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## Ancient Greco-Roman Story-Telling and the Gospels

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Do apparent contradictions in the gospels mean we can't trust them as reliable sources of information about the person and life of Christ? Dr. Mike Licona tackles this important question by examining ancient Greco-Roman biography, the genre to which the gospels belong, and the conventions used by authors of the time when writing them. He explains that what modern readers might be tempted to call errors are actually the result of legitimate compositional devices, methods of story-telling, common to that era that were accepted as truthful and trustworthy.

### Transcript

Hello, and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Licona. Dr. Licona is professor of New Testament studies at Houston Christian University, and he is the president of Risen Jesus, a 501c3 nonprofit organization. In today's episode, Dr. Mike Licona joins Sean McDowell in a deep dive into the argument put forth in his new book, *Jesus Contradicted*.

That the genre of the gospels, ancient biography, allows writers' flexibility in reporting events and constructing narratives. Well, let's just jump right in, because I think a lot of people are eager and anxious to know what arguments you make. But give us a little back story.

I didn't know when I read the introduction, talk about spending eight years of your life, thinking about and studying and examining gospel differences. What personally motivated you to spend that much time? That's a good question. So back in 2007, I believe it is, is when I debated Bart Ehrman for the first time.

We've had seven debates, but that was our first one, and it was on the resurrection of Jesus. And then the next year, 2008, we had, no, it was 2008 and then 2009, we had our second debate, both on the resurrection of Jesus and in both debates, he raised gospel differences as one of the main objections toward believing the gospels toward believing the resurrection of Jesus. Well, a long time before that, I had already, like almost two

decades before that, I had already resolved in my mind that because Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true.

And it would still be true, even if there were some errors or contradictions in the gospel, since it would have occurred before any of the gospels were ever written. So if it's true all the way up until the first gospel was written, even if, you know, if there was an error or so in the first gospel, why would that negate the resurrection since the resurrection was true before any of the gospels was written? So it didn't really bother me so much, but it did bother some Christians. And so I decided I was going to look at it more in detail at that point.

And so that's what got me interested in it initially. You cite this conversation with Gary years ago, Gary Habermas, where these differences were bothering you. And you called him and he's like, Mike, did Jesus raise from the grave? You're like, yes, then Christianity is true.

I've approached evolution that way. If evolution is true in some sense, but Jesus rose from the grave, Christianity is true. So I appreciate that focus.

Now, it might make us rethink what we mean by the Bible being the inspired word of God and an answer. Those questions are not unrelated to this, but the heart of the Christian faith is not at stake. What do you think is at stake and what potential damage would there be if anything, if we really said at the end of the day, okay, there actually are contradictions in the gospel.

Well, I think what it would force us to reconsider would be our concept of inspiration. What does it mean to say the Bible is divinely inspired? What does that look like? It makes us really think through that concept even more. It would also require us to think through what we mean by an errantcy.

Is the Bible an errant? And if we're going to claim it's an errant, what do we mean by that? So that's what's at stake. The scripture itself is not at stake. Our view of scripture would be at stake and we might have to, if there were errors in the Bible, then we'd have to rethink our views of scripture.

Now, some people right now are going to want me to push back and go, wait a minute, an errantcy and probe. You had a conversation with Frank Turk on cross-examined where you spent a good amount of the time unpacking that. So I'll defer people to a last chapter in your book and a Frank's conversation there.

We're going to focus more on gospel differences and what it would mean for biblical reliability. We're going to look at that angle. Now, maybe tell us what makes your approach unique or different from the approach that others have taken.

So maybe explain that and just give us one clear example. It doesn't have to be the best

example. But maybe one example that you think really highlights and illustrates what you're getting at here.

Well, a very popular approach over the years, even since the early church has been to attempt to harmonize the differences in the gospel. Augustine was really strong on that and sometimes he took it to extremes. Origin wasn't so concerned to harmonize all the differences in the gospels.

He said the gospels definitely contain some surface discrepancies. But what really matters is the underlying message, the meaning, the story has given us an essentially faithful representation of what occurred. That's what's important here.

So, yeah, when it comes to an example, one that I like is the story about Jesus healing the centurion servant. So, the story is told in both Luke and in Matthew. In Luke's version, you have the centurion who's got the sixth servant and so he sends some Jewish elders to meet Jesus and to ask Jesus to heal his servant.

So, they come, they go and they say, Jesus, the centurion is worthy of your help. He's a good guy. He's helped build our synagogue.

Please come heal him. Well, so they, Jesus start heading toward the centurion's house. Well, with the centurion, then here's about that and he gets a little change of mind.

So, he sends some friends to intercept Jesus and tell him, hey, Jesus, the centurion says that he's unworthy for you to come under his roof. But he understands that you're a man of authority. He's a man of authority and he tells people to do things and they do it.

So, just say the word and a servant will be healed. And Jesus praises the centurion for his faith and heals his servant without ever seeing the centurion or his servant. Now, Matthew simplifies the account.

Matthew has a pattern of doing this all throughout his gospel. He simplifies the account and he just has the centurion himself go in person to heal. I'm to ask Jesus to heal his servant.

And when Jesus says, all right, let's go. The centurion says, no, no, no, I'm unworthy for you to come under my house yada yada. And Jesus praises the centurion for his faith and heals his servant from afar without ever seeing the servant.

We find a story that's similar to this in Plutarch's life of Pompey and his life of Cato the Younger. So, in Cato the Younger, you have Pompey. He's outside the city.

He's just, he has been, he's outside the city. I'm sorry, yeah, yeah, he's outside the city. And he made a law the previous year saying that if you have a friend on trial, you can't go and read a speech of lavish praise called an incommium because it would unduly bias

the jury members.

And so the next year while Pompey is outside with his army, the life of Cato says he sends in an emissary and reads this incommium that Pompey had read at the trial of Pompey's friend. Well, when you read the same story in Plutarch's life of Pompey, he just narrates Pompey himself coming in and reading it in person. He just simplifies the account in that way.

What's really interesting, Christopher Peling, who's the foremost Plutarch Authority in the world, says that Plutarch wrote these biographies, the one of Pompey and Cato the Younger simultaneously. So you have the same author writing about the same story at the same time using the same sources and their differences in it. So Plutarch is using his compositional device of simplification and transfer always transferring what the emissary said to the lips of Pompey.

And Cassius Dione, I believe it's Suetonius, they tell the same story, but they tell it as Plutarch does in his life of Cato the Younger. So it's Plutarch who is simplifying the account in his life of Pompey, just like Matthew does, simplifying the account and just has the centering himself go in person to make the request of Jesus. Okay, so now this could sidetrack us, but just for clarification so people understand, when it comes again back to the question of an erancy, you would argue that Matthew is intending to do this by simplifying the account.

So it's not an error in the way that we take an error, because this is what he's intending to communicate in the first place, and that's where an erancy lies, not in the specific words themselves necessarily, but the intention behind the words. Is that a fair summary of how you see it? I'd say so. Now, if you're looking at this being the transcript of a legal deposition, that might be a different matter there, but it's not, it's a biography.

And, you know, what we need to write tonight, Sean, you and I and everybody else, make these kinds of moves in our everyday ordinary communication, whether it be orally or an email. We do these things to simplify. We do these things and other things like it to simplify, because if we were to go into every detail and, you know, we might have to talk about the context behind it.

And rather than talking about three or four different occasions, we just combine them all into a single occasion to abbreviate. We don't consider that an error. We don't consider it to be misleading, fictionalizing, inventing.

It's just the way we tell stories in our everyday ordinary conversations, and this is exactly what they were doing in antiquity as well. Now, in antiquity, they did take some additional liberties that we might not do today, but still the principle is the same. Now, this raises questions we'll get to, and I'm just going to plan them in people's minds so they understand where this conversation is going.

Some might say, well, if we do this in regular conversation, why do we even need these computational devices? And again, we'll come back to that. Or there's a difference between kind of simplifying and combining an account and inventing material. So this is where this conversation heads and we're going to slowly unpack them, but you hit it at the importance of genre.

Like, if we do this in regular conversation, there's certain kind of expected means by which we communicate in conversation, which is different than, say, a legal deposition. So how we judge the Gospels is going to be based upon what we conclude about the kind of communication they're intending, which goes back to the genre. So, what genre do you think the Gospels are and maybe lay out some of the evidence behind why you think it's that kind of genre? Sure, I'd be happy to do that.

And by the way, just something I didn't address in your previous question, you mentioned about like inerrancy, or maybe one of your previous questions, does all this fit in with inerrancy? Well, it depends on what your definition of inerrancy is. Now, I can tell you that years ago, I spoke at a conference in, I think it was Vancouver, British Columbia, and J.I. Packer was there. And I gave a lecture on this very stuff that we're talking about here.

The very topic of my book and these compositional devices in paraphrasing, things that were prescribed, and things that were done by ancient biographers and the gospel authors. And I gave examples, a lot of the ones that are in the book. Right after my lecture, J.I. Packer was the first one to walk up to me and shook my hand, and he said the following words, and I'll never forget them because I wrote them down.

