are good arguments for the truth of the Gospel narratives from the fascinating interlocking of the details in the accounts.⁴⁷ The Gospels are full of vivid, specific, empirical details appearing on page after page. But if the details are up for grabs, if the Gospel authors thought nothing of making them up or altering them, why should we expect to find that they fit together or that they are externally confirmed? Those who are interested in Christian apologetics cannot have it both ways: They cannot, when it is convenient, accept an argument from a coincidental interlocking between details in the Gospels or between a detail in the Gospels and archaeology or other external evidence, but when it seems expedient to do otherwise, accept Licona’s theory that the details might at any given point have been invisibly altered by “compositional devices.”

The loss of the literal, historical reliability of the Gospels has as a corollary the loss of a concrete, vivid picture of Jesus. A redactive fog descends upon every scene. Christians for almost two thousand years thought that they could hear Jesus’ cry of “I thirst” from the cross, but apparently not. Who knows whether he ever actually said that? Probably he didn’t, and the saying is just John’s “redaction of the tradition.”

⁴⁶ For more on this point, see Lydia McGrew, “Minimal Facts vs. Maximal Data,” *What’s Wrong With the World*, February 21, 2015 <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2015/02/minimal_facts_are_not_enough.html> See also Lydia and Timothy McGrew, “The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. W. L. Craig and J. P. Moreland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 593-662. <<http://www.lydiamcgrew.com/Resurrectionarticlesinglefile.pdf>>

⁴⁷ See Lydia McGrew, *Hidden in Plain View: Undesigned Coincidences in the Gospels and Acts*.

Reading normally, we believed that Matthew really meant that Jesus healed two blind men fairly early in his ministry as described in Matthew 9:27-31, making this event literally available as evidence of his Messiahship when John the Baptist's disciples came in Matthew 11:3 to ask if Jesus was the Messiah. *There is no indication anywhere to the contrary.* But now it turns out that maybe Matthew invented that early healing as a "doublet." (This is theorized as a serious possibility by Licona on p. 135.)

A reader or hearer of John 20 would think that John was literally describing a scene between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Blinded by her grief and perhaps literally blinded by tears, she does not recognize him and thinks he is the gardener. She pleads with him to tell her where she can find the body of her Lord so that she can take him away for re-burial. Then comes his unmistakable voice: "Mary." But Licona tells us that that scene may have been John's "relocation" of the appearance to Mary Magdalene, showing the extent to which John felt free to "craft" the story. He suggests no indication in the text of John by which anyone, either now or in ancient times, could *recognize* the scene as fictional. That is not how such a "literary device" would supposedly have worked. Indeed, he does not give an opinion on whether John 20 or Matthew 28 is fictionalized. He presents only his own argument against a harmonization of John's account with Matthew 28.

Did Luke intend to report historically (Luke 24:6-8) that the angel urged the women to remember the words that Jesus spoke to them in Galilee, predicting his crucifixion and resurrection, and that the women remembered Jesus' words?⁴⁸ This is a *prima facie* historical narration, with no "tag" whatsoever in the passage to indicate, either for ancient or modern readers, that the words were never uttered. But rather than thinking that the angel said both what is recorded in Luke and in Matthew, Licona tells us that perhaps this is just Luke's redaction of the message in Matthew and Mark. Perhaps Luke was making the angel say something quite different about Galilee to avoid any mention of meeting Jesus in Galilee, since he planned fictionally to make Jesus ascend on Easter Sunday (pp. 175, 179-180).

If we had undeniable evidence that the Gospels were such works, merely (at best) like movies that are "based on true events" (p. 6), we would be forced to follow that evidence where it led. But let us not deceive ourselves into thinking that it *does not matter*. It matters greatly. The losses to Christianity from the denial of literal, historical reliability in the Gospels would be tragic, and it is unclear whether the historical, evidential case for Christianity could survive the blow. Fortunately there is no such evidence against literal reliability. In fact, there is much evidence to the contrary.⁴⁹

Before they are granted credence, Licona's theories about the Gospels deserve careful scrutiny on the part of orthodox Christians if for no other reason than that, if true, they would be

⁴⁸ Luke 24:6, participates in an undesigned coincidence. See Lydia McGrew, "New Undesigned Coincidence: The Women From Galilee," January 24, 2018

<http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/01/new_undesigned_coincidence_the.html>

⁴⁹ The amount and variety of evidence in this regard is too great to summarize briefly. I have endeavored to make a partial list of such evidence in other places while making my own contribution to it by a book-length treatment of the argument from undesigned coincidences. For a partial list of additional evidence of historicity, see *Hidden in Plain View*, pp. 224-225 and the many references in endnotes 15-23 on pp. 260-261. See also See Lydia McGrew, "Let Ancient People Speak For Themselves," January 15, 2018,

<http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/01/let_ancient_people_speak_for_t.html> and (on the evangelists' intentions) "Hoaxer or Historical Witness: The Johannine Dilemma," September 11, 2017,

<http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/09/hoaxer_or_historical_witness_t.html>. On John and the synoptics, see also Stanley Leathes, *The Witness of St. John to Christ* (London: Rivingtons, 1870), pp. 300ff.

seriously detrimental to the cause of the Gospel. We should not allow them to pass unexamined because of a desire to avoid controversy among Christians or because we assume, since Licona affirms and defends the resurrection, that all is well. The matter is important enough that it is worth our time to investigate, in some detail, whether Licona has satisfied his burden of proof. But I do not argue that the harmful nature of his ideas is a reason for rejecting them *a priori*. They should be rejected, rather, because they cannot withstand that scrutiny once it is brought to bear.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ For a portal to the entire series of blog posts on which this review is partially based, with links, see Lydia McGrew, "Licona Wrap-Up," *What's Wrong With the World*, December 15, 2017, <http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2017/12/licona_wrapup.html>. For more posts in the area of New Testament studies, see <<http://tinyurl.com/w4newtestament>>.