

## Did I Misrepresent McGrew on Chronology?

Shortly after the video version of Part 6 went live, a friend alerted me that McGrew was contending on her Facebook page that I had misrepresented her definitions for “achronological” and “dyschronological,” since her definitions include what is implied. She wrote,

Licona seriously misrepresents me as defining dyschronological narration as (by definition) \*explicit\* chronological placement that deliberately differs from what actually happened. He then accuses me of not recognizing that authors may imply things like chronology to a greater or lesser extent. This is an error about my definition and my position, and quite an important one, since Licona uses it to argue that I do not recognize nuance in narration.

Instead, I define dyschronological narration as narration in which the author “does imply or state a chronology that the author believes is different from what happened in the real world.” (TMOM, p. 18) Notice the word “imply” there. The difference between what I call achronological and dyschronological narration lies in the intention of the author. Is the author trying to give the impression that things happened in a different order or took a different period of time from the time that the author believes was the real time period?<sup>1</sup>

I returned to McGrew’s book and reread her definitions:

It will be useful to have a couple of coined words to help us deal with chronology (time ordering). I will be using the term ‘achronological’ for narration that does not have a chronology stated or implied, as intended by the author. I will use ‘dyschronological’ for narration that does imply or state a chronology is stated “that the author believes is different from what happened in the real world.

McGrew is correct that I misrepresented her. This was an unintentional error on my part. How did I come to make it? I should have read that portion of her book more carefully. However, it appears that I was not nearly as mistaken as may first appear, because her practice is often inconsistent with her definitions. Let’s look at three examples.

### 1. A Woman Anoints Jesus

Let’s begin by looking at the relevant text in Mark.

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<sup>1</sup> Posted on June 18, 2020, 6:45pm.

Now it was two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how they might arrest him secretly and kill him. For they were saying, “Not during the feast lest the people riot.” And while Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the Leper, and while reclining, a woman came having an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment of pure nard. (Mark 14:1-3a)

Mark proceeds to tell the story of a woman who anoints Jesus. He follows this with a short story of Judas going to the chief priests and arranging to betray Jesus (Mark 14:3b-11). Now notice the following verse:

Now on the first day of the [Feast of] Unleavened Bread when the Passover [lamb] is sacrificed, his disciples were saying to him, “Where do you want for us to go and prepare so that you may eat the Passover?” (Mark 14:12)

I understand Mark to be stating explicitly that the anointing occurred sometime during those two days before Passover, and probably two days before Passover.<sup>2</sup> I encourage you to read Mark 14:1-3 while keeping in mind that the ancient Greek language did not have punctuation marks or chapter and paragraph divisions.<sup>3</sup> In fact, there were not even spaces

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<sup>2</sup> Blomberg disagrees and thinks this is one of “Mark’s famous sandwiches, in which he narrates two events in an ABA fashion because he understands the meaning of each to be intertwined with the other” (Craig L. Blomberg, “Dealing With Gospels Differences: Can We Still Believe The Bible?” A paper read at ETS 2015 during a panel discussion with Darrel Bock and Michael Licona, page 9.) Blomberg may be correct. But I doubt it. (McGrew, 391, likewise does not find Blomberg persuasive here.) Mark has seven clear sandwiches in his Gospel. Bracketing this one, it is quite interesting to observe that, of the other six, all but one are crystal clear that the event being sandwiched had occurred either as narrated between two other events or simultaneously with them (See Mark 3:20-35; 5:21-43; 6:7-32; 11:12-21; 14:1-11, 17-31, 53-72.). And the single instance in which crystal clarity is absent, the parallel account in Matthew makes an explicit chronological link, even though Mark does not (Mark 6:7-32/Matt. 14:13. Notwithstanding, it is worth observing that its parallel in Matt. 14:13 makes an explicit chronological link.). Let’s look at an example. Jairus comes to Jesus and asks him to heal his daughter. Then a hemorrhaging woman is healed when she sneaks up and touches his robe. Jesus ends up having a conversation with her. Mark then says, “*While He was still speaking [to her],*” people came from Jairus’ house and told him his daughter had just died (Mark 5:35). This links the events together in an explicit chronological sense (i.e., Jesus healing a woman with a hemorrhaging problem is sandwiched between Jairus approaching Jesus and requesting that he heal his daughter and Jesus raising his daughter from the dead). Just about every sandwich in Mark ties events together chronologically, even if a thematic link is likewise present in some of them. In those cases, it is not an either/or but both. So, Mark often uses explicit chronological language when constructing his sandwiches. Accordingly, in my opinion, it is most probable that Mark is intentional in saying the woman anointed Jesus two days prior to Passover.

