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HOW TO APPROACH APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS IN THE GOSPELS: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL LICONA

by Craig L. Blomberg

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SYNOPSIS

Supposed contradictions among Gospel parallels are well known. Some writers advocate a “one-size-fits-all” approach to such problems. They may default to additive harmonization, to multiplying the number of times Jesus said or did something, or several other approaches. Historians of antiquity, however, have to be eclectic. There is a broad scholarly consensus that the New Testament Gospels are biographies of Jesus and that they adopt many of the conventions of the ancient writing of history and biography. Michael Licona’s new book, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, builds on this consensus with an impressive, detailed study of one important ancient Greek biographer, Plutarch. By comparing the way Plutarch narrates the same events in the lives of the same people in more than one of his biographies, Licona isolates eight recurring compositional devices, which he then applies to Gospel parallels. Licona’s applications fall into three broad categories. The majority of his observations involve very minor differences among Gospel parallels and are largely noncontroversial, and the approach is scarcely novel. A second category involves more creative but still generally persuasive application of the compositional devices to Gospel differences. In a number of instances, however, and comprising a third category, Licona defaults to Plutarch’s devices too quickly, when other ways of explaining apparent discrepancies among the Gospels should be preferred. Particularly important is the observation that we never need resort to arguing that one or more of the Gospel writers simply invented details or episodes with no basis in the historical events of the lives of Jesus and His contemporaries.

Anyone who looks through a synopsis of Gospel parallels quickly will realize that most of the stories about Jesus found in more than one Gospel are not told in the identical words in each place. Often the variations in wording are minor, and differences are limited to additions or deletions. Sometimes consecutive passages are arranged topically rather than chronologically. In a few cases, there are more famous “apparent contradictions” that are a little harder to deal with, though in my research, I have considered all of these and believe that plausible solutions exist.¹

APPROACHES TO DISCREPANCIES

Some writers use a one-size-fits-all approach to explain Gospel discrepancies. Perhaps the best known is what may be called additive harmonization. Just take all the information in parallel accounts and put it all together and affirm everything. Sometimes this is very appropriate. All four Gospels speak of various women going to the tomb on what we now call Easter Sunday morning (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10; John 20:1). It makes good sense to combine the references and affirm that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and some other unnamed women all went together.

On the other hand, additive harmonization can lead to improbable results. One can harmonize the two accounts of the healing of the centurion’s servant (Matt. 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10) by having the officer send friends to Jesus to ask Him to heal the young man from a distance (Luke 7:6b–8). Then, a little bit later, the centurion himself could arrive and repeat at length virtually the identical words (Matt. 8:8–9). But this does not ring true to life and is an unnecessary recourse once one realizes that in Jesus’ world, as in ours today, one person could be said to be acting or speaking through their intermediaries.

Other commentators may default to an approach that if there are slight differences between apparently parallel accounts, they imagine Jesus having done or said something very similar at least twice. Again, there are occasions where this seems to be the most historically responsible approach. The shorter and more proverbial a saying, the more likely Jesus *would* have used it in multiple contexts. But it becomes almost ludicrous to try to deal with every problem this way. Do we really want to argue, as the Protestant Reformer, Osiander, did, that Jesus raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead twice, just to account for the differences between Matthew 9:18–26 and Mark 5:21–43? And it is logically impossible to deal with the differences among the various accounts of Jesus’ Last Supper by claiming He had more than one “last” meal!

History is complex, and good historians must be prepared to suggest a wide array of solutions to problems they encounter.² Sometimes the issues involve the nature of ancient reporting. In a world without any symbols for quotation marks or any felt need for them, it was considered perfectly appropriate and completely truthful to summarize in one’s own words what somebody else said, as long as one was faithful to the meaning of the other person’s speech. Many of the variations among Gospel

parallels fall into this category. At times, parallels differ because of the transmission of the tradition. As people passed along key information orally, they often abbreviated, streamlined, or stylized it to make it easier to remember. Still another major reason for differences involves each Gospel writer's distinctive theological emphases.

