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## The Devil is in the Details: Biblical Inerrancy and the Licona Controversy

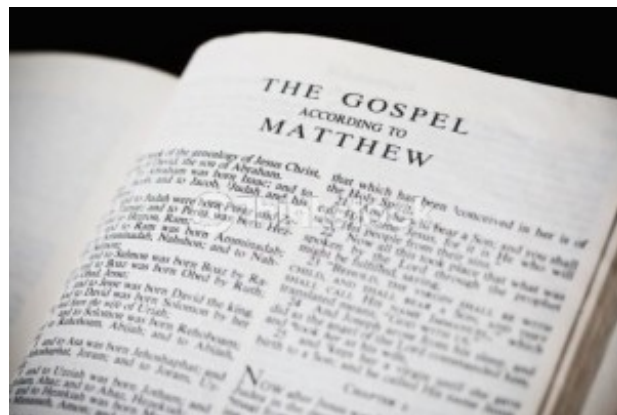
*It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in general terms. The integrity of this affirmation depends upon the affirmation of inerrancy in every detailed sense.*

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The affirmation of biblical inerrancy is nothing more, and nothing less, than the affirmation of the Bible’s total truthfulness and trustworthiness. The assertion of the Bible’s inerrancy — that the Bible is “free from all falsehood or mistake” — is an essential safeguard for the Bible’s authority as the very Word of God in written form. The reason for this should be clear: to affirm anything short of inerrancy is to allow that the Bible does contain falsehoods or mistakes.



Lamentably, the issue of biblical inerrancy has been and remains an issue of some controversy within evangelicalism. Addressing this crisis, a group of leading evangelicals met in Chicago in 1978 under the auspices of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy to adopt what became known as *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*.

The opening words of that statement set the issue clearly:

*The authority of Scripture is a key issue for the Christian Church in this and every age. Those who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are called to show the reality of their discipleship by humbly and faithfully obeying God's written Word. To stray from Scripture in faith or conduct is disloyalty to our Master. Recognition of the total truth and trustworthiness of Holy Scripture is essential to a full grasp and adequate confession of its authority.*

Those who affirm biblical inerrancy understand this affirmation to be essential, not just to the question of the Bible's perfection as the Word of God, but also to the question of evangelical consistency. Thus, the Evangelical Theological Society requires an affirmation of inerrancy for membership, and it has adopted the *Chicago Statement* as the guiding definition of that requirement.

The question of biblical inerrancy has recently arisen in connection with a book written by Michael R. Licona and published by InterVarsity Press last year. Licona is a well-known evangelical apologist who has served as Research Professor of New Testament at Southern Evangelical Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, and, until recently, on the staff of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is based in Atlanta.

Licona's book in question, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, is both massive and important. Furthermore, it is virtually unprecedented in terms of evangelical scholarship. The 700-page volume is nothing less than a masterful defense of the historicity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Licona is a gifted scholar who has done what other evangelical scholars have not yet done — he has gone right into the arena of modern historiographical research to do comprehensive battle with those who reject the historical nature of Christ's resurrection from the dead.

And Licona does so with remarkable skill and great erudition. He also writes with a commendable and quite transparent intellectual honesty. This is a very serious scholar making a very serious case for the fact that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead — and that this event is historically documented and accessible to the modern historian.

When Licona affirms the resurrection as a historical fact, he uses the definition of Richard Evans, who has argued that a historical fact is "something that happened and that historians attempt to 'discover' through verification procedures." Licona denies that the resurrection is inaccessible to the modern historian, and he asserts with confidence the fact that historians who deny the historical nature of the resurrection are simply operating out of their own ideological preconception that such things simply do not happen.

In making his case, Licona demonstrates his knowledge of modern historiography, the philosophy of history, and the work of modern historians. He confronts head-on the

arguments against the historicity of the resurrection put forth by scholars ranging from Bart Ehrman and Gerd Ludemann to John Dominic Crossan.

In taking on Crossan, Licona documents Crossan's straightforward denial that the resurrection can be a historical event. Crossan operates out of a naturalistic worldview that precludes belief in anything supernatural, such as the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Crossan, a veteran of the infamous "Jesus Seminar" that sought to remove all supernatural elements from the New Testament, asserts that the body of Jesus remained in the tomb, where it decomposed and was eventually consumed by scavengers.

Licona offers a powerful rebuttal to Crossan, demonstrating, first of all, that Crossan operates out of a worldview that simply denies that a resurrection can happen. Licona takes Crossan's arguments and, one by one, he answers them convincingly. Along the way, he documents Crossan's own anti-supernatural ideological commitments and his use of psychohistory to explain the experience of the disciples.