<sup>3</sup> See also Matt. 16:1-19.

between words! Read 14:1-3 and ask yourself whether you think Mark intends for his readers to understand that the anointing occurred within two days of Passover.<sup>4</sup>

Lets now look at the parallel text in John:

Therefore, six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Therefore, they prepared for him a dinner there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him [at the table]. Therefore, Mary took a pound of expensive ointment of pure nard . . .

John appears to be locating the anointing six days prior to the Passover meal. In my book, I lean toward thinking it was John who relocated the anointing:

Either Mark (followed by Matthew) or John have displaced the event. Mark may have done so in order to bring the symbolic anointing of Jesus for his burial closer to the event itself. However, it may be that John displaced the event. Not only does he probably displace an event elsewhere (see pericope #10 earlier in this chap.), but it would have been proper practice for him to displace the anointing from its original context and transplant it here. We recall Lucian recommending that stories should be joined together in a narrative like links in a chain and with overlapping material when possible. Just prior to the anointing in John, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in the presence of the latter's sisters, Mary and Martha (11:1– 44). Perhaps John recalled at this point that he had a story about Mary to which he had already alluded (11:1– 2), so he tells it here, linking the two with Mary serving as the overlap.<sup>5</sup>

McGrew likewise acknowledges a chronological difference here. She includes it in her list of probable errors in the Gospels.<sup>6</sup> Recall that her flowchart requires her to go with error prior to acknowledging a compositional device (see my fifth video or Part 5 above). Observe also that her definition of “dyschronology” requires that an author must be stating the time at which an event had occurred while knowing that it had actually occurred at a different time. McGrew refers to the error of the timing of the woman anointing Jesus as “a minor, good-faith chronological error, and one that would be quite easy to make.”<sup>7</sup>

In her post on Facebook (June 18, 2020), McGrew states,

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<sup>4</sup> Καὶ ὄντος (*and [Jesus] being* in Bethany) that begins Mark 14:3 is found only here, 14:66, Acts 27:9, Jos. *Ant.* 17:64, Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1:20, Naph. 5:4. In these six occurrences, it always refers to something going on now. In other words, it's connected to the context in which it appears. Granted, it's a very small sampling.

<sup>5</sup> Licona, 150.

<sup>6</sup> McGrew, 52 note 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

In fact, contra Licona, I explicitly state that I think Mark is \*implying\* a particular day on which Jesus' feet were anointed in Passion Week, though Mark doesn't give the day order quite explicitly and though others (such as Craig Blomberg) think it fairly plausible that Mark may be narrating achronologically. (TMOM, Chapter XIV, section 6, p. 390ff) This is a direct counterexample to Licona's claim that I do not recognize that authors can imply things more and less strongly.

McGrew provides reasons in her book for thinking that Mark is placing the anointing two days prior to Passover. She then chides me for not considering 'achronology' and error and says, "He leaps over all intermediate stages and goes directly for dyschronological narration by Mark or John, telling us that it is either one or the other."<sup>8</sup> In other words, I'm chided for not following the progression in her flowchart. She then charges me of wrongly interpreting Lucian, "severely over-reads" the relevant text, providing a "highly questionable interpretation," "severely misrepresents" Lucian with my "own eisegesis of the passage."<sup>9</sup> She then says my suggestion that John has moved the anointing is based on poor reasons then suggests John could have stated things differently if he had merely wanted to move the anointing closer to Jesus raising Lazarus.<sup>10</sup>

I'm going to spare the reader and myself here by omitting a detailed response to these charges, except to say that I do not find them to be correct. Nor do I find compelling her speculative Monday morning quarterbacking of what John or another author could have done better if they had meant so-and-so. I think the matter comes down to her following statement referring to why she thinks the difference exists in the timing of the anointing:

The far more reasonable conclusion based on the text is that John believed that the event took place the evening before the Triumphal Entry. Whether one concludes that perhaps Mark was narrating achronologically or that one or the other author made a minor, good-faith error, fictionalization is an entirely unnecessary hypothesis.<sup>11</sup>

McGrew has coined chronological terms (*dyschronology* and *achronology*) and created a method she articulates in her flowchart to which she apparently insists that others should follow. Although her chronological terms include nuance, nuance appears to have played no part in her use of the terms in relation to her assessment of the woman anointing Jesus. And I explained in my fifth video/Part 5 how her flowchart is founded on faulty reasoning.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 393-394.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 394-95.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 395.

