Lydia McGrew Answered

Mike Licona

"Michael Licona's groundbreaking work on compositional devices employed in Plutarch's *Lives* and in the New Testament Gospels has been vigorously challenged by Lydia McGrew's iconoclastic critique. In this engaging series Licona effectively rebuts these criticisms, showing that such compositional devices were not only taught to ancient historical writers and employed by ancient biographers like Plutarch but were also virtually undeniably employed by the evangelists in their accounts of the life of Jesus. Licona's irenic and careful sifting of the criticisms serves to illumine the sort of freedom enjoyed by the Gospel writers and has important theological lessons to teach us about the nature of scriptural inspiration and authority."

William Lane Craig

Lydia McGrew Answered
Part 1: Introduction

A number of you have asked me to respond to Lydia McGrew's lengthy critique of my book *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn From Ancient Biography*. Now that I've been able to complete some of my projects, I've had time to read McGrew's book and will now respond. To begin, I want to explain what led me to the approach I've adopted.

In the latter half of the 20th century, several scholars proposed that the Gospels belong to the genre of ancient biography. Richard Burridge's 1992 book *What Are the Gospels?* ended up moving the world of New Testament scholars to think that, at minimum, most if not all of the Gospels share much in common with the genre of ancient biography.[1] Even before Burridge's book, classicists had been writing on ancient biography and how it differed in some respects from modern biography. Ancient biography had different objectives and allowed more flexibility in the way the past was reported than how modern historians write. A question that remained to be answered is how might this impact the way we should read the Gospels. New Testament scholar Craig Keener began research on the Gospels to see how their biographical nature plays out. Several of his doctoral students have conducted focused research in this area as well. I've focused on it, too.

The first step I took was to make a list of all the extant biographies written within around 150 years of Jesus, before and after; about 300 years in all. Biographies were called "Lives" at that time. The English word "biography" did not come along until the 17th century. I began reading those biographies, starting with Plutarch's *Lives*. Many classicists assess Plutarch to be the greatest biographer in antiquity. Plutarch began writing his *Lives* at the end of the first century and continued writing them until sometime shortly after the year 120. He wrote more than 60 *Lives* of which 48 have survived. Nine of the 48 feature main characters who were Romans, most of whom knew one another with many of them participating in some of the same events. So, I read through those Nine *Lives* three times, making a list of all the events reported in them. Then I made a list of all the events that appear in two or more of those *Lives*. For example, the assassination of Julius Caesar is mentioned in Plutarch's *Lives* of Caesar, Cicero, Brutus, and Antony. So, we can compare how Plutarch reports the same story in all four *Lives*. This is a unique opportunity and differs from comparing how the story of Caesar's assassination is told by several different authors. By focusing on Plutarch, I could assess how the same author, very often using the same sources, and writing at the same time reported the same stories. I found three dozen stories Plutarch told two or more times in the nine *Lives* on which I was focusing. My

[1] In 2018, the 25th anniversary edition was published by Baylor University Press and contains more than 100 new pages: Richard A. Burridge, *What Are The Gospels? A Comparison With Graeco-Roman Biography: 25th Anniversary Edition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018).

thinking was I could go through these stories with a fine-tooth comb and observe whether Plutarch copies and pastes the same stories or whether there are differences. If there are differences, I could see what kind of differences there are and see if they shed some light on the differences in the Gospels.

At this point, I recognized that this was a substantial project and would take a lot of time. So, prior to proceeding further, I wondered if someone else had already completed what I was planning to do. Surely a classicist had done so! I contacted my friend John Ramsey, who at the time was teaching classics at the University of Illinois in Chicago and asked if he was aware of anyone who had already completed such a project with Plutarch. Professor Ramsey referred me to his friend Christopher Pelling who he said is the foremost authority on Plutarch. Pelling was teaching at Christ Church Oxford at the time and is the former tutor of Richard Burridge whose book *What Are The Gospels?* has been a game-changer in the discipline of New Testament Studies. I contacted Professor Pelling and he informed me that a few others had indeed conducted the type of work about which I was inquiring. However, the most comprehensive is a journal article he had written and republished in 2002 as a single chapter in his book *Plutarch and History*.[2] He added that his research involved comparing seven *Lives* rather than nine. And it only took a handful of stories into consideration rather than every story that appeared more than once. So, nothing had yet been completed that had the scope I was proposing.

So, I embarked on my research. I placed limits on it in order to avoid embarking on countless rabbit trails and never completing it. I also set limits by proceeding with certain assumptions. I began with the assumption that, at minimum, the Gospels share much in common with the genre of ancient biography. This is the position of a large majority of New Testament scholars, including evangelical New Testament scholars. The literature I had read on the subject convinced me of the Gospels' biographical genre. After all, if you were going to write about the life of an important person, what genre would you use? Poetry, horror fiction, or biography? And let's say you're a biographer in the first century, writing for readers living in the first century about a person who had lived in the first century, would you use the literary conventions in play in the first century or those that would not come into play until more than 1,500 years later? The answers to these questions are obvious. Some have claimed that the Gospels are a unique genre and belong in a category shared with no other literature. This seems odd to me. Every other bit of literature in the Bible fits into a genre that's shared with other literature outside the Bible. Why must the Gospels be the only exception, especially when they share so much in common with ancient biography? So, I began with the assumption that the Gospels share much in common with ancient biography.

I also assumed that many New Testament scholars over the years have been correct that the authors of the Gospels used telescoping, spotlighting, and other devices. Although they

[2] Christopher Pelling, *Plutarch and History: Eighteen Studies* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002).

rarely ever provided evidence to support their contention that these were standard devices used by the ancients, their proposals seemed quite plausible to me; more plausible than viewing the differences as errors or by engaging in strained harmonization efforts, especially since we use many of these devices even today in our ordinary communications.