He looked me in the eye and he said, thanks, tops, agreed with every word. Now, here's the thing. One, perhaps the most conservative definition of biblical inerrancy, of way of defining it, is the Chicago statement on biblical inerrancy.

That statement was crafted by Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, and J.I. Packer. So J.I. Packer says he agreed with every word, which means he didn't see any kind of tension between these compositional devices, the kind of things that they would alter details. Intentionally, he didn't see any difficulty or tension between that and the Chicago statement of biblical inerrancy.

Now, maybe someone will say, yeah, but Norman Geisler did, he sure did. So, but Norman Geisler was inconsistent because he got on my case for saying, you know what, I think John moved the crucifixion of Jesus to one day earlier. And he said, Mike's de-historising John and saying that John made an error.

What Geisler didn't acknowledge is in his big book of Bible difficulties, he says that Matthew moved the temple cleansing from Monday to Sunday. So, but that aside. Okay, so two things before you come and genre, two things.

If I heard your first argument, it goes like this, J. Packer says it, that settles it, therefore I believe it. I'm just kidding. No, no.

Well, yeah, kind of, you know, it does for his definition of inerrancy, right? Fair enough. So that's the Chicago statement. So here's what we're down to.

You have Norman Geisler saying it doesn't square with the Chicago statement. You have J.I. Packer saying it does square with the Chicago statement. Both of them were involved in creating the Chicago statement.

So now you're left with saying, okay, who's understanding of the Chicago statement? Do I agree with Geisler or Packer? But you can't say that Packer or me in that sense are denying or saying that it doesn't square with inerrancy is defined by the Chicago statement because Packer helped create that statement. So anyway. Okay, fair enough.

That goes back to 1978 to give people some context. It's kind of been the rule of thumb for inerrancy. But before we get to genre, if you're making this claim that Geisler criticized compositional devices, but utilized them in the Gospel of Matthew, is your argument that everybody kind of uses these, and it's just a difference of degree not in kind.

Is that your argument or is there a new kind of argument that you are introducing here? I have to think about that. But so I would say that a lot of people are fine with a lot of these compositional devices where they become uncomfortable as the ones that they're unfamiliar with. So they're fine with things like, I mean, most people, not all, some of my critics aren't really happy with any of them.

But most people and certainly most scholars are fine with these things. They're just not fine. Most people who aren't familiar with looking at these things through this kind of lens.

They're fine with certain things like maybe simplifying like I mentioned with Matthew and the centurion, but they're not fine with some other ones because they're not used to that. Like maybe Matthew moving the temple cleansing to one day earlier. Maybe they're not familiar with that kind of things because they may not do that today.

So they would, they do do it, perhaps if they conflate two events that happen over two different days in order to simplify the account. But they're not consciously thinking that they're doing that. They're consciously doing it, but they're not saying, hey, I'm using a compositional device here.

We just do it all the time. Okay, fair enough. And you're right, we're going to get into this, but there's different kinds of compositional devices that I think some people when they're aware of them, will say, I'm okay with A, B, but not C through F. And here's why.

So we'll get into that, but let's go back to the question. Really a lot of this rests on genre. So make your case for what the genre is.

Explain what the genre is and your evidence that the gospels should be read as that kind of genre. Well, the genre of the gospels, most New Testament scholars today think are either Greco-Roman biographies, or that they share in that genre. They're closely affiliated with it.

Now, the question would be why Greco-Roman rather than Jewish biography? Well, for some reason, unknown to us today, Jews were very hesitant to write biographies of their sages. We have four from the first century, and then we don't have any until modern times, according to Louis Feldman, who is one of the leading Jewish scholars out there until he died a few years ago. So you have the life of Moses, which is more like the gospels.

Then you have the life of Abraham, the life of Joseph, which are very different. They're more like commentaries on the scripture. They don't even focus on a single individual, so it's hard to even call them biographies.

So you have the life of Moses, and then you have the life of Josephus, which is an autobiography, and both of these conform pretty much to the rest of Greco-Roman biographies. So whether you want to call them Greco-Roman biographies, because almost all of the biographies written at that time were written by either Greeks or Romans. That's why they're called Greco-Roman biographies.

But if you just want to call them ancient biographies, that's fine. So the thought of as ancient biographies, because number one, they focus on a single individual rather than an era or a war, things like that. So if they're focusing on a single individual, they're going to be a biography rather than a history.

Second, the average length is the same, so it's usually between 10,000 and 25,000 words. Now, in Josephus' autobiography, that's different. I think that's like 80-some-thousand words.

But of course, because it's his own life, he's got a whole lot of content. So of which he was eyewitness. But most ancient biographies were between 10,000 to 25,000 words.

And the gospels fit in there, marked at about 11,000 as the shortest. Luke is the longest at about 18,000, 19,000. Then you have usually not much given on a person's childhood.

It usually goes from their birth and their family, who their family was, and then boom, immediately launches into the inauguration of their public career, be it as a politician. Or the military or philosophy, something like that religion. So one may say, well, why don't the gospels ever talk about Jesus' youth? Why is it that the only story we find about Jesus' youth is Jesus teaching in the temple at age 12? Aside from that, you don't have

anything.

It's just from his birth and the return to Nazareth, all of a sudden, boom. He's getting baptized. That's the next thing we hear about it.

And the reason is because they're ancient biographies, they're not interested in the childhood. And then something else, I mean, there's others, but let me give just one more. The focus is on providing stories about what this person said and did that illuminates their character.

What kind of person are Plutarch says this in his life of Alexander? It's the most commonly appealed to text in all of Plutarch's lives. And so when you read the gospels in view of this, Sean, it becomes real interesting. If you understand that the gospel authors are trying to illuminate who their main character is, how consider this? Mark 1, as Isaiah the prophet said, the voice of one crying into wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.

Well, you think maybe it'd be Jesus going to prepare the way for God, because that's what Isaiah's talking about there, preparing the way for God. But it's the whole biography here. It starts off with John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus.

Well, what does that say about who Mark thinks Jesus is? Mark 2, you have Jesus healing a paralytic and forgive him his sins, and the Jewish leaders say, well, that's blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins. Chapter 3, you have Jesus calming the wind and the waves, something the Old Testament says God does.

Chapter 4, Jesus is casting out demons and his opponents say, well, that's Satan casting out Satan. And then Jesus gives that word picture about if you want to go rob the strongman, you got to bind him first, and then you can plunder his house of his goods. And by that, Jesus is saying his exorcisms show that he has bound the strongman who is Satan and is now is plundering Satan's kingdom.

Well, what human can bind Satan? Chapter 5, then you have Jesus raising the dead, which is something the Old Testament. It says God does. Chapter 6, Jesus walks on water, something the Old Testament says that God does.

And on and on and on throughout Mark's gospel, he illustrates the things that Jesus does that God does, the things that Jesus says that suggest that Jesus thinks he is God or God's uniquely divine son. In other words, if God has some sort of divine DNA, Jesus has it. So there's good reason to think, very good reasons to think the gospels are ancient biographies because they possess so many of the qualities of ancient biography.

Okay, so essentially it's a comparison. We'll get certain factors of the length of ancient biographies, who they focus on, what they include, what they don't include. We look at the gospels and go, oh, they have some of these germane defining features.



Therefore, they're at least minimally have a lot in common. Are there any significant differences that would potentially disqualify them from being ancient biography? Or do they pretty much all match up and you think those differences are only kind of secondary? Well, the gospels do have a lot of theological stuff in it that say Plutarch's lives doesn't have or Suetonius's lives of the 12 Caesars or Tacitus's life of his father-in-law, Gregula. But, you know, they're gonna have theological things because Jesus was divine.

So it's just gonna have it. I don't think that disqualifies it. It's a difference, but I don't know if that how significant that difference is to disqualify it from that genre.

So that'd be one thing. One of the things that some people will say disqualifies Luke as biography, like Ben Witherington, I think Craig Keener both say that Luke is a history, not a biography. Because it resembles a history sum.

And I agree it does have some of the qualities of history, but it still is the length of a biography. It features a single person that focuses on a single person. So it seems to me it's still biography.

And Plutarch's life of Caesar also has a lot of qualities in it that are more like history than biography, but no classicist is going to say Plutarch's life of Caesar is a history. It's a hybrid kind of. It's mainly biography that has some of the earmarks of history.

And I think the same thing could be said of Luke. Well, certainly Acts isn't biography because it's about the advance of the gospel, and that was written by Luke as well. So it's fair to look at some different genres between the two of them.

Okay, so kind of step number one of your argument is that there's a certain genre, Greco-Roman biography. So if you're wrong, and most of the New Testament scholars are wrong about the genre, then the argument itself doesn't follow from it. Now, is that fair, or would you actually say your argument still works even if you're mistaken about the genre? I think it would still work, but yeah, I don't know why that would disqualify it.

