

# OpenTheo

## Lydia McGrew Answered! Conclusion

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode, the final part in an 8 part series, Dr. Licona reviews and summarizes the problems with Lydia McGrew's methodological interpretation of the Gospels. Then he argues that compositional devices is compatible with the biblical doctrine of inspiration. Finally, he pastorally guides us to consider whether it's our view of history that needs reconsideration. These audio clips are taken from Dr. Licona's YouTube channel, originally published in 2020.

### 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 this episode, the final part in an 8 part series, Dr. Licona reviews and summarizes the problems with Lydia McGrew's method.

The methodological interpretation of the Gospels. Then he argues that compositional devices is compatible with the biblical doctrine of inspiration. Finally, he pastorally guides us to consider whether it's our view of history that needs reconsideration.

I believe I can succinctly summarize the different approaches Lydia McGrew and I take to viewing Gospel differences. With most New Testament scholars, I think the Gospels are biographies that employ compositional devices believed by classicists to be practically universal in ancient historical literature. These devices are so simple and common that many of us often use them even today in our ordinary communications without giving them second thought.

How many times have you had a conversation with someone having a different worldview than slightly altered and improved some of the details when relaying your account to a friend one hour later? Because conversations can often be messy, you alter your description of it to make your recollection clearer. You may improve some of the details in your arguments and those of your interlocutor in order to make the points

clearer, stronger, and in a manner that's more interesting. Yet we don't think of this as falsifying, deceiving, or fictionalizing.

Given the existence of a literary relationship between the synoptic Gospels whereby Matthew and Luke supplement their primary source mark with content they believe to be true, a practice they share with other well-known historical writers of that era, it's often fairly easy to observe them editing mark and to identify the techniques they employ in that process. Techniques very similar to those that have been posited by classicists and New Testament scholars for a long time. McGrew rejects the existence of compositional devices, contending that the higher standards of reporting held by the better historians of that era would have eschewed such devices since they involve changing the facts.

For her, any solution that harmonizes the differences is to be preferred to the author's use of a compositional device as long as it does not push the details too far. Even propaganda and error, whether innocent or deliberate, should be preferred to an author's use of a compositional device. And even if a particular author took the liberty to alter a few peripheral details on occasion, that would not mean it was a practice that was approved by that society.

In short, the claim of classicists and many New Testament scholars that ancient authors of historical literature used compositional devices is very difficult, if not impossible to prove. Therefore, according to McGrew, the claim should be rejected. So which approach is correct? Throughout this series, you've seen that Lydia's book, *The Mirror or the Mask*, is riddled with problems.

It's saturated with loaded terms and language that's both charged and exaggerated. These muddy the waters and often create false impressions for her readers. Her arguments are often founded on black and white thinking, which leaves her color blinded to the way in which ancient historical literature in general and the gospels in particular were written.

The supplies to her concept of what's acceptable and truthful reporting, the concept that's even out of touch with today's ordinary communication practices. We also observed an either/or and all or nothing outlook that often lacks literary sensitivity to nuance. McGrew reads her own views into the words of others, often leading her to misconstrued their intended meaning while insisting on questionable interpretations.

Her harmonizations are sometimes entirely ad hoc and inconsistent with how she argues elsewhere. We also observed that fallacious reasoning lies at the very core of her approach to gospel differences, as seen in her flowchart. These problems lead McGrew to adopt and promote a misguided position that's also contrary to what's held by the majority of classicists and much of New Testament scholarship.

Still, some evangelicals have found McGrew convincing, expressing alarm over the

proposal that the evangelist used compositional devices to alter some minor details. Philosopher JP Moreland says such an approach undermines New Testament historicity and is wanting and dangerous, while apologist John Wart Montgomery calls it an approach that destroys both mind and soul. Why are these evangelicals loathe to accept the use of compositional devices, even using such strong terms to denounce them? From McGrew, it's her black and white concept of truthful reporting combined with faulty reasoning.

However, for Moreland, Montgomery, and some others, the refusal to acknowledge the existence of compositional devices often emanates from a view of scripture that's not in harmony with the nature of scripture. Those who reject the gospel author's use of compositional devices should consider an even greater liberty the evangelists take, their use of the Old Testament. For example, Matthew reports that an angel warned Joseph in a dream to take his family and flee to Egypt in order to escape Herod's attempt to kill the Messiah.

