

WHY ARE THERE DIFFERENCES IN THE GOSPELS?

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM
ANCIENT BIOGRAPHY



MICHAEL R. LICONA

FOREWORD BY CRAIG A. EVANS

By

Mark McGee

The full title of this wonderful book is *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?: What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2017). The author, Dr. Michael Licona, is Associate Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University and president of Risen Jesus. Lee Strobel interviewed Licona for his book *The Case for the Real Jesus* and video "The Case for Christ."

Dr. Licona is the author of several books including *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (IVP Academic, 2010) and *Paul Meets Muhammad* (Baker, 2006). He is also co-author with Gary Habermas of the award-winning book *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel, 2004) and co-editor with William Dembski of *Evidence for God: 50 Arguments for Faith from the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Science* (Baker, 2010). Licona is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society, the Institute for Biblical Research, and the Society of Biblical Literature. He is also a well-known speaker and debater and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs.

Dr. Craig Evans, Dean of the School of Christian Thought at Houston Baptist University, wrote the Foreword to *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* –

“Many Christian readers of Dr. Licona’s book will be surprised by his findings. Some will perhaps be troubled. Hopefully all will read his book with an open, teachable mind.”

I agree with Dr. Evans’ assessment. Michael Licona is one of the top New Testament scholars writing on the subject today and his findings and conclusions may surprise some readers. However, as for possibly being troubled, I found it to be most settling. The book contains the answers to so many questions and doubts from people searching for the truth about Jesus of Nazareth. What I found in the book was an extraordinary depth of scholarship that both Christians and non-Christians should consider seriously and carefully.

As a former atheist and opponent of the Gospel of Christ, I can tell you that what Dr. Licona presents from his research will be formidable in its ability to give believers a clarity of understanding and unbelievers an opportunity to see the legitimacy of the Gospels in their historical setting. One of the powerful arguments that helped me see the reliability of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) was looking at the texts from the perspective of other writings and practices of the various eras represented in Scripture.

As a journalist I am fond of orderly systems of research and presentation of findings. Dr. Licona has done an excellent job of that in the way he presents his findings throughout the book. The appendixes, indexes, notes, glossary and bibliography are also helpful for further study and independent research.

I highly recommend Michael Licona's new book to anyone who is searching for answers to their questions about the veracity and credibility of the Gospel accounts.

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Publisher: About The Book

- Argues that differences in the Gospels are similar to differences in works by other ancient authors
- Compares pericopes from Plutarch's work in order to better understand the compositional devices he employed
- Invites readers to understand the Gospels more nearly the way their authors originally intended

Anyone who reads the Gospels carefully will notice that there are differences in the manner in which they report the same events. These differences have led many conservative Christians to resort to harmonization efforts that are often quite strained, sometimes to the point of absurdity. Many people have concluded the Gospels are hopelessly contradictory and therefore historically unreliable as accounts of Jesus. The majority of New Testament scholars now hold that most if not all of the

Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography and that this genre permitted some flexibility in the way in which historical events were narrated. However, few scholars have undertaken a robust discussion of how this plays out in Gospel pericopes (self-contained passages).

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

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

Reviews & Endorsements

“Criticism often progresses through comparison, as it does in this significant volume. Licona’s experiment of exploring differences between the synoptics in the light of differences within Plutarch is suggestive in multiple respects, and students of the gospels will come away with much to ponder.” Dale C. Allison, Jr., Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament, Princeton Theological Seminary

“Licona should be applauded for helping his audience rethink their presuppositions about the Gospels by situating them among ancient Mediterranean biographies, rather than the modern kind, correcting a ‘historical nearsightedness.’ Moreover, the presentation is very reader friendly, with a glossary and appendices added to assist those lacking certain competencies. Interested readers can add this affordable volume to their libraries with confidence.” Reading Religion

“Anyone who has looked at a synopsis of the Gospels will have wondered why the accounts of the same events in different Gospels vary. Michael Licona breaks new ground by arguing that the writers used the same compositional devices as the biographer Plutarch employed when he reworked the same material in more than one of his biographies. This is an illuminating fresh approach to understanding how the Gospel writers used their sources.” Richard Bauckham, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies, University of St. Andrews

“How worried should we be by the differences between the Gospels? Do they discredit the whole story? In an exemplary crossover of classical and New Testament studies, Michael Licona shows that the answer is ‘not very worried at all’: when we compare the techniques used in Greco-Roman literature, the striking feature is the Gospels’ consistency rather than their differences. Troubled believers will find this book as important as classicists and New Testament scholars.” Christopher Pelling, Regius Professor of Greek, Christ Church, Oxford

“Licona’s book is the most important book I’ve ever read on the literary techniques of the Evangelists. There is no book that has this finesse based on the Gospel genre as a ‘biography’ and hence this study can be used with confidence in classes engaged in the Synoptic Gospels. His conclusions about how the Evangelists did what they did are reliable and yet give us one more clear glimpse in how to understand the nature of the Gospels.” Scot McKnight, Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary

“Professor Licona’s new book is a monograph exploring some compositional techniques which the synoptic evangelists appear to have used. Clarificatory and thorough, it is an accomplished piece of work which it is a pleasure to commend.” J I Packer, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College

Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?: What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography (Oxford University Press, 2016, 336 pages)

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