Because Plutarch, I'm sorry, Theon will say things like not only historians and poets and orators, but also those involved in creating fables use the kind of stuff that he was talking about. So if you want to, whether it's biography or history, you're still going to be using some of these things that we're talking about here. Okay, fair enough, good.

But one thing, ancient biography, they weren't as committed to reporting things with the kind of precision, precise accuracy that modern biographers are. So we could say that. We could make that distinction.

Okay, that's helpful. Now, let's take the next step, which you really flesh out in your book. You speak of certain literary devices that ancient biographers used, and you say the Gospels use them.

Unpacked for that, for us, what you mean by these literary devices? And how in a sense you think the Gospel writers use them as well? Well, I think there are two things to look at here. Number one, there's a guy named Theon who wrote what was called a compositional textbook with preliminary exercises in it called *Projum-Nasmata*. And there were others who wrote it.

Theon is writing in Greek in the first century, and he's talking about how he mentions how there were others. He's providing the same exercises that had gone before him, others had, and he's adding some exercises that weren't in the previous compositional textbooks. So he's got numerous different chapters, one on narration, one on paraphrase, one on elaboration, one on refutation, one on thesis, all these kinds of things.

Under paraphrase, he talks about how writers can paraphrase. And so he gives a certain number of things, four major ways, like one, you could add. So you could take a statement and you could add to it.

In other words, you would kind of do that to clarify some things. You could subtract, so you could make things, you could abbreviate, you know, for brevity's sake. You're still including the same thoughts, but you can elaborate on them in order to, you know, clarify or subtract for brevity.

You could change the syntax or grammatical style of it. That's, that is the kind of thing that we typically think of in many cases when we think of paraphrase. But the ancients had a broader view of how to paraphrase than what we do.

He talks about how you could actually create a dialogue. So we find this sometimes in the Gospels where instead of having just a block of Jesus teaching, Matthew especially will take it and create a dialogue between Jesus and his critics. So it's a short dialogue, but it's still a little bit of a dialogue nonetheless.

It makes it a little more entertaining than just reading a block of Jesus' teachings. We wouldn't do that today in just simple paraphrase, but they did that in antiquity. So you have these different ways of paraphrasing.

And then you have Plutarch, widely regarded as antiquity's greatest biographer. And he wrote more than 60 biographies of which 48 have survived. And when you read through them, you find there are nine of them involving characters who pretty much lived around the same time, the time of the transition between the Roman Republic to Roman Empire.

And many of them knew one another and participated in the same events. So of course you're going to have Plutarch then tell the same story and multiple of his biographies, which we'll call lives back then. So for example, the Caesar's assassination is reported in Plutarch's life of Caesar, life of Brutus, one of the conspirators who killed him, the life of

Antony, and the life of Cicero.

Cicero just mentions it, doesn't describe it, but it's described in the other three. So you can see how Plutarch is going to tell the same story. He never copies and pastes.

He's always varying the account in some way, one way or another. The Catalunarian conspiracy is actually described in seven different of Plutarch's lives. And again, no copying and pasting, he's telling the same story differently in every one.

So we can infer from that because it's the same author reporting the same stories using the same sources, writing most of the time at the same time simultaneously. And yet there are differences. So these differences would be intentional.

And then you start to see patterns of the same kind of differences occurring. And from that, classicists like Christopher Pelling and others have been able to infer what they call compositional devices. And when you read ancient biography through the lens of compositional devices, you can see they're not being sloppy historians.

They're just telling the same story and they're varying it because that's the kind of stuff they would have been taught to do. And when you look at the Gospels and how the Gospels tell the same story differently, it's like, wow, they're kind of using the same kind of devices you see in Plutarch and that are taught at Theon. So that's how I approach the Gospels.

And I think that this should be the primary way of doing it because these are things that some of them are prescribed in the compositional textbooks. But some of them we infer and see the greatest of all the ancient biographers using them. And it's like, okay, well, would the Gospel authors use them? Should we be surprised if we saw them using them? I think we should be surprised if we did not see them using them.

Now, you said a lot of stuff that we're going to get to. For example, Theon teaches that we could paraphrase certain statements. I think most people will be with you and say, sure, paraphrase is fine.

But when it comes to creating dialogue and adding things that arguably didn't happen, that's where the concern comes in. We will come back to that. Now, you mentioned some of these devices.

And a part of my question is does Theon say, here's these devices of like spotlighting and, you know, I forget some of the other terms that you use. Transferral displacement compression conflation. Perfect.

Is there like a list of these that he has and others have? Or have these terms more come from scholars looking at the agents and saying, it seems like they're using these common features. So let's name and categorize them so we can understand what they're

doing. Theon mentions a number of different things.

Okay. Like the four things of paraphrase I talked about. He talks about something called refutation.

He talks about elaboration, things that we can see. Some of the gospel authors and ancient historians using. But he doesn't mention specifically things like compression, conflation, displacement, transferal, things like that.

That's where scholars look at what people like Plutarch and Suetonius and others are doing when they take the same story and they report it differently. What I find interesting is we see it when Plutarch the same author is reporting the same stories, writing at the same time. And he's reporting the same thing with some differences involved.

So this isn't because there are different sources. Plutarch is doing this intentionally. Okay.

So some people have challenged if you're interpreting reading Theon correctly. We'll come back to that. I want to make sure we lay out the argument first.

But essentially so people understand you and other classical scholars have read Plutarch and these other ancient rioters maybe before and after Jesus carefully. And some of these computational devices they lay out like Theon gives elaboration a few others. Others we see them utilizing.

And the basic idea is if they felt that it was integrous and intentional to adapt a story to its end for the particular time, the particular place, whatever motivation they had. And that was a considered line and it was consistent with good careful reporting. We should expect to see the gospel rioters do the same thing and it doesn't undermine our confidence in them.

Is that fair just so people understand where we've laid out so far? Yeah, I agree with that. Okay. All right.

So here's where it's going to get a little sticky in people's minds and I think some clarification will help. You have a chapter where you talk about truth telling in ancient biographies. And so there's a statement in your book on page 79 that I'll read and be helpful if you unpacked us for us.

You said, so while we may not always be reading a precise description of what Jesus said and did in the Gospels, I'm convinced that they preserve the main and essential parts of what occurred. So the details are not necessarily precise, so to speak, descriptions what Jesus says and what he does, but they preserve the main and essential parts. And one of the illustrations I've heard of you is you write in your book is like a film.

Like it was okay to adapt certain characters to make a certain point. Explain that film analogy and how you think it relates to truth telling in ancient biographies. Yeah, so two films I can talk about.

I mean, there's plenty of them, but Carol Bach told me this example about Hacksaw Ridge. So Hacksaw Ridge talked about, oh, I forgot what was his name, Desmond something. So it talked about a guy who wanted to get into the war, but he didn't want to pick up weapons against the enemies.

So the movie had him go down and enlist so that he could get involved. But in reality, what happened, he got drafted, but he had a way out because he was a conscientious objector, and so he didn't have to go. But when he was drafted, he refused that way of getting out, and he said, look, I want to be in.

I want to help out here, but I can't pick up a weapon, so I want to be a medic, and they let him in. So what the creators of Hacksaw Ridge did was they just simplified that, and rather than getting to all of that, they just had him go down and enlist and request to be a medic. If you're simplifying and you understand that the producers aren't trying to give us a story that reproduces it with the precision of a legal transcript, well, then I don't have any problems with that.

Now, of course, you can go too far with stuff like that, but I don't think that that's going too far. Apollo 13, that's an example I'd like to give because I was really, you're too young for this, Sean, but I grew up during the Apollo age, and man, I was really into the moon landings and stuff, and I remember when Apollo 13 ran into that nearly fatal, that potentially fatal problem. So when I watched the movie of Apollo 13, I was glued to it later on in life, and there's a famous saying in there that's put on the lips of Gene Krantz when he says, failure is not an option, and that became the tagline for the movie.

Well, Krantz never uttered that statement, but what it did was it epitomized the... it epitomized the attitude of those admission control at that time. And so how do you really show that and take stuff that happened over several days and collapse it and to be able to tell that story within about two hours? You know, sometimes you got to take some liberties. You want to communicate the essence of what happened.

You want people to be able to get a feel for what it was like, and so that's what they did. They took the same, failure is not an option, they attributed it to Gene Krantz, and so is that an accurate portrayal? As a portrait, yes, as a photograph, no. So that's what I would say on that.

When it comes to things like the Gospels, we will find more of this portrait stuff in the Gospel of John than we will in the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew Mark and Luke. Matthew Mark and Luke, I think, generally present things closer to what we would have seen had we been there, or if we had heard Jesus talking or read a transcript of what he had said, I

think his words would have been closer to what we're reading to Matthew Mark and Luke than in John. And yeah, so that's what I'd say.

Okay, that's helpful. So let me push back a little bit for clarification on the movie example. And certainly a helpful way, and we see movies do that, and I think they should do that, because they've got to have a dramatic effect, they've got to tell it within a certain time, even though recent movies are like three, four hours long now, we get the broader point.