I read literature written by classicists and I discovered that they also spoke of the same literary devices as New Testament scholars along with a few additional ones. Classicist J L Moles commented that a number of these literary devices are "practically universal in ancient historiography."[3] Since Pelling refers to them as "compositional devices," I adopted that term. The scope of my project would be largely limited to examining stories told in two or more of Plutarch's *Lives*, identifying differences in details, and looking for occasions where compositional devices might be in play. Now if the majority of New Testament scholars and classicists are mistaken about the existence of these devices, then I am too, since I'm largely standing on the shoulders of Richard Burridge, Christopher Pelling, J. L. Moles, Craig Keener, and many other scholars when launching into this expanded research that breaks some new ground. The entire project took around eight years.

During my research, I was quite surprised to observe how often Plutarch appears to have used the compositional devices identified by classicists. I also read through the Gospels eight times in Greek and made a list of all the differences I observed. I then read those stories in view of the compositional devices posited by scholars and was surprised by how often the Gospel authors appear to have used them. Oxford University Press published my research in 2017 in a book titled *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn From Ancient Biography*. The book received praise from Prof. Pelling who called it "an exemplary crossover of classical and New Testament studies." Richard Bauckham called it "an illuminating fresh approach to understanding how the Gospel writers used their sources." Dale Allison referred to it as a "significant volume" while Scot McKnight said it's "the most important book I've ever read on the literary techniques of the Evangelists." All of these are highly respected scholars in the relevant fields. The esteemed evangelical theologian J. I. Packer referred to my book as "an accomplished piece of work which it is a pleasure to commend."

However, the book has received some criticism, the sharpest of which has come from Christian philosopher Lydia McGrew. She began to post lengthy criticisms of my book on her blog. She then published two articles in evangelical journals, one of which she sells as a PDF on Amazon. Then in November 2019, she published her book *The Mirror or the Mask: Liberating the Gospels from Literary Devices*, a 560-page volume that's largely a negative criticism of my book.[4]

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[3] J. L. Moles, *Plutarch: The Life of Cicero: With an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Eastbourne, U.K.: Aris and Phillips Classical Texts, 1988), 40.

[4] Lydia McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask: Liberating the Gospels from Literary Devices* (Tampa: DeWard Publishing Company, Ltd., 2019).

More recently, she and her husband Tim have contacted a number of people asking them to stop promoting my work, asserting that it has been thoroughly refuted by her book. Friends of the McGrews are contending vigorously in their favor on social media platforms. Unfortunately, some division in the Body of Christ has resulted. And this concerns me. That plus the many requests I have received to reply to her is what has motivated me to offer one.

So, here's how I'm going to proceed. This is the first in a series of eight parts. In the seven that follow, I'll reiterate the steps I take in my book and assess how McGrew has replied in her book. I will not be responding to everything she says. That would require far more time than I can devote to the matter. But I am responding to the major points.

I intend to do this in a collegial manner. McGrew will no doubt reply at length. However, I want to be clear about something here at the outset. This is my response to Lydia's book. I have no intention of being involved any further in the disputes many of you are having. I have other projects that require my undivided attention and I'll be moving on to those. So, as you view my assessments, judge for yourself whether you think compositional devices provide a proper understanding of many differences we observe in the Gospels. If it helps you, great. If you don't like it, that's fine. Whether you agree or disagree, I hope you will conduct your investigation and the dialogues that follow in a manner that builds up the body of Christ rather than one that tears it down. There's room for disagreement. Be a peacemaker.

In Part 2, we will discuss whether the Gospels are affiliated with the genre of Greco-Roman biography.

Part 2: Are the Gospels Ancient Biographies?

During the 1970s, a few New Testament scholars began to propose that the Gospels were ancient biographies; specifically, Greco-Roman biographies. In my book I provide ten characteristics, many of which are usually present in Greco-Roman biography. I won't take time to articulate these here. Those interested may read them on pages three and four of my book. If you don't have my book, you can find them in the "Look Inside" feature of my book on Amazon.[5]

Since the Gospels focus on the life of Jesus, they are some sort of biography. Most scholars think they are affiliated with Greco-Roman biography. Why Greco-Roman instead of Jewish biography? For some reason, Jews were fairly silent in writing biographies during that era. We only know of four: Philo's Lives of *Moses*, *Abraham*, and *Joseph*, and Josephus' autobiography; all written in the first century. In fact, according to the late Jewish scholar Louis Feldman, after these four, "we do not find biographies written by Jews until modern times."[6]

Philo's *Abraham* and *Joseph* differ from his *Life of Moses*. Whereas the *Life of Moses* is exclusively interested in the life of its main character, as is typical in Greco-Roman biography, the Lives of *Abraham* and *Joseph* are also interested in the lives of others, such as Enosh, Enoch, and Noah. The Lives of *Abraham* and *Joseph* largely follow a pattern of interpreting a biblical story followed by allegory or explaining the underlying meaning, whereas the *Life of Moses* generally avoids allegory and conforms more closely to Greco-Roman biography.[7]

Like Philo's *Life of Moses*, the Gospels more closely resemble Greco-Roman biographies than Philo's Lives of *Abraham* and *Joseph* or Josephus' autobiography. The average length of Greco-Roman biography was between 10,000 and 25,000 words. The Gospels fit within that range, being 11,000-19,000 words. Philo's *Life of Moses* is a little longer than average at close to 31,000 words. However, the autobiography of Josephus is nearly 89,000 words. In short, although three of the four Gospels are written by Jews, they share a lot in common with Greco-Roman literature.