## 2. Jesus Curses a Fig Tree

McGrew criticizes Craig Keener's treatment of Jesus cursing the fig tree, contending that "If Matthew knowingly, falsely narrated that the tree withered immediately when he believed that it didn't wither until the next day (or at least until after the disciples and Jesus had left), he was narrating dyschronologically."<sup>12</sup> Given what she writes throughout her book, she does not think Matthew would intentionally write "dyschronologically." So, how does McGrew explain the three differences related to (a) when Jesus cursed the fig tree, (b) the time that elapsed between when Jesus cursed it and when his disciples first noticed it had died, and (c) Matthew's placement of the temple cleansing on Palm Sunday whereas Mark locates it on Monday? Unfortunately, she does not tell us. However, we may be able to make an intelligent guess by looking at the available options and arrive at what she probably thinks through the process of elimination.

With many classicists and New Testament scholars, I think ancient historians would occasionally narrate an event to have occurred at a certain time when the author knew it had occurred at a different time. I refer to this as "synthetic chronological placement" and "displacement." McGrew calls it "dyschronology." In order to recognize that an author has intentionally located an event at a different time, that author would have to state the timing in a manner that's either explicit or implied. Of course, what some may think is implied, others will not. A matter becomes easier when the implication is strong. And some matters may be so strongly implied by the language that it is difficult to distinguish *strongly implied* from *explicit*.

But what are we to think when one won't acknowledge when something is even strongly implied? That is what I believe we often have with McGrew's assessments. We see this in how she treats this story. Because Matthew is very likely using Mark as his primary source when recalling Jesus cleansing the temple and cursing the fig tree, we can observe how he redacts Mark's version. The changes made are intentional. So, he's either (a) using compositional devices, such as synthetic chronological placement and compression, (b) lying to his readers, or (c) correcting Mark.

As one reads her book, one observes that McGrew *never* thinks a Gospel author has intentionally narrated an event to have occurred at a specific time while being aware that it had actually occurred at a different time. Therefore, neither (a) nor (b) are what McGrew has in mind pertaining to the three differences in this story. Does she think either Matthew or Mark were guilty of errors here, even if they were unintentional? It's worth observing that none of the three differences appear in her list of examples in the Gospels she thinks are probably errors (c).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 116-118. The quote appears on 118.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 52 note 2.

Perhaps she did not intend for her list to be exhaustive. However, if she regards any of the three as errors, the section in which she treats the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree would have been an opportune time to inform us.

Since McGrew does not think a Gospel author intentionally displaced the events chronologically and appears not to think either is in error pertaining to these three differences, I suspect she likely takes the position that Matthew narrated the event “achronologically” or what I have termed as “floating chronology.” If so, McGrew would follow her flowchart and prefer that view over my opinion that Matthew has here provided a strongly implied chronology and the time that had elapsed between when Jesus cursed the fig tree and they observed it withered.

However, if she were to take this route, her opinion would result from her rejecting “dyschronology” and “error” rather than because she had considered whether something was implied, even strongly implied, such as we find in this case. This would be McGrew practicing the very thing I’m claiming in Part 6 pertaining to *how she applies* the chronological terms she coined. Although she asserts that her definitions of “achronological” and “dyschronological” include in principle that which is implied, her use of the terms in practice suggests she often has something else in mind. In Part 7, we will observe still another example of McGrew’s lack of literary sensitivity in her treatment of the story of Jesus raising Jairus’s daughter from the dead.

### 3. Jesus Heals a Leper

This story appears in all three Synoptic Gospels: Mark 1:40-45; Matt. 8:1-4; Luke 5:12-16. I argue in my book that the language employed by Mark and Matthew is explicit when the larger context is considered.<sup>14</sup>

In Mark 1:21-28, Jesus arrives in Capernaum and cast out a demon from a man in the synagogue there. “And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew” where he heals Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31).<sup>15</sup> This is immediately followed with “When evening came and the sun had set,” people came to Jesus, bringing the sick and demon-possessed (Mark 1:32–34). This is immediately followed with “In the early morning while it was still dark,” Jesus got up and went to a secluded place to pray (Mark 1:35–38). He then left Capernaum and went throughout Galilee preaching in their synagogues (Mark 1:39). It’s in the course of this journey that Jesus heals the leper (Mark 1:40–45). For in the verse that follows, Mark says that Jesus returned to Capernaum “after some days” and healed a paralytic (Mark 2:1-12). Therefore, Mark’s chronology is fairly explicit that (1) Jesus entered Simon’s house and healed his mother-in-law immediately *after* leaving the synagogue, (2) Jesus healed the leper *after* he had healed Peter’s mother-in-law and (3) *prior* to healing a paralytic (i.e., synagogue→

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<sup>14</sup> Licona, 191-93.