But, even as Licona dissects arguments against the resurrection of Jesus as a historical fact, he then makes a shocking and disastrous argument of his own. Writing about Matthew 27:51-54, Licona suggests that he finds material that is not to be understood as historical fact.

The text reads:

*And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" [Matthew 27:51-54, English Standard Version]*

The issue of greatest concern with regard to Licona's own argument is how he deals with Matthew's report that "many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many."

Earlier in his book, Licona had suggested that some of the biblical material might be "poetic language or legend at certain points," specifically mentioning Matthew 27:51-54 as an example.

That statement is deeply troubling, but when he turns his full attention to Matthew 27:51-54, his argument makes a turn for the worse. He refers to "that strange little text in

Matthew 27:52-53, where upon Jesus' death the dead saints are raised and walk into the city of Jerusalem.”

Licona then refers to various classical parallels in ancient literature and to the Bible's use of apocalyptic language and, after his historical survey, states: “it seems to me that an understanding of the language in Matthew 27:52-53 as 'special effects' with eschatological Jewish texts and thought in mind is most plausible.”

Special effects? Licona then writes:

“There is further support for this interpretation. If the tombs opened and the saints being raised upon Jesus' death was not strange enough, Matthew adds that they did not come out of their tombs until *after* Jesus' resurrection. What were they doing between Friday afternoon and early Sunday morning? Were they standing in the now open doorways of their tombs and waiting?”

This is a very troubling argument. First of all, if we ever accept the fact that we are to explain what anyone in the Bible was doing when the Bible does not tell us, we enter into a trap of interpretive catastrophe. We are accountable for what the Bible tells us, not what it does not.

Licona eventually writes, “It seems best to regard this difficult text in Matthew as a poetic device added to communicate that the Son of God had died and that impending judgment awaited Israel.”

He even seems to catch himself at this point, conceding that if the raising of these saints, along with Matthew's other reported phenomena, is a poetic device, “we may rightly ask whether Jesus' resurrection is not more of the same.”

This is exactly the right question, and Licona's proposed answers to his own question are disappointing in the extreme. In his treatment of this passage, Licona has handed the enemies of the resurrection of Jesus Christ a powerful weapon — the concession that some of the material reported by Matthew in the very chapter in which he reports the resurrection of Christ simply did not happen and should be understood as merely “poetic device” and “special effects.”

This past summer, evangelical philosopher Norman Geisler addressed two open letters to Michael Licona, charging him with violating the inerrancy of Scripture in making his argument about Matthew 27:52-53. Licona, Geisler argued, had “dehistoricized” the biblical text. As Geisler made clear, this was a direct violation of biblical inerrancy. Licona's approach to this text, Geisler argued, “would undermine orthodoxy by dehistoricizing many crucial passages of the Bible.”

Geisler called upon Michael Licona to change his position on this text and to affirm it as historical fact without reservation. But Geisler, a member of the Evangelical Theological Society [ETS] for many years, made another very important point. He reminded Licona that such arguments had been encountered before within the ETS, and it had led to the expulsion of a member.

Amazingly enough, the issue in that controversy was also centered in the Gospel of Matthew. New Testament scholar Robert Gundry had written *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, published in 1982. In that volume, Gundry had argued that Matthew was using the literary form of midrash and that he had thus combined both historical and non-historical material in his Gospel in order to make his own theological points. Gundry had written that readers of Matthew should not operate under the assumption “that narrative style in the Bible always implies the writing of history.” Gundry proposed that Matthew freely changed and added details in his infancy narrative to suit his theological purpose.

Scholars including D. A. Carson and Darrell Bock argued, in response, that Matthew was not writing midrash and that his first readers would never have assumed him to have done so. Scholars also noted that Gundry’s approach was doctrinally disastrous. Gundry had argued that Matthew “edited the story of Jesus’ baptism so as to emphasize the Trinity.” Thus, Matthew was not reporting truthfully what had happened in terms of historical fact, but what he wanted to report in order to serve his theological purpose. Gundry had suggested that Matthew changed Luke’s infancy narrative by changing shepherds into Magi and the manger into a house. As one evangelical scholar retorted: “For Gundry, then, the nonexistent house was where the nonpersons called Magi found Jesus on the occasion of their nonvisit to Bethlehem.”

In 1983, the Evangelical Theological Society voted to request that Robert Gundry resign from its membership. The arguments for his expulsion from the ETS are exactly those that are now directly relevant to the argument that Michael Licona makes about Matthew 27:51-54. The suggestions that these events reported by Matthew are “special effects” and a “poetic device” are exactly the kind of dehistoricizing that led to Gundry’s removal from the ETS. Gundry’s argument concerning Matthew’s use of midrash is virtually parallel to Licona’s argument from classical references and Jewish apocalyptic sources.