Some people get hung up on the term "Greco-Roman" biography. Philo's *Life of Moses* is the only Jewish biography similar to the Gospels and exhibits the use of several of the same compositional devices we observe in Greco-Roman biography. In his essay, "Philo's Adaptation of the Bible in his *Life of Moses*," Brian McGing notes instances where Philo employs transferal, elaboration, chronological displacement, and changes the explicit chronological order of events.

So, if you're uncomfortable with the term Greco-Roman biography, just think of it as ancient biography, since the only Jewish biography close in form to the Gospels has many of the

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[5] https://amzn.to/3gW3gZS.

[6] Louis H. Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 23.

[7] Feldman, 25.

same types of differences we find in Greco-Roman biographies resulting from compositional devices.

Now McGrew does not think the Gospels belong to the genre of Greco-Roman biography and asks the following question: "Do the Gospels belong to or resemble the genre of Greco-Roman Bίος in the informative sense that the authors were probably influenced by the conventions of this genre and chose to write their Gospels according to the conventions of this genre?"[8] She answers "no" for 2 reasons: First, she says "Burridge's arguments are utterly unconvincing."[9] However, a very large and heterogenous majority of New Testament scholars have found the arguments of Burridge and others quite convincing. Of course, this does not make them right. But such a large and heterogenous majority should not be dismissed too quickly. So, let's look at McGrew's second reason. She says there's an antecedent *improbability* that the authors of Matthew, Mark, and John had ever encountered Greco-Roman biography. She writes,

> The evidence that Matthew, Mark, and John were written by their traditionally ascribed authors tends to disconfirm the thesis that they were influenced by Greco-Roman literature. How likely is it that Matthew the tax collector, John Mark, Peter, or even John the son of Zebedee would have read or heard the earlier writers of biography discussed by Burridge such as Xenophon, Isocrates, Satyrus, and Nepos and that they would have desired to emulate a specific Greco-Roman genre?[10]

For McGrew, only Luke may have been somewhat influenced by Greco-Roman genre.[11]

McGrew did not consider the huge gap that exists between the extent of literacy required to be a tax-collector with that for producing a biography as sophisticated as Matthew's Gospel. There may be an even greater gap between the literacy required of a fisherman and that of one who could write John's Gospel. McGrew never considers whether the traditional authors would have needed and enlisted help in writing their compositions. It's not a black & white matter of being either very skilled in writing or illiterate.

My friend Randy Richards is an expert on scribal practices. His book *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* broke new ground.[12] Randy once told me of an exercise he does with his students. He gives each of them a piece of papyrus, ink and a short reed to dip in the ink. He then asks the students to begin writing the words he's

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[8] McGrew, 72.

[9] ibid, 83.

[10] Ibid., 76; cf. 76-79.

[11] Ibid., 83-84.

[12] E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

about to dictate: "Paul, an apostle" . . . [one minute later] "of Jesus Christ." It quickly becomes apparent that Paul very likely did not dictate his letters word-for-word. Richards says that, in the first century, short hand was in its infancy stages and the few who would have been proficient at it were in Rome. He shows how secretaries were employed in three roles in their services: transcriber, contributor, and composer.[13] Paul's secretaries who assisted him in writing letters would have most likely taken notes from Paul, composed the letter, had Paul read it and provide feedback, then proceed to write the final, which would have been sent only after Paul had given his approval. Several of Paul's letters suggest he made use of a secretary in his letter writing. At the end of 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, Paul says that he wrote the greeting with his own hand.[14]

This suggests that a secretary played some role in the composition of those letters. But the crown jewel of Paul's letters is *Romans*. Its literary quality far surpasses that of his other letters. So, it's very likely that Paul's secretary for that letter performed a significant amount of editing. His name is Tertius and he mentions his involvement in Romans 16:22: "I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord." Now, since Paul, who was highly educated, made regular use of a secretary, wouldn't we expect that Matthew, Mark, and John would also have used secretaries when composing their Gospels? And wouldn't it be likely that those secretaries would have had at least an equal, if not an even greater role in the composition of their Gospels than Paul's secretaries had in the composition of his letters, since Matthew, Mark, and John were almost certainly less educated than Paul, that the Gospels are substantially longer than a letter, and that they contain thematic focuses that have been recognized since the days of the early Church? Given the degree of literacy their secretaries would have possessed, they would have been quite familiar with the literary conventions in play at the time. Moreover, the near non-existence of biographies written by Jews in antiquity provides little to commend to the position that Jewish biography attempted to distinguish itself from Greco-Roman biography. Of course, we can only speak here of plausibility. And that applies equally with McGrew's position. That said, in view of what I just discussed, I think McGrew's contention that the Jewish authors of Matthew, Mark, and John would not have been in a position to have been influenced by Greco-Roman biography, has very little relevance, if any at all.

McGrew thinks it's possible that Luke had encountered Greco-Roman literature. But she downplays it, contending his preface expresses his desire to be truthful.[15] She writes,

> He does show that he intends to write according to high standards of historical factuality. This intention may have been influenced by exposure to high standards of reliability in

[13] Ibid., 64-80.

[14] 1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17.

[15] McGrew, 83-84; cf. 79.

> Greco-Roman history, in which case it does not support the conclusion that Luke would have used fictionalizing literary devices.[16]

McGrew merely assumes those using high standards of reliability would have rejected the use of compositional devices, which she tendentiously calls "fictionalizing literary devices," many of which they had learned in the compositional textbooks. I'll cover this in Part 3. And what about how some of the finest historians practiced writing history? Sallust used compositional devices. Tacitus used them. Plutarch used them.