<sup>15</sup> Scholars have often observed that Mark has a practice of transitioning to another story with “And immediately” in order to move his narrative along rapidly. Yet, this does not eliminate its chronological sense.

mother-in-law→leper→paralytic). Furthermore, when one reads Mark's text in a straightforward manner, it is certainly implied that Jesus healed those who came to him on the evening of the same day he healed Simon's mother-in-law and that Jesus rose early on the following morning and prayed.

In Luke, Jesus enters Capernaum and casts a demon out of a man in their synagogue (Luke 4:31-37). This is immediately followed with "And having left the synagogue, he entered the house of Simon" (Luke 4:38a) and heals his mother-in-law (Luke 4:38b-39). This is immediately followed with "As the sun was setting," people came to Jesus and he healed them (Luke 4:40-41). "And when day came," Jesus went to a desolate place to pray then left with his disciples to preach "to the other towns" (Luke 4:42-44). "While in one of those towns," Jesus heals a leper (Luke 5:12-14). He then heals a paralytic (5:17-26).

Luke follows Mark's order for the other events and uses similar though somewhat weaker language that implies Jesus healed those who came to him on the evening of the same day he healed Simon's mother-in-law, that Jesus rose early on the following morning and prayed, and that he healed the leper after that. Luke also locates Jesus healing a paralytic after healing a leper. However, unlike Mark and Matthew (9:1), Luke does not indicate that Jesus had returned to Capernaum before he healed the paralytic.

In Matthew, the healing of the leper occurred during an earlier period than we find in Mark. After Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew reports that, "Having come down from the mountain, large crowds followed him" (Matt. 8:1). This is immediately followed with the story of a leper who approached Jesus and was healed (Matt. 8:2-4). Jesus then returned to Capernaum, where he healed a centurion's servant (Matt. 8:5-13) and then healed Peter's mother-in-law who was also in Capernaum (Matt. 8:14-15). "When evening came," people came to Jesus and he healed them (Matt. 8:16-17). The phrase Matthew uses here clearly refers to the evening of the day on which Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law.<sup>16</sup> Although Matthew's language surrounding Jesus healing the leper is neither explicit nor strongly implied, it is at least weakly implied (i.e., leper→centurion's servant→mother-in-law).

Here's another reason that suggests Matthew probably places the leper healing chronologically prior to Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law. In Matthew 8:1, Jesus comes down from the mountain after preaching his Sermon on the Mount and a large crowd is following him, perhaps consisting of those who had attended the Sermon. Verse 2 begins with "And behold" (καὶ ἰδοὺ) and follows with Jesus healing a leper. This phrase, "And behold," occurs 28 times in

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<sup>16</sup> "When evening came" (Οψίας δὲ γενομένης). In the New Testament, this phrase appears only in Matt. 8:16; 14:15, 23; 20:8; 26:20; 27:57; Mark 1:32. Bracketing Matt. 8:16 and Mark 1:32, which appear after Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, every instance clearly refers to the evening of the same day. There is no reason to think the bracketed texts are any different. Outside of the NT, the phrase only appears in Herm. Sim. 88:6; *Diatesseron* 5; Acts Andr. Mth. 26:9; Acts John 6:5, all having the meaning of the evening as same day on which the preceding event(s) occurred.

Matthew (2:9; 3:16, 17; 4:11; 7:4; 8:2, 24, 29, 32, 34; 9:2, 3, 10, 20; 12:10, 41, 42; 15:22; 17:3, 5; 19:16; 20:30; 26:51; 27:51; 28:2, 7, 9, 20) of which 23 clearly refer to an event occurring within a tight chronology. Of the five exceptions, two have parallels in Mark and Luke where explicit chronology is present (Hemorrhaging Woman: Matt. 9:20: Mark 5:27 / Luke 8:49 explicitly connect it chronologically to the story of Jairus; Blind Men: Matt. 20:30: Mark 10:46 / Luke 18:35 explicitly connect it chronologically to Jesus entering Jericho). So, although Matthew's chronology is not clearly explicit in these two instances, the parallels in Mark and Luke are. Since Matthew is using Mark as his source, he probably intends to communicate that these two events occurred with explicit chronology. Of the three that remain, one is Matthew 8:2, which we will bracket for the moment, since it relates to Jesus healing a leper. Matthew 9:2, which introduces the story of Jesus healing a paralytic, is weakly implied chronology. Only Matthew 19:16 is quite ambiguous pertaining to chronology.