They would later return to Judea after Herod's death. Matthew reports that this fulfilled the prophecy, out of Egypt, I called my son. Matthew is citing Hosea 11-1.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. Hosea is unambiguously referring to God's bringing Israel out of its bondage in Egypt, and there are no Jewish uses before or after the first century that link Hosea 11-1 with Messiah. Now, there are numerous ways of understanding what Matthew is doing here.

Craig Blomberg and R.T. France may be correct when suggesting that the relationship Matthew is drawing between Jesus and Israel and Hosea is one of typology. Regardless of whether that's correct, one thing is clear. Matthew is engaged in a creative hermeneutic whereby he takes an Old Testament text and assigns it a meaning entirely foreign to its original one.

Let's look at another example. After narrating Judas throwing the 30 pieces of silver in the Temple Sanctuary, Matthew states, then was fulfilled, what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet saying, and they took the 30 pieces of silver, the price of him on whom a price had been set by the sons of Israel, and they gave them for the potter's field just as the Lord instructed me. The careful reader will search in vain to find this text in Jeremiah.

That's because it's in Zechariah. However, Matthew borrowed a single word from Jeremiah. Field inserted it in the text from Zechariah loosely paraphrased the text, attributed it to Jeremiah, interpreted it to say something quite different from the original meaning of either text, then claimed scripture had been fulfilled.

Such free artistic use of texts was not unique to the New Testament authors. In a recent volume titled *Composite Citations in Antiquity, Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Early Christian Uses*, edited by Sean Adams and Seth Ehorn, we learned that composite citation was a

common literary practice, and sometimes in the free sense we observe Matthew doing here. Yet we would scold a pastor for doing something similar in his sermons.

So why is the evangelist practice acceptable to McGrew, Moreland, and Montgomery? By their standards, how is this not the abandonment of truthful reporting? And by their standards, was not Matthew guilty of falsifying the text and deceiving his readers by attributing the text to Jeremiah, assigning a meaning to it that's far into what it originally meant, then claiming that scripture was fulfilled? By their standards, isn't this practice by Matthew one that undermines New Testament historicity, is wanting and dangerous, and one that destroys both mind and soul? McGrew, Moreland, and Montgomery do not object to this practice because however much they may not like it, they understand that this is what divinely inspired scripture looks like. However, this leaves them in a pickle. How can they approve of the New Testament authors taking such great liberties with Old Testament scriptures, while forbidding the same New Testament authors from using much milder compositional devices? McGrew, Moreland, and Montgomery are inconsistent.

They strain at editorial gnats while swallowing hermeneutical camels. That said, no one should question the love McGrew, Moreland, and Montgomery have for the Lord and for scripture. In fact, it's their reverence for scripture that motivates them to defend it so strongly.

However, their view of what's allowable in divinely inspired scripture needs refining. The way we think about what it means to say scripture is God breathed should be informed by the claims of scripture about itself and by the nature of scripture. Too often the nature of scripture is only partially considered while scriptures claims about itself are loaded with one's preconceived ideas of what divinely inspired scripture should look like.

The resulting view of scripture then fails to line up with what we observe in scripture. Notwithstanding that view of scripture ends up being freeze-dried, pre-packaged, and sold for consumption. Consumers are then told, this is what you will eat.

It's good for you, but it's missing important ingredients that were overlooked. We are not obligated to purchase a view of scripture that lacks literary sensitivity. F.F. Bruce was no theological liberal.

J.I. Packer worked with Norman Geisler and R.C. Sproul to craft the Chicago statement on biblical inerrancy, one of the most conservative definitions of the doctrine. Packer wrote of Bruce, no man ever did more to demonstrate how evangelical faith and total academic integrity may walk hand in hand. Bruce's comments on divine inspiration are worth pondering, he wrote, I should not find the career of a Bible teacher so satisfying as I do, if I were not persuaded that the Bible was God's word written.

The fact that I am so persuaded means that I must not come to the Bible with my own

preconceptions of what the Bible as God's word written can or cannot say. Inspiration is not a concept of which I have a clear understanding before I come to the study of the text, so that I know in advance what limits are placed on the meaning of the text by the requirements of inspiration. On the contrary, it is by the patient study of the text that I come to understand better not only what the text itself means, but also what is involved in biblical inspiration.

Then Witherington similarly writes, inspiration looks like what we have in these documents, not what we would like to have. We have documents that conform to ancient standards of truth-telling, historical reporting, and biographical writing. If the literary conventions of ancient biography permitted biographers to employ compositional devices that altered some details, while preserving an essentially faithful representation of what occurred, and if the gospel authors also used compositional devices to this effect, then this is what truth-telling and divinely inspired scripture looks like.