Furthermore, Josephus says something very similar to Luke pertaining to his high standards of reporting while making use of many of the same compositional devices we find in Greco-Roman biography. It may also be observed that Josephus did not live up to the standards he claimed for his writings. Lucian of Samosata lays out high standards historians are to follow while not practicing them in his work *The Passing of Peregrinus.* So, it's not simply a matter of what one states. We must judge and interpret the authors in light of what they do.

McGrew quotes Colin Hemer from his book *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*.[17] Hemer says Luke's Gospel shares much in common with Greco-Roman biography. However, he adds that since Greco-Roman biography was a fluid genre, Luke must be judged by his performance.[18] I'm in complete agreement with Hemer here. Ancient biography was a fluid genre with characteristics that sometimes bled over into other genres, like history. For example, as Pelling has noted, Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* is a hybrid of biography and history, because it's not so much concerned with Caesar's character as it is with how Caesar became so popular among the Roman people. Still, classicists do not regard Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* as anything other than a biography. Tacitus's *Agricola* is likewise a hybrid between biography and history. Yet its size and focus on *Agricola* place it firmly within the genre of biography. So, it's surprising to read McGrew say of Hemer's comments,

> These emphatically cautious comments could not be farther from Licona's insistence that, if the Gospels even have much in common with Βίοι [i.e., biography], we should be surprised if they did *not* make use of transferal, displacement, and/or other fact-altering literary devices, because they were part and parcel of that genre.[19]

It's here that we observe one of McGrew's loaded terms: "fact-altering literary devices." It's also one of many examples where we will see McGrew merely assuming that an author's

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[16] Ibid., 86.

[17] Ibid., 88. See Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, Reprint (Winona Lake, MI: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

[18] Hemer, 93-94

[19] McGrew, 88-89.

view of accuracy, in this case Hemer's view, is similar to hers and would not allow for the use of compositional devices. There's nothing in Hemer's words that suggests he embraced McGrew's wooden concept of truth-telling in reporting. To the contrary, as classicist J. L. Moles observed, a number of compositional devices are "practically universal in ancient historiography."

Now, let's revisit the question McGrew asked that I quoted earlier:

> Do the Gospels belong to or resemble the genre of Greco-Roman Bίος in the informative sense that the authors were probably influenced by the conventions of this genre and chose to write their Gospels according to the conventions of this genre?

As I stated earlier, there are many reasons for thinking the Gospels share much in common with Greco-Roman biography. I share these on pages 3-4 of my book and they appear in the "Look Inside" feature of my book on Amazon. We've observed that McGrew's contentions to the contrary fail to appreciate the extent of literacy required for writing a Gospel. Moreover, she interprets what others say through the lens of her own thinking. This results in McGrew misinterpreting others and leads her to a conclusion that's at odds with a majority of even conservative New Testament scholars. Craig Blomberg, who has taken issue with only a few items in my book wrote the following in his review of it:

> There is a broad scholarly consensus that the New Testament Gospels are biographies of Jesus and that they adopt many of the conventions of the ancient writing of history and biography. Michael Licona's new book, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?*, builds on this consensus with an impressive, detailed study of one important ancient Greek biographer, Plutarch. . . . The majority of his observations involve very minor differences among Gospel parallels and are largely noncontroversial, and the approach is scarcely novel.[20]

In Part 3, we will discuss exercises used by rhetoricians to teach others to write well and see if some of them are reflected in the Gospels.

[20] Craig L. Blomberg, "HOW TO APPROACH APPARENT CONTRADICTIONS IN THE GOSPELS: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL LICONA" at http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAF5402.pdf.

Part 3: Compositional Textbooks

Only a small percentage of people in antiquity could read. Scholars offer different estimates. But perhaps 10 percent could read and only half of those could read and write. There was also a difference between those who could write and those who could write well. In antiquity, by the time children of well-to-do families reached their mid-teens, they had already learned how to write and would proceed to the next level where they would be taught to write well. It's here that they were exposed to compositional textbooks containing writing exercises called *progymnasmata*. The earliest of these that has survived was composed in Greek by Theon in the first century. Quintilian provided similar exercises in Latin in the first century. However, there were others who preceded Theon and Quintilian.[21]

In my book, I focused on exercises provided by Theon. In his chapter titled "Paraphrasing," Theon describes 4 techniques:

> "Paraphrase consists of changing the form of expression while keeping the thoughts. . . . There are four main kinds: variation in syntax, by addition, by subtraction, and by substitution, plus combinations of these." (Theon, 108)

In other words, to paraphrase, one can change the grammatical structure. One can add to or subtract from the thoughts expressed or substitute some words with synonyms or synonymous phrases. Here's a quick example of substitution. In 66 BC, Cato Uticensis was approaching the city of Antioch when he saw a crowd waiting to welcome him enthusiastically at the city's gate. Not to be haughty, he dismounted from his horse, proceeded on foot, and ordered those accompanying him to do the same. However, when they arrived at the gate, a leader of the welcoming committee asked him where Pompey's freedman Demetrius was. They were looking for someone of much lower status than Cato and were disappointed when it was not him while failing to recognize that they were speaking to a much greater person. The men who accompanied Cato broke out in laughter and Cato responded curtly with "O, cursed city!" That's how Plutarch reports what he said in his *Life of Cato Minor*. However, in his *Life of Pompey*, he substitutes "cursed" with "miserable": "O, miserable city!"[22]

[21] Theon said his compositional textbook contained additions to the exercises described by others (Theon, 59; see also Suet. *Gramm*. 4).