But I guess I'd say, even like Hacksaw Ridge, when I watch that, I know there's some history embedded in it, but they tell us at the beginning of movies, like based on a true story, they make it clear that they're taking creative liberty in telling this. So in that movie, there's that fellow at the beginning who's ripped and he's strong, and everybody thinks he's strong, and the key character is they think he's weak, because you won't go in battle. And of course, there's a scene where that guy ends up being naked and running out doing this stuff, and it's supposed to be a little humorous.

But what they're doing in the movie is they're comparing and contrasting real strength, which is on the inside, with strength on the appearance. Because when they get to war, the guy who looks strong has no strength, and the main character has strength. So I watch this movie, and I think everybody else who watches it, knows that they've added certain elements intentionally and it's built in, and then it's loosely built upon the story itself, because we're aware of the genre.

So partly this goes back to genre, but are there any times where the gospel writers say, like the beginning of a movie, it says loosely based upon what happened in history, however they were this. I think of the end of John, it's like the author inserts himself and says, and this was to indicate how Peter would die. Though sometimes the author step in clarify to make sure we don't miss the point.

Are there any ways where the authors do this and say, look, I'm paraphrasing here, or I'm telescoping here, or I'm doing these kinds of things here to make sure we don't miss it? You know, the thing that comes to my mind, I think Thucydides says something like that in his history where, hey, I'm not reporting this in his exact order, something like that, okay, but generally speaking, no, what Thucydides did there would have been the exception to the rule. So I'm also thinking of Philo in his life of Moses. He changes up the order of the plagues.

He doesn't say that that's what he's doing, but that is what he's doing. You have Josephus who will change some things at times, and he's not saying he's changing it, but he is. You've got the gospel authors, what they do at times.

You've got some stories that are floating out there that maybe they don't remember at what time or what location these things happened, or where Jesus actually said

something like this, where he made the statement. So what they do is they just put it at a place in the gospels where they think it would be fitting. One example I can think of right away would be where Jesus has some people come up to him and say, hey, I will follow you, but let me go bury my dad first.

And that's where Jesus will say, well, let the dead bury their dead, or foxes and birds. Foxes have holes and birds have their nests, but the son of man doesn't have a place to lay his head. Well, in Mark, Matthew, that is in the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Right after he has given the Sermon on the Mount, he comes into Capernaum, cast out a demon, heals Peter's mother-in-law, heals some people that evening in Capernaum. And then he tells his disciples to get in a boat and cross over to the other side. And right before they do, that's when these people come up, hey, I will follow you.

And Jesus says, foxes have holes, birds have their nests, let the dead bury their dead, et cetera. But in Luke's gospel, Luke places it at the end of Jesus' ministry as he's on his final return to Jerusalem. So Matthew and Luke knew that the story happened at some time during Jesus' ministry, and they just put it at different places.

Now, they don't say, well, this didn't actually happen here. It happened at another part, but I'm weaving it into the story here for whatever reason. They don't do that.

They don't give any kind of marker or footnote. They didn't have footnotes back then. They just weave it into the story where they felt it would be appropriate.

Okay, fair enough. So there's no really clear examples. Like, you're right, there's no footnotes, but there are times where the author speaks and says, here's what's going on, even though it's not footnoted, it's included in the text to kind of make sure the reader doesn't.

Transfiguration, six days later, or Luke, about eight days later, or it was two days before Passover. Yeah, you will have that. Yeah, but even then, I guess there's a difference between context, like six days, eight days later.

And in the end of John, John seeming to step out of the narrative to tell us, here's why he said this and what he means. So in a sense, you would argue, obviously, this isn't speculative. You would say these are educated guesses, but we have to get in the minds of Matthew and Luke because this story about bearing your own dead, it doesn't seem reasonable that, jeez, the same thing happened twice.

There's too many similarities between those stories, but why do they place it in different places? That's where your response is trying to give, if I understand correctly, trying to give an educated guess what was in their mind and assuming they're using these compositional devices, but they never tell us explicitly that they're doing so. We're somewhat guessing. Is that charitable or is that not charitable? No, I think you're right.

That's what I'd say. We're not going to know for sure. I wish we could ask the gospel authors why they did what they did.

We camp. All we have to do, like you said, is take educated guesses. See, I don't regard what they did there with that, you know, let me, I want to follow you.

And Matthew put at the beginning, Luke, at the end of Jesus' ministry, I don't consider that to be an error. You know, that's just that. Now, did one of them change the details or was it they didn't know the details where this was to be placed chronologically and they just put it where they wanted it, you know, fitted it in somewhere? Yeah.

Did they tell? No. Would the readers have had a problem with this? No, I don't think so. I would think people would kind of understand the genre of ancient biography.

You know, again, it's not expected to give us a precise picture with photographic accuracy. That's not what they were trying to achieve. I agree with you on that.

I haven't looked at the context of both of those two stories enough and Luke and Matthew to see if they're communicating clearly it happened then or if they just included it. Then, like, those are differences we'd have to unpack. But I'm with you in principle.

Now, you addressed this in your book. It might be helpful now. How do we know that the gospel writers were aware of and used to these compositional devices? Like, were they reading Plutarch? Were they reading Faean? Like, give us the evidence that they actually were using these rather than we're just finding similar themes across them, which you said a lot of these you think we used in regular language anyways.

So what's the evidence they're aware of and use these kind of compositional devices? Well, I guess I just read the Gospels in view of these. It's like, okay, well, classicists agree that these kind of compositional devices that they're identifying that Pelling, JL, Moles, and others identify that Plutarch and others use. Well, you know, and that I think as I comparing how Plutarch tells the same story differently, it's like, okay, it seems like he's doing these things.

Then I come to the Gospels and I look at the differences and I say, okay, what's the best way to look at these? I can try to harmonize them as many have done. And it's like, ooh, you know, I don't know that I feel comfortable doing that because you really have to go overboard in a lot of cases. I'm just not satisfied with that.

But if I read them through the lens of ancient biography, a whole lot comes into focus. It just makes sense to me. So, you know, I look at certain things like, you know, Jesus is parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants.

You know, you got Mark and Luke started off by saying, on three different occasions, the vineyard owner sends a servant to collect the first fruits and they kill or wound that



servant each time. But Matthew says the vineyard owner sent three servants. You say, all right, well, wait a minute, Mike.

You know, it could have been he sent three, but he's not saying he sent three at one time. Well, then you look at after Matthew says that he sent three and they killed or hurt them, wounded them. Then Matthew says, then he sent more than he did the first time.

So, it's obvious here that what Matthew has done is conflated those three separate events into one. I don't know how you get out of that if you're trying to harmonize. So, you know, I look at that.

I look at a number of different things and say, okay, what about the baptism of Jesus? It comes out of the water. God's voice comes out of heaven and Mark and Luke and says, you are my beloved son. With you, I am well pleased.

God is directly addressing Jesus. Matthew changes it. He has God speak directly to the crowd.

This is my beloved son. With him, I am well pleased. Maybe you say, well, Mike, maybe God said both.

He said it to Jesus and then he said it to the crowd. Well, congratulations. You've done exactly what the Gospel of the Ebionites did in harmonizing them in the second century.

I think Augustine is probably correct here when he suggests that Matthew changed the words in order to make it the message more personable to the readers. But notice if that's happening, Matthew has actually altered the words of God. Let that sink in and it's like, well, is that really something that is far-fetched? Look at what Matthew and other authors do with the scriptures.

They change it. They repurpose. They use composite citations.

These are things that are on the outer limits of some of these compositional devices that make what Matthew does in changing God's words there, Jesus' baptism to resemble more like dictation. I suspect some people might push back on the Matthew example and say it's one thing to paraphrase. You know, you are my beloved son is likely what he says.

While he's explaining that to somebody else, Jesus is still the identity that's being talked about. He's being baptized, gives him the same designation, and it's the classic distinction between the, you know, *ipsisima verba* and *ipsisima vox*. I think a lot of people who hold the classical idea of an *erancy* wouldn't have a problem in harmonizing it that fashion.

And to me, that strikes me as pretty reasonable and pretty fair paraphrasing. So it's

changing or adapting the words of Jesus, but still faithful to what Jesus communicated. Nothing's being invented here.

When we get to some of the invention that we'll get to, that's where it gets a little sticky and we can unpack that a little bit more. I'm glad you brought up the example of the wicked tenant because on page 91, here's what you wrote. You said Matthew creates a dialogue by transferring the answer to the Jewish leaders.

And he then elaborates their answer with even more rigor than either Mark or Luke narrates Jesus providing. So you look at the differences you cited a minute ago and you say the most reasonable is that there's this transfer going on and this elaboration going on, these kinds of devices. Then you cite in which, which Lydia McGrew offers a plausible harmonization.

And that's your term. You call it plausible. So what's going on in this text if it needs to be unpacked anymore? And why do you favor the compositional devices in terms of harmonization? Because I tend to say if we have a plausible harmonization, let's go with that instead of bringing in these compositional devices.