So why is this important? While Morland and Montgomery assert that the use of compositional devices is dangerous and destroys both mind and soul, I'm finding that precisely the opposite is occurring. Ricardo Mora is a high school teacher in California. Last year, he sent me an email telling me he had lost his faith while attending USC, but got it back later.

He then attended Talbot School of Theology, where he earned a master's degree in order to learn how to answer difficult questions. Gospel differences especially troubled him. He read books on Bible difficulties by Gleason Archer, Norman Geisler, and Thomas Howe.

But he found many of their solutions to be more troubling than the gospel differences they were attempting to resolve. Last September, Mr. Mora was listening to William Lane Craig's podcast and heard him recommend my book on gospel differences. He bought it, read it, and sent me an email providing the background I just mentioned and saying how my book had helped him profoundly.

Having his permission, I'll share how he ended his email. I am so thankful for what you have done here, Mr. Lacona. I am crying right now as I write these words, and I'm a guy I don't usually cry.

It's been 22 years of searching for an answer, praying for some form of insight, hoping that my mind would one day be at peace. It is finally at peace. Now the very differences that caused me so much worry and doubt are turning into markers of authenticity.

I can finally trust these accounts again. Your work is crucial for young adults to know as they enter college. What happened to me can be avoided.

Please don't stop doing what you do. Ricardo's email is one of many I've received that communicate a similar message. In contrast, the view of some harmonizers pertaining to

what constitutes truthful reporting promotes a rigid concept of reliability that often serves as fertile ground for breeding doubt.

Now I'm not at all suggesting that harmonization efforts are always mistaken. However, if the assessments in my book on gospel differences are correct, reading the gospels through a lens prescribed to recognize the literary conventions of the period in which they were written will more often than not bring us closer than harmonization efforts to understanding the gospels as their authors intended. This will open the door to a more harmonious union of our view of scripture and what we observe in scripture.

I want to conclude with what may be a helpful exercise not only for the matter at hand but also for some other matters of theological dispute. Imagine that Jesus has just returned and you're having a conversation with the apostle Matthew. At one point you bring up the difference between his account and Luke's pertaining to Jesus healing the centurion's servant.

You ask Matthew whether the centurion had gone to Jesus to make his request in person as he had reported in his gospel or as Luke reported that the centurion had relayed his request through emissaries and did not see Jesus that day. Matthew looks at you as if somewhat surprised by your question and says the centurion sent emissaries, I just simplified the account. You're surprised by his response because you had previously approached gospel differences by harmonizing them.

So you raised another matter that had troubled you. Brother Matthew, Mark narrated Jesus temple cleansing to have occurred on the day following Palm Sunday, whereas you seem to place it on Palm Sunday. Furthermore, Mark narrated Jesus cursing the fig tree on Monday than has the disciples notice on Tuesday that it had withered and died.

However, you appear to have narrated the event as though Jesus cursed the fig tree on Monday and that it withered and died before their very eyes. Did you mean to do that? Matthew says my secretary did. He liked to abbreviate on occasion and would alter some minor details as long as his final version of the story preserved the essential details.

And I was fine with that. What do you think? Thoughts raced through your mind at this point. You're in heaven.

You've actually just spoken with Matthew and he told you things that are forcing you to rethink some matters. Now here's something for you to ponder. If Matthew were to tell you these things, would you be upset with them? Would you complain to God that Matthew had not been truthful? Or would you adjust how you think about the matter? And what would your opinion now be of those heated debates on social media in which you had engaged? Would you be ashamed of the harsh and divisive comments you had typed and pressed enter? Comments that had strained and even destroyed some of your relationships and even worse had caused division in the body of Christ? Or would you be

glad that you had been more reserved while recognizing that intelligent and sincere people who love God in Scripture and who are your brothers and sisters in Christ have arrived at different conclusions pertaining to a non-essential matter and you were content to disagree while putting a premium on unity in the body of Christ.

I would rather be wrong on the matter of compositional devices than to be right while being an agent of division in the body of Christ. I confess that, although I've been deliberate in not responding to Lydia's criticisms for the past few years, I'm not blameless in the way I responded at times. And for that, I'm truly sorry and apologize to Lydia.

Going forward, let's all keep the matter in perspective. And if the Lord returns in our lifetime, let's approach Matthew to gather with our questions. Arm and arm as brothers and sisters in Christ.

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. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast, visit Dr. Lacona's YouTube channel, or consider becoming a monthly supporter.

This has been the RisenJesus Podcast, a ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona. Give it up, Mike, Mike, Mike, Mike.