

By Lydia McGrew

Pat has asked me to write about an interview between Michael Licona and Matt Fradd that has come out around the same time as Pat's interview with me. A few points about that interview.

First, in discussing [Gospel reliability](#) Dr. Licona simply did not begin to convey the number and significance of the places where he questions Gospel historicity. He gave the distinct impression that he considers the Gospels highly reliable in a literal, historical sense, but in fact his concept of "details" that the authors felt free to change is quite wide-ranging. I write about all of this meticulously in *The Mirror or the Mask*. To give just a couple of examples, Licona unnecessarily questions the report in John that Jesus said, "I thirst," arguing that this is John's altered version of the quite different saying, "My God, why have you forsaken me." There is not even an apparent discrepancy here. Jesus could easily have said both. Licona thinks that Luke moved the first appearance to the disciples all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, despite the fact that a first appearance in Jerusalem is multiply attested in Luke and John. This alleged moving has apologetic implications, since (among other things) it is difficult to see how the appearance to Doubting Thomas can be fitted into such a scheme and since such a significant change by Luke calls Luke's historical reliability into question. There are many more such examples. Suffice it to say that Licona does not question only a few facts in the Gospels, and his theories are such that they would, consistently applied, lead us to question a great many.

Second, Matt Fradd clearly misunderstands what Licona is saying at a [certain point](#) when they are discussing compositional devices. Licona is saying in that discussion that Matthew deliberately changed the day on which Jesus cursed the fig tree and deliberately made it wither immediately in his version of the story when he knew that this did not really happen. Matt Fradd characterizes this by saying that some of these contradictions in the Gospels are merely apparent. But this is not a correct understanding of what Licona is saying. On the contrary, in the very case he is discussing, he is saying that the discrepancy is both real and *deliberately caused by Matthew*. Licona answers by saying, "It's intentional," as if this agrees with what Fradd has just said, but that is actually not compatible with saying that the discrepancy is merely apparent.

Third, Licona and Fradd are far too hasty to agree with one another that any attempt to harmonize the accounts of the death of Judas is strained and dubious. My own professional work on ad hocness (a concept they mention) shows two things: The extent to which a theory can accommodate some anomalies depends on the extent to which it is otherwise confirmed, as Luke's and Matthew's reliability is. And the extent to which an elaborated theory is ad hoc depends upon how independently improbable the elaboration of the theory is. In this case, I simply disagree (as Pat and I discussed) that there is anything so very improbable about the idea that a body fell onto its face and burst open. Such things do happen. And as Peter Williams rightly pointed out, some sort of height is implied anyway by the bursting open reported in Acts 1:18. In general, Licona is far too quick in his book and interviews to treat reasonable

harmonizations as artificial and strained. This is particularly ironic given the extremely artificial, strained nature of many of the literary device views that he accepts.

Fourth, Licona incorrectly states to Fradd that the sort of changes he is alleging are the kinds of things that most of us do in ordinary conversation. This is simply untrue. Licona is talking about deliberately, realistically narrating as if something happened one way when you know full-well that it did not happen that way. In the immediate context he is talking, again, about the theory that Matthew made an event (the cursing of the fig tree) happen on a day when he knew that it didn't happen and another event (the withering of the fig tree) happen immediately when he knew that it didn't. (And as Licona's theories of deliberate change go, this is a relatively mild example.) If someone you know routinely, realistically tells you stories in which he deliberately includes such false details, much less larger changes, I suggest you treat his assertions with great caution. You certainly shouldn't think of such a person as historically reliable! Contra Licona, this is *not* how truthful, reliable people behave in ordinary conversation.