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HOW TO APPROACH APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS IN THE GOSPELS: RESPONSE

by Michael Licona and Craig Blomberg

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I would like to thank Professor Craig Blomberg for interacting with my most recent book *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (vol. 40, no. 2). In this book, I propose that compositional devices (i.e., literary devices commonly used in historical literature written during the Greco-Roman era) are responsible for many of the differences in the gospels. Blomberg's article is a slightly edited version of the paper he delivered at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Mark Strauss and Darrel Bock also delivered papers related to my book. And the three papers were followed by a panel discussion in which I was included.

Blomberg's reservations with my book may be boiled down to two. (1) He thinks I regard compositional devices as the solution to all gospel differences, and (2) he expresses disagreement with a few of my solutions, asserting that an appeal to compositional devices in those instances is unnecessary. (I would like to note that Strauss and Bock did not share Blomberg's concerns.)

Regarding the first reservation, he writes,

It is understandable that [Licona] 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.

Blomberg's comment is unfortunate, because I'm quite clear in the book that there are many reasons for the presence of differences. On page 2, I list ten to which may be added the compositional devices discussed in the book. On page 3, I write, "This book is not a Rosetta Stone for understanding all of the differences in the gospels." On page 119, I write,

My proposed solutions are tentative. Others have offered different solutions. Some New Testament scholars may prefer to view some of the differences as resulting from an evangelist redacting the tradition in order to make a theological point rather than seeing the use of a compositional device. Such an approach may sometimes be preferable. In these pericopes, I am primarily attempting to view the differences in light of compositional devices to see if a greater understanding of what lays behind the differences may be obtained in some instances.

In my chapter summary on page 182, I write, “I have limited myself to those pericopes I regard as having the best chance of containing differences resulting from the same type of compositional devices.” Naturally, these “best chance” examples will suggest the use of compositional devices. Ironically, Blomberg himself wrote in his review, “[Licona] often acknowledges multiple options for explaining certain differences.” This is a far cry from his contention that I am seeing compositional devices as “the key to solving all the Gospel problems.” That said, I think compositional devices very often illuminate what is behind gospel differences and do so in a manner superior to some of the solutions Blomberg proposes. But I’ll leave it to the reader to decide.

Blomberg’s second reservation with my book involves solutions I proposed for three gospel differences and for which he prefers other solutions: the location to which Jesus commanded His disciples to go after feeding the 5,000, the healing of blind Bartimaeus, and the day and time of Jesus’ crucifixion. Space limitations prevent me here from addressing the weaknesses in Blomberg’s alternative proposals. However, those interested may listen to the panel discussion where he and I discuss them: www.risenjesus.com/panel (begin at 10:25–45:00).

Michael R. Licona

Craig L. Blomberg replies: Mike Licona is a good friend. He has already taken too much flak just for asking about the literary genre of Matthew 27:52b–53, and his views have been repeatedly misrepresented by his harshest critics. I do not want to replicate that process on the issue of gospel parallels. I knew that Mike acknowledged other options as possible besides those he chose. But as his reply acknowledges, he chose only passages where he believed Plutarch’s compositional devices solved the problems best. So there is no tension between my noting that he allowed for other solutions while nevertheless taking a uniform approach to all the passages that he treated.

My biggest concern is not clearly reflected in either of the two points Mike makes to summarize my reservations. That concern is that I do not believe the gospel writers ever just invented unhistorical material to flesh out their accounts of Jesus’ words and works. Plutarch does do this at times, and this is where I believe the value of appealing to Plutarch breaks down. Neither Darrell Bock nor Mark Strauss has ever suggested that option; their remit at ETS was to deal with other issues.