Licona's Contribution

Enter Michael Licona's impressive new book, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* Licona is well aware that a large consensus today of biblical scholars of all major theological traditions recognizes the Gospels resemble ancient biographies in numerous ways. The problem is that they don't always look like modern biographies, so we don't always think of them as such. Biographies in New Testament times might not include accounts of a person's birth. Often little was said about someone's early years. There was typically a disproportionate focus on the teachings and actions that made them famous as adults and on the events leading up to their death, based on the conviction that how a person died told you a lot about who they really were.

We are fortunate to have a remarkable number of ancient biographies from the centuries immediately surrounding the life of Jesus. A few of these are Jewish, but most are Greek or Roman. Sometimes we even have parallel accounts of events in two or more sources that enable us to compare and contrast what those writers did with what the Gospel writers did. In the first century, we have the Jewish historian Josephus writing two major multivolume works: the *Antiquities* and the *Jewish War*. Where those works overlap, Josephus does not always recount his stories in exactly the same way. The same is true when we compare two *different* biographers, like the Greek authors Arrian and Plutarch writing about the life of Alexander the Great.

Licona has chosen to study the first-to-second century Greek biographer Plutarch, who wrote no less than fifty "lives" of important ancient figures from his world. Licona identifies thirty episodes that Plutarch narrates more than once, in nine of these biographies, which vary from each other in a variety of ways that appear to resemble the variations among the New Testament Gospels. These episodes come from the lives of such well-known Roman individuals as Julius Caesar, Brutus, Pompey, and Antony, as well as from the biographies of less famous people such as Crassus, Cato Minor, Sertorius, and Lucullus. Licona identifies in Plutarch eight particular compositional devices that are nearly universal in ancient history writing, so that we should not be surprised to find them in biography as well. Licona calls these eight devices transferal, displacement, conflation, compression, spotlighting, simplification, expansion of narrative details, and paraphrasing.

Licona next proceeds to summarize each of the thirty narratives in Plutarch that he has studied, along with the ways in which the parallel accounts differ. Then he lists the compositional devices that he thinks are at work in the parallel accounts. While one might quibble about a few of his analyses, overall Licona more than succeeds in demonstrating that all the compositional devices he has enumerated do indeed appear

in Plutarch's parallel lives. His conclusions include the following: Plutarch often "provides more details of a story in a *Life* where it bears greater biographical relevance for the main character." More generally, he alters his earlier accounts by "using synonyms, using different wording, different syntax," and he "changes a statement to a question (or vice versa)." "He paraphrases [sayings] and content, sometimes by summarizing a large amount and recasting it." "Plutarch often shines a literary spotlight on a character." "He often compresses and conflates accounts. He also takes the words or actions he had assigned to a certain character in one *Life* and transfers them to a different character in another *Life*." Licona adds that Plutarch appears to have free-floating sayings, editorial emphases, varying motives for the same character, differences in names and numbers, locations of events, chronologies, the occasional slip of memory, and the invention of details with historical verisimilitude. Most of these differences involve elements peripheral to the main plot of each episode, and only rarely are we unable to make educated guesses as to what Plutarch was doing.

Finally, Licona turns to the Gospels, selecting nineteen passages that occur in two or more of them, which seem to him to illustrate the same compositional devices that he identified in Plutarch. These come from all portions of Jesus' adult ministry. As with his discussion of Plutarch, Licona summarizes each narrative, analyzes the differences between parallels, and concludes with a list of the compositional devices he discovers. He often acknowledges multiple options for explaining certain differences but understandably favors those that fit his list of Plutarch's kinds of changes.