*The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* explicitly declares that these approaches are incompatible with the affirmation that the Bible is inerrant. There is every reason within the text to believe that Matthew intends to report historical facts. Matthew 27:51-54 is in the very heart of Matthew’s report of the resurrection of Christ as historical fact. Dehistoricizing this text is calamitous and inconsistent with the affirmation of biblical inerrancy.

Article XVIII of the *Chicago Statement* makes this point with precision: “We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship.” Furthermore, the *Chicago Statement* requires that “history must be treated as history.”

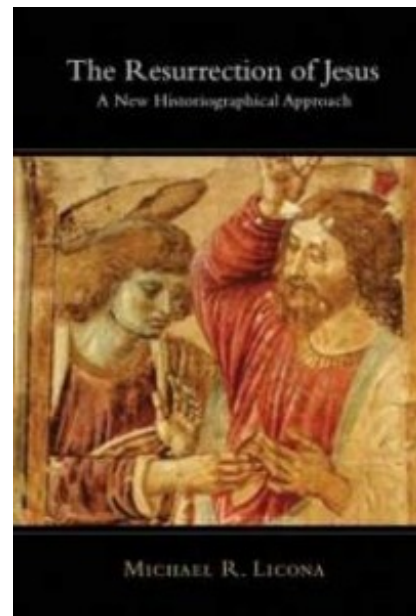
In a response to Norman Geisler, Michael Licona stated his affirmation of inerrancy but did not retract his arguments concerning Matthew 27:51-54. In fact, he made no reference to “special effects” but said that his position had been that the text should be interpreted as “apocalyptic imagery.” He also stated: “When writing my book, I always regarded the entirety of Matthew 27 as historical narrative containing apocalyptic allusions.”

But what can this really mean? In his book, he clearly argues that the raising of the saints was not to be taken as historical fact, leaving no other option but to understand that Licona understands at least some of the “apocalyptic allusions” he sees in Matthew 27 to be something other than historical in nature. Thus, “the entirety” of Matthew 27 is not to be taken as consistent historical narrative at all.

Licona also wrote: “Further research over the last year in the Greco-Roman literature has led me to reexamine the position I took in my book. Although additional research certainly remains, at present I am just as inclined to understand the narrative of the raised saints in Matthew 27 as a report of a factual (i.e., literal) event as I am to view it as an apocalyptic symbol. It may also be a report of a real event described partially in apocalyptic terms. I will be pleased to revise the relevant section in a future edition of my book.”

This hardly resolves the issue. As a matter of fact, Licona’s only real concession here is to allow that Matthew’s report of the raised saints may be as likely as his earlier published argument. That is not a retraction. Further, he says that his slight change of view on the issue came after research in the Greco-Roman literature. As the *Chicago Statement* would advise us to ask: What could one possibly find in the Greco-Roman literature that would either validate or invalidate the status of this report as historical fact?

There is one crucial difference between the cases of Robert Gundry and Michael



Licona. Gundry had written a major commentary on Matthew that demonstrated throughout his approach to Matthew as midrash and his argument that Matthew was changing historical facts to suit his theological agenda. Michael Licona has written a massive defense of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. His treatment of Matthew 27:51-54 is glaringly inconsistent with his masterful defense of the resurrection as history and of Matthew as a faithful reporter of this central historical fact.

We can only hope that Michael Licona will resolve this inconsistency by affirming without reservation the status as historical fact of all that Matthew reports in chapter 27 and all that the New Testament presents as historical narrative. He needs to rethink the question he asked himself in his book — “If some or all of the phenomena reported at Jesus’ death are poetic devices, we may rightly ask whether Jesus’ resurrection is not more of the same.”

In his book, he asked precisely the right question, but then he gave the wrong answer. We must all hope that he will ask himself that question again and answer in a way that affirms without reservation that all of Matthew’s report is historical. If not, Licona has not only violated the inerrancy of Scripture, but he has blown a massive hole into his own masterful defense of the resurrection.

It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in principle. The devil, as they say, is in the details. That is what makes *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* so indispensable and this controversy over Licona’s book so urgent. It is not enough to affirm biblical inerrancy in general terms. The integrity of this affirmation depends upon the affirmation of inerrancy in every detailed sense.

Michael Licona is a gifted and courageous defender of the Christian faith and a bold apologist of Christian truth. Our shared hope must be that he will offer a full correction on this crucial question of the Bible’s full truthfulness and trustworthiness. I will be praying for him with the full knowledge that I have been one who has been gifted and assisted by needed correction. Leaving his argument where it now stands will not only diminish the influence of Michael Licona — it will present those who affirm the inerrancy of the Bible with yet another test of resolve.

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*The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* [1978]

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