That seems to actually make it more difficult. Tell me why I'm wrong. Well, I think you're wrong because if these compositional devices were part and parcel of writing ancient biography, if paraphrase like Theon is used as he says in every form of writing where they paraphrase not only their own writings but also the writings of others, if Plutarch is using and other ancient biographers are using these things on a regular basis, then I think that this should be the default position, not harmonization.

Harmonization is just, I think, being stuck in the old way of doing things because, well, that's the way we've always done it, right? But why? You know, the compositional devices, you read the gospel differences through the lenses of these compositional devices and basic paraphrase as Theon puts forth and other of these other compositional textbooks. And it's like, well, everything comes into view. Everything just is very clear.

It fits perfectly like hand and glove. But you try harmonizations and a lot of times, man, the glove doesn't fit. If you remember the old thing with O.J. Simpson, the glove doesn't fit.

So let's get back to this parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants. So here you have, after we talk about, you know, he sends three servants and then he sends more and finally he sends his son. And the wicked farmers tend to say, hey, this is the heir.

Let's kill him and then the vineyard will belong to us. And so they kill him. And then Jesus in Mark and in Luke, he asks and answers his same question.

What will the owner of that vineyard do? He will come and put those, he will come and punish the tenants and give the vineyard over to others. Well, when you read the same

thing in Matthew, Matthew says, has Jesus say, what will the vineyard do? And Matthew has now his Jewish interlocutors give the answer. Well, he will come and put those wicked tenets to a miserable death.

And then they will hand it over to people who are more worthy of it. And Jesus says, thus was Isaiah the prophet spoke well of you when talked about, you know, rejecting the stone which the builders rejected became the very cornerstone. So it's like, okay, now Jesus takes this question.

Jesus asks and answers his own question, but now he transfers the answer, the same answer to the Jewish leaders who are there. Now, if I remember right now, it's been, you know, probably four years, I guess, three or four years since I read Lydia's book. I think she just says something like, Jesus asked the question and then the Jewish leaders, they provide the answer and Jesus says, yeah, that's exactly what I was thinking, you know, something to wear that line.

But that's not what the gospel say, right? So there, you still have fact-changing, I guess you could say. It just depends what you're satisfied with them doing. It's like if it's me presenting it, no, it's off limits, but if they're wanting to do it, it's okay.

So I do think that compositional devices fit here a whole lot better than just trying to do a tortured harmonization of something none of the gospels act. So you're either doing this harmonization to try to create, recall the story in a way that none of the gospels actually describe it, or you read this account in view of the compositional devices and it's like, okay, well, this makes sense. I don't have to strain to make this happen.

Yeah, I think anybody would concede that there's certainly some differences in the gospel, that harmonization strains the data that we have. Some of it really comes back to our assumptions that we're bringing to the text. Again, back to the genre.

And so, if we have reason to believe, like you've laid out, that these are ancient biographies and the apostles or the gospel writers are intentionally using them, then we should look for them. If we read the gospels more in the sense of like, these are eyewitness accounts and reporting, where they're trying to deliver the facts, like our friend Jay Warner Wallace as an eyewitness, you know, not eyewitness, as a detective who has examined eyewitness, reads the gospels and says there's something in here that seems to match the kind of similarity and difference we get from different people reporting events differently. And of course, the writers say many times we're there and we saw this and we are reporting what we saw, we are witnesses to these things.

And so, it really seems to me that the assumptions we have about what the gospel writers are trying to communicate, the kind of genre gets to the heart of it. So, somebody in a harmonization would probably be okay at times just saying we don't have all the facts. We shouldn't expect to have all the facts.

We're dealing with some that happened 2000 years ago, we're given a part of this conversation. So, really, a contradiction is when you affirm and deny the same thing in the same time. So, if I said it's raining at 11.48 in the morning at Sean McDowell's house at San Juan, Cabstrano, and I said the exact same thing and said it's not raining.

But still then, we might say Mike, well, how do you define rain? I mean, in Southern California, if it's literally just sprinkling, I would define that as rain. My friends from Seattle would say that's not really rain. So, there's not a contradiction.

There's a difference that is there. So, am I at least illustrating what's at stake here in the different assumptions that people bring to the text well? Would you change or challenge that? What do you think of that little mini speech I just gave? No, that's fine. Okay.

Yeah, I mean, look, I acknowledge the gospels. I agree with Jim Wallace that the gospels do, I think, exhibit the kind of normal variation that we will find in eyewitness testimony. I think a really good example of this would be the four descriptions of the gospels of Jesus's trip before Pilate.

They don't show a whole lot of dependence, like most scholars do think that Matthew and Luke used Mark extensively and then will supplement Mark or edit him. I don't see this with Jesus's trip before Pilate. But in most cases, when you do have the stories that are very, very similar between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in some cases, virtually verbatim, well then I think that these are good cases of where Matthew and Luke are using Mark as their primary source.

And so, when we see one differing from the other, it seems to me that they are adapting him intentionally. One example I can think of right off is in the Olivet Discourse, you have Mark make, it's during the final week of Jesus' life and they've seen at one point the disciples say to him, Lord, the buildings of the temple complex are beautiful. And Jesus says, I'm telling you, if there's going to come a day when not one stone is left on another.

And so, later on, they're on a Mount of Olives and they asked Jesus, well, what are these things going to be? And so, he starts to describe these things and then in Mark it says, when the abomination of desolation is seated where he shouldn't be, let the reader understand, let those who are in Jerusalem flee to the mountains, something like that. Well, that statement, let the reader understand is kind of awkward there. What does it mean? And most scholars, I think, say that that is meant for the reader of that gospel when they are reading it before the congregation and there they can pick up something like, well, this is what Daniel the prophet spoke of.

What's really interesting is when Matthew reports the same thing in the same context, he puts that parenthetical statement in the same awkward place, that when you see the abomination of desolation sitting where he shouldn't be or standing where he shouldn't

be, let the reader understand. It's like, whoa, well, come on. I mean, that is pretty strange if you're going to say, well, there are just independent sources here that are inserting that statement just coincidentally that weird statement in the same exact awkward spot.

No, they are using a source here and it's probably Matthew using Mark and he elaborates a little bit or you could say, not quite elaborating, but he adds by talking about Daniel there and some stuff. So I think that's a good example where we see Theon's paraphrase through addition that is coming into play. Okay, so more than anybody, you have taught me to pay attention to my methodology and to my assumptions.

You do this better than anybody I've seen in your book on the resurrection. Try to do that in my work on the apostles. I don't know anybody who's done that more clearly and I think with more integrity than you Mike and I wish more scholars would do that.

So as I read this book, I try to think through what are the assumptions that are worked into it. And do I agree with those assumptions or do I not agree with those assumptions? And you don't necessarily have to defend them right now. But as I thought about it, there's an assumption which you've given your case for about the genre that the Gospels primarily is.

There's a presumption about Mark in authority. Hence, Matthew uses Mark and often tailors or adapts or changes. Mark in priority.

Mark in priority. Yeah, what did I say? Mark in authority. Oh, thank you.

Mark in priority. Good distinction. So the genre, Mark in priority, that there are these computational my word, compositional devices that the apostles are aware of and utilize through secretaries.

Am I right about those assumptions? Would you add any other assumptions that are at the root of this that if any of those were not true, it would make you really rethink things? The only thing I might clarify there is what you said about secretaries. Now, I do think that secretaries were involved here. So I don't think Matthew was actually the one putting read to papyrus or John.

I don't think that either had the kind of literary skills to be able to create what we find in the Gospels attributed to them. I do think that they are behind it. I think that they probably had a ghost writer.

You could say who took notes. A secretary who took notes, composed the gospel, and then they read it and signed off on it as, yep, that's my story there. And it's not unusual.

You had Cicero, one of the most highly educated Romans who used Tiro and did more than just take dictation. He did major editing. You've got Paul, who, three of his letters

say, I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, which means he didn't write the rest of it.

Now you say, yeah, but maybe just dictated to the secretary who wrote things down. Yeah, but then you've got Romans, the crown jewel of all of Paul's letters. And in Romans 16:22 it says, I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you and the Lord.

So I think since Romans is such of a superior literary quality to all of the other Paul's letters, that Tertius did a whole lot more than just take dictation. So if Paul could use Tertius, if Cicero can use Tiro and they're highly educated as they are, then I don't see any reason why Matthew and John, which a tax collector wouldn't require any kind of major literacy, a fisherman wouldn't have required any kind of major literacy. Why they wouldn't use secretaries to compose their biographies of Jesus.

They're still behind it, but they use secretaries. That's the only thing. My thing doesn't rise or fall on whether they use secretaries.

I'm just saying that if you're going to say that Matthew and John wrote these things themselves, no, I think there's some difficulties there. But even if they did, well, then they knew this kind of stuff. But see, that's the thing.

If they say, yeah, but why would these people be familiar with Greco-Roman biography? Well, again, if you just look at it and say, well, that's because most of the biographies are written by Greeks and Romans, doesn't mean that it was a different biography than what Jews were using. Jews just weren't really writing biographies. But if you're going to say that, well, Matthew and John and so forth wouldn't have had to know about Greco-Roman biography, it's just their secretaries would have.