CRITIQUE

It is easy to agree with many of Licona's proposals, and they are not all new. For example, either Matthew or Luke inverted the order of the second two temptations of Jesus (Matt. 4:5-11; Luke 4:5-13) in order to culminate his series with a theme that fits one of his overall emphases (worship in Matthew; the temple in Luke). Peter did not deny Jesus six times; the minor differences among the settings of the denials in each of the four Gospels do not change the fact that in each one Jesus has predicted, and the reader sees fulfilled, Peter's *threefold* denial of Christ (Matt. 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:55-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27). The location in the Passion narrative in which Christ's flogging occurs, like the place in the sequence of events where Jesus is offered some sour wine to drink once He was on the cross, varies as well (Mark 15:15-23; John 19:1-29). But the writers are not attempting to give us a blow-by-blow, completely chronological account of things, and everything they say happened to Jesus did in fact happen. John *is* shining his spotlight on Mary Magdalene by mentioning her at the beginning of his resurrection account (John 20:1) because of her importance in the early church, even though other women went with her (note the "we" in v. 2). Many other similar examples could be given, not to mention the plethora of smaller changes Licona correctly identifies as due to the use of synonyms, topical or thematic narration,

abbreviation, explanation, paraphrase, theological emphasis, stylistic editing, or lack of modern precision in storytelling.

In other instances, Licona suggests approaches that are less common and more creative, but which still make very good sense. He observes, for example, that the Synoptics introduce John the Baptist by claiming him to be the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 (Mark 1:3 and parallels), whereas the fourth Gospel has John himself claim to be “the voice crying in the wilderness” (John 1:23). Licona recognizes that John the apostle could easily have had John the Baptist use these words as an accurate summary of his more extensive claims that the Synoptics spell out. In comparing Mark’s and Luke’s versions of the resurrection of Jairus’s daughter, we observe that “people” in the plural come from Jairus’s home to Jesus in Mark (5:35), whereas in Luke an individual man comes to tell him that the daughter has died (8:49). Licona surmises, “Luke may have shone his spotlight on the man who made the announcement to Jairus,” even if others came together with him. When Jesus is nearing Jericho on His final journey to Jerusalem, Matthew and Mark narrate a story of Him healing the blind but then explain this took place as He was leaving the city, whereas Luke seems to suggest His healing miracle occurred as He approached the city. But only Luke also narrates the story of Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus in Jericho. Luke may therefore have preferred to narrate the events in thematic (and climactic) order with his spotlight particularly on Zacchaeus. Again, many additional examples could be mentioned.

The weakness of a study like Licona’s is disclosed in a third set of examples. Sometimes it is not at all clear that appealing to one of Plutarch’s compositional devices is the best way to explain the differences among Gospel parallels. So, for example, after the feeding of the 5,000, when Mark says Jesus told the disciples to go to Bethsaida (Mark 6:45) while John says they set off for Capernaum (John 6:17), Licona believes that “it will not work to harmonize the accounts by asserting the disciples intended to go to Bethsaida but were blown off course and landed in Capernaum.” I agree. But why not look first for a way that both statements could be true? Licona thinks the feeding miracle had to occur very close to Bethsaida because Jesus and the disciples went there first in Luke 9:10. But two verses later, Luke agrees with both Mark and John that they have moved on to “a remote place” (v. 12). The most likely region for such a place is east of the Sea of Galilee, from which one could easily refer to two different cities (both to the northwest) as the destination of the little troupe, especially if they stopped at Bethsaida en route to Capernaum. In fact, if Jesus knew the weather was going to be bad, He could have told them to head for Bethsaida first so they would stay closer to shore and not be in the open and most exposed parts of the sea. There is no theological reason for either evangelist to substitute one city for the other, and all Licona can suggest is that “one or more of the evangelists artistically weave elements into their narrative that were not remembered in a precise manner.” Yet there is nothing artistic about replacing Bethsaida with Capernaum or vice-versa. It is better to suggest the two Gospel writers independently knew what they were talking about.

Or consider the difference between Mark's account of Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) and Matthew's account of Jesus healing two unnamed blind men (Matt. 20:29–34). Both occur in the same place in the evangelists' outlines, both occur near Jericho, and the only really interesting difference between the two versions is the fact that Matthew has two individuals rather than one. Licona already has highlighted from Plutarch the most probable explanation of the differences, and he mentions it here as the last option he discusses, though seemingly without enthusiasm: one evangelist, in this case Mark, shines the spotlight on the key individual involved without implying that no one else was present. So why complicate matters by suggesting that Matthew is compensating for the fact that earlier he did not include Mark's account of the blind man healed at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26)? He has no need to compensate for anything because he has already included a story, earlier still in his narrative, of Jesus healing two different blind men somewhere near Capernaum (Matt. 9:27–31). Licona also appeals to Matthew's supposed tendency for doubling individuals, perhaps in keeping with the "two or three witnesses" principle of Deuteronomy 19:15. But there are actually only two places in all of Matthew where this "tendency" occurs — in 8:28 where there are two demon possessed men instead of Mark's one (Mark 5:2) and in 20:30 with the two blind men. Chapter 9:27–31 can't be counted because it has no parallels in Mark. Since when do *two* examples make a pattern?