[22] Plut. *Cat.Min*. 13.3 (*kakadaimonas*); Pomp. 40.3 (*athlias*).

Theon goes on to say there are even more techniques.

> "There are other ways of varying the content along the lines discussed in the chapter on narration; for example, recasting an assertion as a question, a question as a potentiality, and similarly other forms of expression that we mentioned." (Theon, 109)

Here's a quick example of Plutarch changing a statement to a question. As Caesar continued to increase in power after becoming dictator, some were warning him of Brutus to which Caesar replied, "Brutus will wait for this shriveled skin." That's what Plutarch reports in his *Life of Caesar* (62.3), However, in his *Life of Brutus* (8.2), Plutarch recasts Caesar's reply as a question: "What? Does it not occur to you that Brutus intends to wait for this flesh?"

How important was it to learn how to paraphrase? Here's Theon's answer:

> "Training in exercises is absolutely useful, not only for those who are going to be orators, but also if anyone wants to be a poet or historian, or if he wants to acquire facility with some other form of writing. These things are, in effect, the foundation of every form of writing." (Theon, 70; cf. 60)

Theon says that these exercises in paraphrasing and writing narrative are "absolutely useful" to those aspiring to be historians because they are "the foundation of every form of writing."

Let's look at a few examples of these techniques being used by the Gospel authors. I'll assume that Mark was the first Gospel written, as do a very large majority of scholars. Those interested in why the majority think Mark was written first may find Season 2 of my Risen Jesus Podcast helpful.

Jesus's parable of the mustard seed is reported by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark reports Jesus saying, "How can we compare the kingdom of God, or with what parable may we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard" (Mark 4:30-31). Luke reports Jesus saying, "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what will I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard" (Luke 13:18-19). And here's Matthew: "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard" (Matt. 13:31). Matthew does two things here when editing Mark. First, he conflates the question and statement and presents the two as a single statement. Second, instead of saying "kingdom of God," he substitutes "kingdom of heaven." In fact, Matthew has a habit of changing instances where Mark and Luke have "kingdom of God" to "kingdom of heaven." When speaking to Jews, Jesus may very well have used "kingdom of heaven" instead of "kingdom of God." Regardless of the reason, Matthew edits Mark.

Let's look at another example: Jesus's parable of the Vineyard and Wicked Tenants. This parable is also reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke with all three locating it after Jesus'

triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. The parable is most similar in Mark and Luke where the vineyard owner sends 3 servants, one at a time. The tenants wound or kill each one. Mark adds that the owner sent many others. Mark and Luke then say the owner sent his son whom the tenants kill. Instead of sending 3 servants, one at a time, Matthew says the vineyard owner sends 3 servants at the same time whom the tenants wound and kill. Then he sends more the second time than the first. Finally, he sends his son whom the tenants kill. Mark and Luke then report that Jesus asks and answers his own question pertaining to what the vineyard owner will do. But Matthew seems to create a short dialogue in which Jesus asks the question and the chief priests and Pharisees answer him. And the latter do so with even more vigor. Theon refers to this as creating a dialogue and elaboration. I provide an abundance of examples like this in my book.

Here's how McGrew answers the claim that historians employed these compositional devices in editing. She writes,

> Here, the claim is that compositional textbooks from which the Gospel authors would have been instructed directly taught students that it was legitimate to make factual alterations in history—either in reported sayings, speeches, or other aspects of events.[23]
>
> [Licona and Craig Evans] are claiming both that the Gospel authors were trained according to the pedagogical methods they have in mind and also at the methods involved teaching students to alter history.[24]

Making "factual alterations" and teaching students "to alter history" is not at all how Craig Evans and I, Craig Keener, Richard Burridge, and many others interpret what Theon taught. But McGrew is caught in black & white thinking. If peripheral details we just observed were altered intentionally, in her mind, that's altering history and fictionalizing. And McGrew will have none of it.[25]

How then does McGrew explain the differences in Matthew's version of the parable of the vineyard and wicked tenants? She proposes the following harmonizations:

> One possibility is that Jesus paused for a moment and that some in the crowd spoke up at approximately the same time that Jesus decided to go ahead and answer his own question. Another possibility is that someone in the crowd spoke up and answered the question approximately as given in Matthew, and that Jesus affirmed, "That's right, he'll come and destroy those tenants," or words to that effect, remembered and recorded by

[23] McGrew, 139.

[24] Ibid., 141.

[25] Ibid., chapter 8 and Appendix 1.

> Peter as told to Mark. This sort of natural harmonization hardly stretches the bounds of credibility. In fact, it describes quite a common interactive teaching situation.[26]

McGrew posits two alternative scenarios she judges as being *possible*. However, granting that something is *possible* is not equivalent to saying it's *probable*. I'm willing to grant that both of her invented scenarios are *possible*, even *plausible*. However, I believe the solution I provided is likewise *possible* and *plausible*. The remaining question is "Which is the more probable solution?"[27]

In order to refute the claim that Theon meant for aspiring historians to apply the rhetorical techniques for paraphrasing and composing narrative prescribed in the compositional textbooks, McGrew provides a few hypothetical examples of what a modern high school student may be asked to do, such as "Write a speech that George Washington could have given to encourage his men at Valley forge" and to "Write a dialogue between two soldiers just before the Battle of Gettysburg." She then says,

> Just as there is no reason to think that students who were taught to write from a curriculum like the hypothetical modern one just described will get the idea that creative alteration and invention of fact are welcome in serious historical writing, there is no reason to think that Theon's exercises were taken to be "instructing" students in that way either. The literary device theorists are therefore completely misinterpreting and misapplying these exercises when they imply that they provided historiographical models that instructed students to change historical facts.[28]

> The Greek exercise books do recommend paraphrase as an exercise but make no statement whatsoever about the degree of freedom allowed or encouraged in reportage of the spoken word *in history*. That is simply not the point of the exercises.[29]

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[26] Ibid., 267.