Okay. So I understand we have direct evidence that Paul used the secretary, Romans 16:1, Tertius. We also have direct awareness.

I mean, Paul is quoting in the Sermon on Acts, chapter 17. He's quoting these gods from the culture at that time. So he's clearly educated.

When it comes to gospel writers, we don't know their level of education of the Greco-Roman world. And so the way to get them to use these compositional devices is through a secretary that either knew it, encouraged them to do so, adapted it. Is that fair to why that's a piece of this case? Yeah.

Yeah. Okay. The only thing, the reason I brought up secretaries in the book is because some think, well, yeah, but Matthew and John being Jews, and possibly Mark, but Matthew and John being Jews, they wouldn't have been familiar with Greco-Roman biography.

And my only thing was, look, they wouldn't have had to have been. The only thing

necessary is their secretaries would have been. Okay.

Got it. Okay. So let's move on.

That's helpful. I want to read a statement from your book. And I appreciate at times you really, you don't shy away from what you're saying.

You say it clearly so people can read it and understand and then decide if they agree or not. But here's part of concern that some of your critics have raised is that if your thesis is correct, it would undermine the case for the trustworthiness of the gospels. Since there's never any tag that indicates when a literary device is being employed.

So if they use these literary devices, how do we know when they're transferring? How do we know when they are spotlight? And how do we know these kinds of things? It creates a kind of relativistic approach when it comes to the text. And this is a quote from your book on page 97. And you're referring to what some of the literature historians at the time actually did.

You said, did they invent speeches? Yes. Do they paraphrase and elaborate in order to improve the quality of a speech or even an narrative? Yes. Do they change a statement to a question and express a thought in any number of different ways? Yes.

Do we see them doing this in own writing? Yes. Do we see them doing this with the writings of others? Do you observe Matthew and Luke often paraphrasing Mark in these ways? Yes. Now, some of these wouldn't give people pause.

But when you say did they invent speeches, that's going to give a lot of people pause and go, whoa, time out, Mike. Now there's willingly these literary devices that we assume the gospel writers are using. We don't know when they use it.

It involves invention and creation. We've opened up, you know, the camel's nose is under the tent, so to speak. How do we make any distinctions now between what was invented and what's not invented? Well, I like that word picture.

That's funny. So Thucydides is one of the first, perhaps the first, to talk about speeches, okay? And he's considered to be the greatest ancient historian. And people, according to Lucian, would pattern how they wrote after Thucydides.

So Thucydides talks about, you know, you want to try to reproduce a speech as accurately as possible, okay? Now, of course, when Thucydides is writing, you know, there's no audio recorders. There was no shorthand even at that time. So you're trying to recall these things from memory as best as possible.

And he said, so in essence, there's no way you can get word for word unless the speech had been written down and you had the document. You're trying to recall it as best as

possible. And in cases where you don't know what was said on that occasion, you want to create that speech, craft the speech that you knew was given on that occasion, or surmise that it was given on that occasion, you want to craft a speech that would be very, the very similitude would be there.

It would be something like what we would expect to have heard. So just an example in the War with Catalyne, written by Salist, who knew Julius Caesar. He was one of the great Roman historians, and he will reproduce speeches.

Like when Catalyne was facing up his army and getting them ready to face Rome's army that was coming out to crush his rebellion, he gives a speech that's reported by Salist. Well, the reports are that there were no survivors that the Roman army that came out from Rome crushed that rebellion, no survivors. So there was no one to say what that speech would have been like.

So he crafted it to give it very similitude. This is probably what that speech would have been like, that Catalyne would have probably given a speech to pump up his soldiers, and this is kind of the things that he would have said. There is an example of Julius Caesar.

I think he was going to cross over to Britain. I think it was Britannia back then. And they were going to fight him.

And so it's like, okay, this is what the general for the Britain army would have said. But they have no idea what he would have said. So you craft a speech with very similitude.

Lucian, in the probably around the middle of the second century, he wrote the only extant treatment of describing how to write history. The title is how to write history. And in that book, he's talking about crafting speeches.

You know, you want to be accurate, but you can take what was probably said. And the orator at that point, the historian can use his oratory skills to take that speech and to make it sound really, really good. So when it comes to say speeches within the Gospels or the Book of Acts, you got, you know, there was no one there who was taking, you know, they didn't have audio recorders back then.

There was no video recorders. People didn't have their mobile phones. You know, I'm recording Peter here.

At that point in the first century, shorthand was in its infancy stages and probably the best people who were doing shorthand were in Rome. So it's probably the case that we are getting what Luc has done. And there's much debate and discussion over this.

But I'd say at minimum, what Luc is doing is taking the kurigma, the basic message of the apostles at that time. And he's creating a speech. It's like, okay, well, Peter preached



at Pentecost.

This is probably what he would have said. Or Peter told me that these are some of the things he said. And then he crafts, Luc crafts a speech.

But we don't have word for word, certainly for what was said on that occasion. We can get a pretty good idea, I suppose. But we're not going to have word for word.

Look, more, I'll close with this. More recent times, you got that famous speech, Liberty or Death speech by Patrick Henry. That speech is being recalled.

I think it's 41 years later by two eyewitnesses who took no notes. We have no surviving notes from Patrick Henry. So you've got two eyewitnesses who are trying to recall that speech by Patrick Henry.

40 years later, having taken no notes. That Liberty or Death speech has been crafted by that author. I forgot his name, but crafted by that author who put this together based on the reminiscences of those two eyewitnesses.

He probably got that one line correct. Give me Liberty or give me Death. But the rest of it is they're trying to communicate the essence, the feeling of what was said on that occasion.

And John, that's within recent times. I think where, well, you know very well, people say there's a big difference between taking the speeches of Acts and summarizing them down. Which, when I read Keener years ago, I was like, oh, I never really thought about that.

But that makes sense given the nature of a speech. And Paul had talked for a long time. I mean, someone fell asleep and fell out of a window in Paul preach.

So he's summarizing versus inventing and creating things. That's of course where some of the debate and the discussion I think difference would come in. Let's shift to the Gospel of John.

Well, hang on a second, that's summarized in there. That fits with what I'd say on that. Okay, how so? Well, because they're going to, you know, we look at the creeds that you find in the New Testament.

You know, death, burial, resurrection appearances, things like that. How they're looking at this thing, what Jesus did is the fulfillment of prophecy. These would have been things called the Karigma that was going on around at that time.

Luke would have been familiar with the Karigma. And so he's crafting a speech based on what he knew, the basic or an outline of the message that would have been given on that occasion. I guess it's somewhat of a separate question.

But when we look at these ancient writers, they obviously aren't guided by the Holy Spirit. This obviously isn't God breathed. So it brings in that element as well, which would probably take us aside.

And I know you have a section in your book of what does that mean? How does God do this? So we'll kind of bracket that right there for now. But just want to make people aware of that distinction. You don't ignore that and you address that in your book.

And they can read it, see if they find a satisfactory or not, but you don't shy away from that. It might be helpful if we jump to an example in John, because there's a few specific examples here that I think might help clarify where you're coming from. So again, we're talking about Jesus contradicted, which by the way is a great title because it's somewhat ambiguous.

Like, is somebody else contradicting Jesus? Did he contradict himself? It's a catchy, quick title. I don't know who came up with it, but I like it. By the way, did you come up with it or did your team come up with it? No, I wanted to do reading the Gospels for the first time again.

Okay. Okay. That's what I wanted to call it.

But then they searched around and they said, you know, that sounds familiar to something. And they found a book written years ago by Marcus Borg that said, reading the Gospels again for the first time. So I got, you know, I don't have that book.

I haven't read it, but it was close enough. So they didn't want to use that. So Zandervin came up with the title.

It's a good title. I like it. So in Jesus contradicted, you say it's impossible to know how far John went in adapting the words of Jesus.

How does this fit with the claim that the Gospel authors are making factual changes only in specific ways endorsed by specific compositional devices within specific limits? Now it's pretty wide open. How do we square those two, so to speak? It's a good question. Listen, I'm not a Johannine specialist here.

So in that, I just have to go with my own experience of reading John as distinct from the other Gospels as well as with the majority, large majority, probably the unanimous consensus of Johannine specialists say. And that is that John's gospel is different. It's a different animal from the other Gospels.

John takes greater liberties. So you'll have things like Craig Keener says that all Johannine scholars acknowledge some degree of Johannine adaptation. In other words, he's taking the sayings, the teachings of Jesus, the stories about Jesus and adapting them.

You'll have Darrell Bock, who will say that John often takes what Jesus implicitly stated, and he will convert it to an explicit statement. So, like for example, did Jesus say some of the IM statements that we have in John? Because we don't find most of those in the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So did he make these kinds of statements? And what Darrell would say is that John took what Jesus implicitly said in the Synoptics and he makes them explicit.