For a final example where Licona seems too impervious to a traditional harmonization, we may turn to the vexed question of the day on which Jesus was crucified. Without rehearsing the arguments I have set forth in detail in several of my writings for how I think all the relevant texts in both John and the Synoptics should be dealt with,³ let me just summarize Licona's conclusion and then point to two features in the text of John that in my opinion make it impossible. Licona, with many, determines that John has "displaced the celebration of the Passover meal to have occurred one day later than we find in the Synoptics." He did this, along with altering the time of Jesus' crucifixion "in order to emphasize theological points, specifically that Jesus is the burnt offering for sins and the Passover Lamb." Licona is confident that if one read John without any knowledge of the Synoptics, one could conclude only that Jesus was crucified on the afternoon just before the evening of the first main meal of Passover week, but he believes it was perfectly acceptable for John to alter the day to emphasize the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death. In fact, he thinks John did the same thing to Mark's statement about the time of Jesus' crucifixion, changing it from the third hour (9:00 a.m.; Mark 15:25) to the sixth hour (noon; John 19:14) so that Jesus would die at the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.), the time the Passover lambs were to be slaughtered for the evening feast.

The first problem with this common explanation of the seeming divergence between John and the Synoptics is that John never says how long Jesus hung on the cross until He died. The only indication of time we get is that He was still with Pilate at "about" noon, just before Pilate handed Him over to be crucified. John never gives a single hint as to how many hours He was on the cross; that comes only in Mark 15:33.

Without that reference to His death at the ninth hour (3:00 p.m.), we would have no reason to suspect a synchronism with the time of the sacrifice of the lambs. The second and even bigger problem involves John 19:31. It is true that the clause in verse 14, *ēnde paraskeuē tou pascha*, could mean “it was the day of Preparation for the Passover,” but it could just as easily mean “it was the day of Preparation (for the Sabbath) in Passover week.” Fridays were routinely called “the Day of Preparation” in Jewish circles. *Without looking at Mark*, how do we decide which John means? Verse 31 settles the matter: “it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath.” Then when we consult Mark, we see John has changed nothing, because Mark 15:42 states explicitly, “It was Preparation Day (that is the day before the Sabbath).” Add to all this that John was writing primarily for Gentile Christians in the diaspora who were unlikely to have known the fine points of Passover preparation without John spelling any of this out, and it becomes almost impossible to imagine him “pulling a Plutarch” here. Once again, several other similar problems could be cited in Licona’s survey of Gospel parallels.

In conclusion, Licona has undertaken a painstaking study of an important near-contemporary to the New Testament authors. It is understandable that he would want Plutarch to be the key to solving all the Gospel problems. But historians must be eclectics. There are all kinds of reasons for the differences among the canonical texts, and we dare not default to any single approach as our solution for all of them. In many cases, alleged parallels with Plutarch’s compositional devices prove persuasive, but in a number of cases, they do not. Most importantly, there is no evidence that the Gospel writers ever actually invented out of whole cloth details that they inserted into their narratives. As I have tried to demonstrate in my writing elsewhere, there are always more plausible explanations for the apparent discrepancies than this one.⁴

Craig L. Blomberg is Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary. He is the author, coauthor, and editor of twenty-five books, four of them on the historical trustworthiness of Scripture.

NOTES

1. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007).
2. Craig L. Blomberg, “The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 135–74.
3. See esp. Craig L. Blomberg, “A Constructive Traditional Response to New Testament Criticism,” in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 345–65.
4. Most recently, see Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament* (Nashville: B and H, 2016).