[27] We should also bear in mind something I will discuss more in Part 5: Not only is Matthew probably using Mark as his source, he often adapts Mark and is writing decades after the events he's describing. In view of these factors, in my opinion, it's more probable that we are observing Matthew's adaptation of Mark and his use of paraphrase as prescribed in the compositional textbooks than any of McGrew's invented scenarios being correct.

[28] McGrew, 153. She also writes, "Do you take it from the existence of these assignments, and more like them, that high school students taught from this curriculum are learning to alter historical facts if they should become historians later in life? Of course not. . . . The assignments tell you nothing whatsoever about what the students are taught about historiography and the requirements of truthfulness and recounting history" (152).

[29] Ibid., 166; cf. 165, 171.

> The authors of the exercise books are writing curricula in rhetoric, and those curricula are not teaching the ethics of truthfulness and reporting history, one way or another.[30]

Even if Theon did not explicitly state that historians are to handle their sources this way when writing history, it's a very small step to surmise that they would later when engaged in historiography. And remember Theon's statement that training in these exercises is necessary for those aspiring to be historians. McGrew attempts to downplay this. She writes,

> Theon is pointing out that, while future rhetoricians are the most obvious consumers of his curriculum, *all* future writers can profit, including poets and historians. But this, again, does not mean that he is giving advice or opinions concerning the degree of factuality that an historical narrative should have. . . . Theon is advertising the broad usefulness of his writing curriculum. That is all.[31]

No. That's not all. Earlier, I quoted Theon on his techniques for paraphrasing. In one instance he says there are additional techniques for paraphrasing that he provides in his chapter on Narrative. In that chapter, Theon writes,

> Since we are accustomed to setting out the facts sometimes as making a straightforward statement and sometimes as doing something more than making a factual statement, and sometimes in the form of questions, and sometimes as things we seek to learn about, and sometimes as things about which we are in doubt, . . . and sometimes as making a command, sometimes expressing a wish, and sometimes swearing to something, sometimes addressing the participants, sometimes advancing suppositions, sometimes using dialogue, it is possible to produce varied narrations in all these ways."[32]

The last sentence in Greek is clear: "It is allowed according to all of these ways to vary the narrative." The term for "vary" here is *poikillontas*, which carries the meaning of bringing forth in various colors, to embellish, to adorn, to tell with art and elegance, to change. Theon is saying all of these techniques are permitted for varying the narrative artfully. He is not talking about different manners by which historians report different facts, for example, Fact A is reported as a question while Fact B is reported as a statement. Contrary to McGrew, these techniques taught in the compositional textbooks are not only for the classroom. They are for historians to use

[30] Ibid., 169.

[31] Ibid., 170.

[32] Theon, 87. For the Greek text, see James R. Butts, *The Progymnasmata of Theon: A New Text With Translation and Commentary*, Ph.D. dissertation at Claremont Graduate School, 1986, page 349, line 278.

when writing their narratives. And Theon says, "historical writing is nothing other than a combination of narrations."[33]

If this is not clear enough, Theon is even clearer in his Preface:

> Thought is not moved by any one thing in only one way so as to express the idea that has occurred to it in a similar form, but it is stirred in a number of different ways, and sometimes we are making a declaration, sometimes asking a question, sometimes making an inquiry, sometimes beseeching, and sometimes expressing our thought in some other way. . . . There is nothing to prevent what is imagined from being expressed equally well in all these ways. **There is evidence of this** in paraphrase by a poet of his own thoughts elsewhere or **paraphrase by another poet and in the orators and historians**, and, in brief, **all ancient writers seem to have used paraphrase** in the best possible way, **rephrasing not only their own writings but those of each other.**[34]

Theon is clear. Evidence of these techniques for paraphrasing may be observed when we compare how a poet states his similar thoughts in more than one place. It may be observed in similar comparisons with orators and historians. The matter concerns how an author states the same thought in a different form. Therefore, I was actually mistaken in my book when I wrote, "In these exercises, students improved their skills by altering the wording of their sources. Although the textbooks do not specifically state this was the manner in which they handled their sources when writing professionally, it is a very small step of faith to surmise they would employ such alterations."[35] Theon says, that ALL ancient writers used these techniques by rephrasing their own writings and the writings of others. And in my book, I provide many examples that show how Plutarch paraphrases his own writings and how Matthew and Luke paraphrase Mark.

And there's even more. Theon has a chapter on "Elaboration" in which he writes,

> "Elaboration is language that adds what is lacking in thought and expression." What is "lacking" can be supplied by making clear what is obscure; by filling gaps in the language or content; by saying some things more strongly, or more believably, or more vividly, or more truly, . . . or more wordily—each word repeating the same thing—, or more legally, or more beautifully, or more appropriately, or more opportunely, or making the subject pleasanter, or using a better arrangement or a style more ornate.[36]

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[33] Ibid., Preface, 60.

[34] Ibid., Preface, 62.

[35] Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn From Ancient Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14.

[36] Theon, 110.

We often observe elaboration when ancient historians improved or wrote speeches. Indeed, Lucian prescribed that historians *should* do this when recounting a speech. And couldn't this be what we observe Matthew doing with the reply of the chief priests and Pharisees when Jesus asked them what the vineyard owner will do to those who killed his son?