You'll have Paul Anderson, one of the foremost Johannine specialists in the world, and will say that John will take Jesus' sayings and the whole gospel. Most of it is a theological paraphrase. So, the paraphrase is the sayings of Jesus and puts in theological overtones to it, which John would have known would have been true of what Jesus thought, but John is just stating them more explicitly.

My favorite one is F.F. Bruce. You have J.I. Packer, one of the three scholars who crafted the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy, and he said of F.F. Bruce that no one has wedded the evangelical faith and academic integrity as well as F.F. Bruce has done it. And F.F. Bruce in his commentary on John's gospel says that John has taken the teachings of Jesus and he's given us an expanded paraphrase, a translation of the freest kind, a transposition into another key, and so much more.

So, John is just different, and some of the things that we would say regarding the other gospels, John just is going to take that a step further in many cases, and it's just hard. Again, I'm not a Johannine specialist. All I know is when I read Matthew Mark and Luke, and you read Mark five times, then read Matthew five times, then read Luke five times, and then read John five times, which you'll notice is that Matthew Mark and Luke are extremely similar.

John says pretty much the same things in terms of the message, but he words it very differently, sounds differently, and then read first John five times, and you'll, whoa! Well, Jesus in John sounds a whole lot like John does in first John. More like John in first John does than Jesus does in Matthew Mark and Luke, even though the message is the same as Matthew Mark and Luke. So, from my experience, limited in reading these things over the years, is I think that John has taken Jesus' teachings, and many times just recast them, excuse me, recast them in his own words, and does what I think Darrell Bach says.

He takes a lot of Jesus' claims that he made implicitly, and now he's making them explicit. I think half the people right now are going, Mike, where do you find the time to read John five times, and read first John five times, and Matthew five times? I've been doing this for years. I've been doing this for years.

I know. It's your job. I get to live in this stuff.

Exactly. You and I get to live in the text like this. We have the benefit of the time to do that over the years, and the more you do it, the more you see, the more these things

come together more.

Like, even since writing the book, there's one or two things that is like, I wish I put that in the book. That would have even made it clearer. That is one of the curses of writing a book.

It always happens, but that'll be the update when you conclude that. I've only got a couple more questions for you. You mentioned that I am statement, so let's probe down on one in particular.

Again, in Jesus' country, they could you suggest that the same before Abraham was, I am. Of course, in John 8:58, one of the most common passages that is cited for a clear case where Jesus is basically saying, I am God, about as clear as it can get. You say it might be a Joe and I, an adaptation of things Jesus says, in entirely different contexts in the synoptics, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

But there's not a scene in the synoptics that corresponds to the story where Jesus says, before Abraham was born, I am. All the synoptic examples, and you give a few of these, of high Christology are from different places and contexts. So, before Abraham was born, I am occurs a discussion between Jesus and some hostile heroes.

It's kind of an extended discussion. Like he said, it's the kind you get in John that we don't have in some of the other gospels. If this is a Joe and I adaptation of something found in the synoptics, would that amount to John's inventing an entire saying and the scene in which it is embedded? Which would kind of raise the question, how far are we going here on adaptation and invention and creation? It's a good question, Sean.

I don't know that anyone can really answer that in a manner that we know that this is the answer to it. You have Clement of Alexandria in the third, early third century, I think, and you have origin in the early third century and they both refer to John as a spiritual gospel. So, even they in the early church were recognizing that, again, John is a different kind of animal.

When you read the synoptic gospels, Jesus is very often cryptic about his identity. He does not want it to be made known publicly. He doesn't want the demons to say he's the Son of God.

He doesn't want to even come out and say he's Messiah publicly. Now, he's doing it through his deeds. He's illustrating through his deeds that he's Messiah.

Even in John's gospel, you have at one point the Jewish leaders say, look, if you are the Messiah, just tell us plainly, which means he was being cryptic in this kind of sense. And that's when Jesus says, I have told you, the works that I do, these testify of who I am. So, Jesus is not coming right out according to the synoptics, and even this passage in John, you know, about overtly explicitly who his identity is in public.

So, isn't it kind of strange that at some point he's going to say publicly? Before Abraham was, I am. He's going to claim to be Jehovah God himself publicly in front of these folks. Now, of course, this could be the exception to the rule, but, you know, look, I don't know what's going on.

Did Jesus actually say before Abraham was, I am? I don't know. Maybe he did. Maybe he did not.

But he did make statements like this. Even Paul Anderson, again, one of the foremost Johannine specialists in the world says that of all the Johannine, I am statements, they have corollaries. All of them have corollaries in the synoptic gospels.

So, for example, I am the way of the truth. No one comes to the Father, but by me. Well, it's got an corollary in Matthew and Luke when he says, no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and to whomever the Son chooses to reveal him.

Same message, just different words. So, again, this is not an easy thing. It's not an easy thing.

You know, this is the kind of stuff that Johannine specialists, those who spend their entire careers with John try to figure out an answer. I don't believe I'm going to come with an answer to this anymore that I'm going to know the difference or be able to provide the solution between God's sovereignty and free will and election and all that. It's just a difficult one.

So, final question on content, and I have a question or two just on how you hope the book is used and how it's impacted people and what it means to you. I want to get to that and make sure people hear that. I think some people at this point would say they feel attention between embracing this way you're looking at the text and what's sometimes called like a reporting eyewitness approach.

And so, John, the author is clearly John. Of course, there's debate about whether it's the beloved disciple or not, but seems to go out of his way to say, I am a witness. I was there.

I was present. I am reporting what I saw. And so, how is that consistent with going? Well, he says he's reporting what he saw, but maybe Jesus didn't really say this.

Like, there seems to at least minimally be attention between the two. So, kind of the eyewitness approach would say, we pay attention to the smallest details and even maybe find these undesigned coincidences between, say, John, the only miracle that's recorded in all four gospels is the 5000. And we find these small details that are crossed the four gospels.

And they tell this wider picture and actually fill in like a puzzle as different eyewitness accounts would. That's a kind of approach and an argument for the text that seems to be at odds with their approach you're taking here. Because if we're not sure if Jesus said I am or not before Abraham was born, I am, that it seems to me we certainly can't have any confidence in the details of the gospels.

Are those intention or are you saying no, we can actually use both approaches? I think we can use both approaches. Now, when it comes to copies or undesigned coincidences, I think some of them are compelling. One I really like is the way Luke and John interact.

Jesus, what his statements are before Pilate. So, Luke's most likely written before John. And Pilate asks Jesus, are you a king? And Jesus says, it is as I say.

And then the very next thing Luke reports is Pilate says, I find no calls in this man. So what? Jesus has just claimed to be a king and he's not one of the client kings appointed by Rome. You execute people like that.

You don't say I don't find any calls and it doesn't make any sense in Luke. But when you read it in John, he says, are you a king? He says, yeah, but my kingdom's not in this world, right? Well, now that makes sense. And if Luke and John are independent, which most scholars believe that they are, well, then this undesigned coincidence is very nice.

It's a great one. Some of the others, like you mentioned, the feeding of the 5,000 and the fact that I think it's John that says that the grass was green. Yeah, the grass would have been green at the time of the year, but I don't find that compelling undesigned coincidence.

It could easily just as be what is said that you're supposed to, when you write a narrative, you're supposed to just bring it alive. You throw in some details to just get people involved in it. And that could easily be the case.

You know, you add that kind of detail to spice up the narrative. So is it an undesigned coincidence? Possibly. But, you know, some of them just aren't that strong.

I don't think most of them are that strong. That's why most people don't use them. So I think in some cases, you know, you got undesigned coincidences.

I think you can have both. It's not one to the exclusion of the other. I wish that, look, I live in the 21st century.

I wish that our gospels were actual transcripts of video recordings made of those actual events. And these were the precise words that Jesus had said after experts in Aramaic and Greek had assessed that when Jesus spoke in Aramaic and it was translated into Greek, yes, these are just precise as much as possible, you know, transcripts of what Jesus said. We don't have that.

We know we don't have it because his words differ even between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Did Jesus say blessed are the poor in spirit as Matthew has in a Sermon on the Mount? Or does he say blessed are the poor as Luke has in a Sermon on the Mount? How many Beatitudes were there? If you compare the Beatitudes and Matthew and Luke, they differ. They differ in the way they're organized.

So we can see Matthew or Luke's probably more Matthew's editorial hand that's in play here. And we see just a lot of the same kind of pattern of what's going on in these gospels. And most of the time it's Matthew who's taking these liberties and doing some of these things.

Like I said, he moves. He simplifies so often. He does this with the Centurion's Servant.

He does it with the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead. He does it with the cleansing of the temple. He does it with the fig tree.

He does it over and over and over. We see this as a pattern. Matthew simplifying.

And so you can either call that an error. I think a lot of this is the stuff most of us do. Or you can call it an error.

I don't. I think it's there because he's using a compositional device. I think that lens makes a whole lot more sense.

Well, this is where I'm going to have to take serious issue with your argument, Mike. You said specifically we don't have videotape of the words of Jesus. Clearly you haven't seen the chosen.