What does this tell us? Of the 28 occurrences of "And behold" in Matthew, 23 are clearly to be understood in a chronological sense. Matthew probably intends for two of the remaining five to be understood in an explicit chronological sense. Of the remaining three, only one is quite ambiguous pertaining to chronology. What can be acknowledged is that a straightforward reading of Matthew suggests he reported Jesus healing the leper prior to healing Peter's mother-in-law. Moreover, apart from Matthew 8:2, which pertains to the leper, Matthew uses the term "And behold" in an explicitly chronological sense 92 percent of the time and in an implied sense seven percent of the time. In only one instance, three percent, it appears in a sense where no chronology is stated. Thus, it is certainly reasonable to think that Matthew intentionally located Jesus healing the leper chronologically prior to healing Peter's mother-in-law, while Mark and probably Luke place it afterward. Mark's chronology is fairly explicit while the chronology in the wider context in Matthew is fairly explicit and is probably implied pertaining to the leper. Even if one were to assert that the language does not explicitly state that such-and-such occurred "on the same day," "on the following day," etc., one can still agree that the language used by Matthew and Mark implies that they locate the healing at different times.

However, McGrew disagrees and cites Augustine where he writes in reference to Matthew's timing of Jesus healing the leper:

Matthew has not indicated the date of this incident; that is to say, he has specified neither before what event nor after what occurrence it took place. For we are certainly under no necessity of supposing that, because it is recorded after a certain event, it must also have happened in actual matter of fact after that event. . . . [W]hen the order of times is not apparent, we ought not to feel it a matter of any consequence what order any of them may have adopted in relating the events. But wherever the order is apparent, if the evangelist then presents anything which seems to be inconsistent with



his own statements, or with those of another, we must certainly take the passage into consideration, and endeavour to clear up the difficulty.<sup>17</sup>

In support of Augustine, McGrew writes,

Augustine thus provides evidence *against* the idea that Christians of his own time accepted dyschronological order. On the contrary, Augustine emphasizes that an apparent discrepancy between chronologies, when the order is apparent, does require harmonization. This is a rejection of dyschronological narration. Augustine says that it is only when the author does not specify the order that we can sometimes conjecture that one author or the other was narrating achronologically, so there is no contradiction between two accounts.<sup>18</sup>

The Latin term Augustine uses here translated “apparent” is *appareo*. In this context, he is referring to instances where the chronological order is “plain and unambiguous.” For Augustine, if two or more authors have narrated the same event(s) without specifying an order, one is free to conjecture a chronology. However, if the order in both is “apparent” but does not line up, one should harmonize the texts. For Augustine, an error in the Gospels, whether intended or unintended, was not an option on the table. For McGrew, only an unintentional error is on the table. Since she rejects synthetic chronological placement/dyschronology as an intentional (and unethical) error, she joins Augustine in blinding herself to the implied language used by Matthew, Mark, and Luke in this instance. Notice her statement: “Augustine says that it is only when the author does not specify the order that we can sometimes conjecture that one author or the other was narrating achronologically, so there is no contradiction between two accounts.” However, as we have observed, the chronology of when Jesus healed the leper is implied by Matthew, Mark, and to a lesser extent Luke. So, although McGrew includes implied language in her definitions, this is yet another instance where she refuses to acknowledge its presence.

You can decide for yourself. Take a moment and read Mark 11:1-25 and Matthew 21:1-22. If you think each presents an order of events that’s clear, you’ll recognize that this is yet more evidence that McGrew’s definitions for her terms “dyschronological” and “achronological” are often inconsistent with how she applies them when assessing Gospel differences.

In summary, I acknowledge that I unintentionally misrepresented McGrew when asserting that her coined terms “dyschronological” and “achronological” lack nuance because

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *De consens. Ev.* 2.21.51-52 (1888). In P. Schaff (Ed.), S. D. F. Salmond (Trans.), *Saint Augustin: Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels* (Vol. 6, p. 127-28). New York: Christian Literature Company.

<sup>18</sup> McGrew, 236.

they do not acknowledge when something is implied. That said, my misunderstanding came about by observing how she applies those concepts when assessing Gospel differences. I have shown that, in practice, she means by those terms what I have stated in Part 6. In short, what McGrew states in principle pertaining to those definitions is inconsistent with what she often does in practice.