What of McGrew's contention that Theon is not touching on the ethics of truthfulness in historical reporting? It's McGrew's black & white concept of truthful reporting that leads her to think ethics is involved. Since Theon and other rhetoricians are teaching aspiring historians that, when writing narrative, they are to paraphrase their sources using the techniques they are practicing, it's clear that these rhetoricians did not regard it as unethical to bring about these minor alterations. Moreover, we observe some of the finest ancient historians using many forms of the rhetorical devices learned in the compositional textbooks. Classicist Ronald Mellor writes of Tacitus,

> His rhetorical training informs every page of his histories, but it is most obvious in his reliance on speeches to shape the historical narrative. Even Rome's enemies are granted an opportunity to speak, and to speak more effectively than they ever actually did on the battlefields of Britain or Germany.[37]

Where did Tacitus learn to improve or invent speeches? From the exercises in the compositional textbooks. Moreover, when we observe Plutarch writing of the same event in two or more of his *Lives*, we see him doing the types of paraphrasing and narrative composition prescribed by Theon. He never copies and pastes.

So, we must observe what historians of that period are doing. Do they invent speeches? Yes. Do they paraphrase and elaborate in order to improve the quality of a speech or even a 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 with their own writings? Yes. Do we see them doing this with the writings of others? Yes. Do we observe Matthew and Luke often paraphrasing Mark in these ways? Yes. When I identify the differences in how Matthew and Luke report material for which Mark is their likely source, and read the relevant Gospel texts through the lens of the prescribed exercises in the compositional textbooks, what I observe aligns perfectly with what is prescribed in the compositional textbooks. Referring to the exercises that are commonly found in the compositional textbooks by Theon and others, Gerald Downing comments,

> The procedures are always so similar that it would be absurd to suppose without massive supporting evidence that the NT evangelists could have learned to write Greek and cope

[37] Ronald Mellor, *The Roman Historians* (London: Routledge, 1999), 105.

with written source material at all while remaining outside the pervasive influence of these common steps toward literacy.[38]

In summary, McGrew's wooden concept of truthful reporting results in her misconstruing Theon. In Part 5, we will observe how additional problems with McGrew's thesis are even more egregious. For they are not due to having an inadequate grasp of the ancient literature. Instead, they result from clouded reasoning. But before we go there, we will take a look at one of the more profound weaknesses in McGrew's book: Her black & white concept of truthful reporting.

[38] F. Gerald Downing, "Compositional Conventions and the Synoptic Problem," *JBL* 107, no. 1 (1988), 71.

Part 4: Black & White Thinking

Jesus said, "I have come into the world in order that I may testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate replied, "What is truth?" (John 18:37-38). In the first chapter of my large book on the historicity of Jesus's resurrection, I defend a correspondence theory of truth. I go on to explain how the tools of historians do not always allow them to discover the truth or to know it with complete accuracy. A number of evangelicals somehow interpreted what I wrote to mean that I don't actually embrace a correspondence theory of truth. But that's not what I said. The current discussion on compositional devices is not about the existence or knowability of truth. It's on the latitude afforded writers in antiquity when reporting truth.

One of the profound weaknesses in McGrew's book is that it's marinated in a black & white concept of truthful reporting. McGrew cites Aristotle and Plato on truth.[39] Aristotle said that it's a falsehood to claim that something is when it is not or to claim it is not when it is. Plato taught something similar. McGrew contends that the compositional devices posited by classicists, many New Testament scholars, and those I have posited in my book promote falsehood. In fact, she contends that, even if historians employed the techniques for paraphrasing and narrative prescribed by Theon that I discussed in Part 3, they would be "fictionalizing" their account.

McGrew defines "fictionalize" as "an alteration of fact" and unpacks this with 3 criteria, all of which must be present:[40]

1. What is presented in a seemingly realistic fashion in the work is actually contrary to fact. The real facts have been altered.
2. The alteration of fact was made by the author deliberately.
3. The alteration of fact is invisible to the audience within that work itself. In other words, there is nothing in the text that would alert readers that a change has been made.

In addition to "fictionalize," McGrew speaks of "fact-altering" and "chang[ing] historical facts."

To me, these appear to be loaded terms. When most people think of fiction, they have in mind a story that did not occur. For a few examples, how about the movies *Avengers* and *Joker*? In the Bible, parables are fiction. We move closer to history, however, with historical-fiction, whereby a story that did not occur is located in a historical setting; for example, *Gone With The Wind*. We move even closer to history and away from fiction with a story that's loosely based on

[39] McGrew, 96-100.

[40] Ibid., 10-11.

actual historical events, such as the movie *1917*. Closer still is when moviemakers narrating true stories very often use dramatic license to conflate two characters, narrate events as though they had occurred over a shorter period of time, and other devices. Darrell Bock provides a nice example:

> One film, *Hacksaw Ridge*, portrays the life of Desmond Doss, a war hero who chose never to wield a weapon in battle for religious reasons. In the movie, Desmond enlists in the army in support of the WWII effort even though he does not believe in killing and will not bear arms in battle. In real life, he was drafted, as an article shows from the *Washington Post* on March 25, 2006. Obviously this is a difference. A colleague disturbed by the movie's change pointed out this detail to me and asked what I thought of the move. When I checked this out, what I found was intriguing. Desmond had been drafted but was offered a conscientious objector status that would have allowed him out of the draft and out of the Army. He refused to take it arguing he wanted to be a medic and serve in a way that could contribute to the war effort in light of his convictions. The Army took him in on this basis. So now the question remains, in the movie's summarizing did portraying him as enlisting, that is, choosing to serve, actually fit well what he did? I might contend this is an adequate summarizing of what took place, reflecting the state of choosing to serve. The example shows the potential ambiguity of a 'creative' detail when considered in light of literary tendencies to summarize.[41]