I like that series. I know these people criticize it. I love it.

I thoroughly enjoy it with my kids. Gives us a lot of conversation because we go back to the text and talk about it and unpack it. But even then there's a certain genre behind that of what they're claiming to do that has to be taken into consideration.

But I digress. I promised one more question. Is what does this mean for preaching? I mean, I've used the passage in John 8:58.

And I can imagine pastor standing up and saying and drawing out the scene and the drama and says that the moment of climax Jesus says before Abraham was born, I am. But he might not have actually said that. I mean, obviously I mean somewhat sarcastic here.

But what do you think this means for preaching when there's invention in creation and transform all these other compositional devices, potential play. And then you conclude we can't really know if Jesus said these things or not. You know, when it comes to preaching, I don't know that a pastor needs to be so concerned with saying, you know,

dealing with the deep historical issues like we're discussing here.

I don't have any problems if the pastor gets up and says, and this is what Jesus said here. Jesus certainly seems to be claiming divinity for himself, claiming to be God elsewhere. As I mentioned a bunch of different things when Mark is illuminating Jesus's divine character all throughout it permeates Mark's gospel.

So the gospel authors are certainly all four of them are presenting Jesus as God's uniquely divine son, even Yahweh himself. So I don't have any problem with them saying, well, you know, in John's gospel, you got this and Jesus is saying this. Again, John is a different animal than Matthew, Mark, and Luke are.

He's different and even conservative New Testament scholars acknowledge this. Joannine specialist who are evangelicals acknowledge this. I don't know that we have to get into that.

All this minutiae with the person in the pew on a Sunday morning. Okay. Yeah.

Okay. So I just thought of this. Sorry.

This is helping me out. So it would be okay then to preach from John 753 through 811, which is the story of the woman caught in adultery that most scholars would say was not in the original text. Now somebody could say, well, it's a kind of thing Jesus would say.

It fits within what we know about Jesus. And if you say, well, he shouldn't because it's not in the original text, then aren't we favoring the autographs and what they actually said, which is the kind of case that an errant is made. So am I missing the point or is an example of having your cake and eating it too? What would you say that passage in John 753 to 811? If I were going to, if I really wanted, I probably wouldn't preach using that passage, but if, I mean, that's just me.

But if I really wanted to use it, I would put a caveat in there and I would say, hey, look, if you've got a modern translation, you probably have some brackets around this story in the gospels with a little footnote that says that this story, these verses are not found in the best manuscripts. So there is question among scholars whether this Jesus actually did this, but many scholars think that yes, Jesus, this is a true story. It just didn't appear.

It was just known outside of John's gospel and that at a later time, a scribe, a copyist inserted it in the text because they wanted it included. That's probably what I would say. I think you can make the argument that obviously the text still matters and it's God breathed.

We just have to still unpack what it means that it's God breathed and how God has, you know, stuff has been preserved in the text and not to make your point. But fair enough, I got to the end of the book and I did, I love some of the stories because I know you do



this for a lot of the same reason that I do. And one is just it's interesting.

We love the conversation. We love the New Testament. We love apologetics.

You and I could talk about this stuff for hours, but also know you have a heart to help people with a lot of the same questions that you have wrestled with and seen a lot of people have their faith hijacked from. So talk about how you hope people use this book and maybe just a story of how it was meaningful to you. Sean, I've had so many people who have emailed me or contacted me after reading my first book on gospel differences that was published in 2017 saying that this either saved their faith or this approach either saved their faith or it really strengthened their faith.

Even with the new book that's just been out for two weeks as of today, there's already a couple of reviews on Amazon of people saying that this has really restored their faith or strengthened it. So, yeah, you know, again, when it came to the gospel differences when I started studying it, look, to me, once you have concluded that Jesus truly rose from the dead, these gospel differences just don't bother me anymore. Because if Jesus rose, its game set match, Christianity is true, period.

And even if the gospels did contain contradictions and some errors, it doesn't change that. Now, you know, if the gospels were entirely unreliable, Christianity would still be true. It's just we wouldn't know anything about it, right? But I think the gospels are reliable.

And as you know, in the book, I devote a chapter to inspiration. And I start off by saying, why should we even believe that scriptures are inspired? And I argue for why we should believe that they are divinely inspired. And then I go on to say, what does that mean? I have lectures on my YouTube channel that argue for why we should believe the gospels are historically reliable.

You don't have to be an errand in order to be historically reliable. So, I think what ends up happening, someone may say, yeah, but that's a slippery slope. If you acknowledge some errors in the gospels, you can go down to slippery slope and lose your faith.

And that does happen at times. I think it mainly happens when someone has such a, there have been taught such a wooden view of an errancy and what scripture is. It has to be without any errors or you can't trust any of it.

Those are the kind of people that go down to slope the other side of the hill because hills have two slopes to them, not just one. And the other slope, yeah, it's slippery, but the grade is a whole lot steeper. So, when you've got this really wooden view of an errancy in the Bible, that if it has one error, you can't trust any of it, that's when something can't be answered, they go tumbling.

They take one step down that slope and they go tumbling down to the bottom and lose

their faith. So, in some sense, the doctrine of an errancy in a traditional sense can be a dangerous doctrine to the spiritual vitality of some. And outside the United States, there isn't so much of a focus or emphasis on an errancy.

It's more like one infallibility and things like that, or the reliability or authoritativeness of scripture. So, an errancy, I don't know Sean, this has really helped me, it's helped others. It makes sense to me because I love scripture.

I believe it's divinely inspired. And because I love scripture, I want to follow it, I want to bow to it, it's authority, as God has given it to me. And as I look at some of these views of scripture, real strict and errantist view, it just doesn't seem to line up with the Bible that we have today.

Whereas if we look at it through the lens that I'm prescribing in this book, it seems like a whole lot more comes into focus. And if we view scripture a little bit differently, just a little bit to tweak our lenses a little bit in how we view inspiration and errancy, then wow, the whole text of the Bible comes a lot more into focus. We started this conversation pretty quickly talking about an errancy and we've brought it back at the end full circle.

I know there's some people going, wait a minute, Sean, push back and clarify and talk about this. That is a separate conversation. You had a wonder conversation with Frank Turk.

I hope people will check out recently on this podcast. You address it in the back of your book. You don't shy away from it.

So I'd encourage people to read that chapter in particular. And maybe at the end of the day, they won't agree with you. That's fine.

You cite some scholars, the people like Mueller who sees it very differently and is concerned with your position. And you respond in a way you think is fitting. So either way, we're moving the conversation forward, getting some clarity.

So I do remember, I guess it was about eight or ten years ago, you said you're going to write a popular book on this. I'm still waiting for it, Mike, because this is Zondervin Academic. This is still an academic book.

When is that book going to come out? Well, this is it, Sean. I didn't even want to write this one to be honest with you. As soon as this one came out, Oxford asked me to write a more popular level one.

Because the other was an academic monograph. And I said, I just don't want to. And then I put in a manuscript proposal and they said, well, this is too popular.

And so for Oxford. But as I lectured on this stuff around the country and around the

world, I had multiple people saying, you know, I love the ideas that you present. But I don't know how to tell these and share these with others.

Can you write a book for that? And that's what this book is. And so I took time a couple of years to write this book. So in addition to the eight of studying and writing the first one, add another three years or so to this one.

But I want to get back to my original or what I was doing after that first book on Gospel Differences. And that's the historical reliability of the Gospels. I've been really anxious to see where you go with that.

And we'll have that conversation for sure. So by the way, it is on an academic, but it's very readable. You don't go into depth on the Greek.

Anybody can read. It's not more than a carpenter. Light read is going to take some depth, but it's doable.

And I think for many of the topics you cover, you just have to get into the weeds of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to understand your point. So I think it's great. At the end of the day, whether people are with you or not, you've done your homework, you've presented your case, you put it out there for conversation.

Clearly, it's helping a lot of folks. So I appreciate you taking my questions and even some of the challenges that many critics have. Now, before I let you go, folks, make sure you hit subscribe.

We've got a lot of other topics coming up. We'll be talking about near-death experiences. Again, we get so many questions on that.

We've got some others on the reliability of the Scriptures. We have somebody coming on talking about that. And if you thought about studying apologetics, Mike, you ready for this? Go to either Biola or Houston Christian.

Thank you. Honestly. We're all in this together.

And I've always wanted to be a team player. Last fall, I taught into the faculty training. And, I mean, Nancy Pierce, he introduced me.

Craig Evans is doing amazing work there. You've got such a great team, a little different focus that we have at Biola. The key is just go get apologetic training so you can be helped to the church and help to your family and your community and the body of Christ.

So, I'm a fan of what you're doing Houston Christian. Of course, I'm biased, but we're all in this together. So, check out information below about joining me at Biola and Talbot for a Masters.

Mike, totally fun. Let's do this again soon. You bet, brother.

Thank you. Thanks for joining us today. If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, visit [RisenJesus.com](http://RisenJesus.com), where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the reliability of the gospels and the resurrection of Jesus.

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