It would be a gross misrepresentation to regard the movie *Hacksaw Ridge* as fiction. If one were to assert that the creative retelling used in that movie pertaining to how Doss came to be in the Army would be "changing historical facts" and "fictionalizing," that would cause the wrong impression. It would muddy the waters in a discussion about the historical reliability of *Hacksaw Ridge*. Were some historical facts changed? In a technical sense, yes. However, there are degrees of change and the *impression* one gets from McGrew's terms is that the essence of a story was compromised. To say the director of *Hacksaw Ridge* "fictionalized" gives the impression that what is being portrayed has little correspondence with what actually occurred. Now McGrew is clear that she is using "fictional" in a technical sense. However, that use is not common among classicists, New Testament scholars, and virtually every lay reader. And when used repeatedly, in fact, more than 400 times in her book where she denounces compositional devices in the strongest of terms, the well becomes poisoned, and unaware readers are easily led to think that compositional devices are the tools of terribly misguided and inept historians. In fact, she comes close to saying this on page 272 when claiming that the appeal to compositional

[41] This is from a draft of an essay contributed to a forthcoming volume.

devices by myself and others is founded upon "the blinkered, hasty assumptions of anti-realistic redactive criticism."

But this is only a taste of McGrew's charged language. In addition to referring to positing the use of compositional devices by ancient authors as "unnecessary, hyper-complex literary theories,"[42] she insists that the contentions of those she criticizes are "vastly exaggerated,"[43] "vastly overstated,"[44] and "vastly under-supported."[45] They are likewise, "utterly unconvincing,"[46] "utterly unjustified,"[47] "utterly irrelevant,"[48] "utterly unnecessary,"[49] and "utterly false."[50]

She's even more fond of the terms "extreme" and "extremely," using them 99 times in her book with half of them being used in a negatively critical sense. Explanations with which she's in disagreement are "extremely misguided,"[51] "extremely strained,"[52] "tendentious in the extreme,"[53] "extremely unhelpful,"[54] "extremely poor,"[55] "extremely vague,"[56] "extremely bad,"[57] "extremely weak,"[58] "extremely rigid,"[59] "extremely choppy,"[60] "extremely averse,"[61] "extremely odd,"[62] "extremely strange,"[63] "so extreme as to be wildly out of proportion,"[64] "so extreme as to be almost breathtaking,"[65] and "even more extreme."[66] There are also "extreme

[42] McGrew, 334.
[43] Ibid., 280.
[44] Ibid., 143.
[45] Ibid., 201.
[46] Ibid., 83.
[47] Ibid., 187.
[48] Ibid., 344, note 7.
[49] Ibid., 359.
[50] Ibid., 116.
[51] Ibid., 53.
[52] Ibid., 105.
[53] Ibid., 106.
[54] Ibid., 118.
[55] Ibid., 183, 190, 205, 281.
[56] Ibid., 192, 531.
[57] Ibid., 197.
[58] Ibid., 245, 337.
[59] Ibid., 354.
[60] Ibid., 391.
[61] Ibid., 181.
[62] Ibid., 397.
[63] Ibid., 435.
[64] Ibid., 341.
[65] Ibid., 504.
[66] Ibid., 436.

changes,"[67] "extreme theories,"[68] "extreme over-reading,"[69] "extreme weakness,"[70] "extreme suggestion,"[71] and other matters posited in an "extremely broad sense."[72]

In contrast, when McGrew relates items to HER approach, they are "extremely fruitful,"[73] "extremely scrupulous,"[74] "extremely common,"[75] "extremely modest,"[76] "extremely strong,"[77] "extremely simple,"[78] "extremely easy,"[79] and "extremely minor."[80]

Back to my main points. McGrew goes so far as to suggest that compositional devices would negate the historical reliability of a text and require that "any reference to truth made by an ancient author must have a large asterisk by it. It must be reinterpreted, because those ancient folks simply meant something significantly different by 'truth' than what we would mean and what we would take them to mean."[81] But this is both black & white thinking and exaggeration. Context is important. Even in our ordinary communications today, we often simplify by altering minor details. When I retell a back-and-forth conversation I had with someone, I may weave into it something that person had told me on the prior day as though it had occurred in our later conversation. I may do this because it renders the person's true thoughts more clearly or simply to abbreviate and simplify. I may sense no need to tell my friend that I have weaved content in from a previous conversation. And I would not think that I had deceived my friend in neglecting to do so. Nor would my friend think I had deceived him if he later learned that I had included an item from an earlier conversation in the latter.[82]

In Part 3, pertaining to the rhetorical exercises found in the compositional textbooks, we observed how Matthew substitutes "kingdom of heaven" for "kingdom of God" and conflates a question and a statement in Jesus's parable of the mustard seed. He alters these facts deliberately and without providing any clue to his readers that he did. It's noteworthy that these

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[67] Ibid., 358.
[68] Ibid., 359.
[69] Ibid., 107, 414.
[70] Ibid., 152.
[71] Ibid., 280.
[72] Ibid., 74.
[73] Ibid., 54.
[74] Ibid., 90, 125.
[75] Ibid., 185.
[76] Ibid., 241.
[77] Ibid., 116, 142 (twice), 223, 326, 355, 504.
[78] Ibid., 336.
[79] Ibid., 341, 392.
[80] Ibid., 349, 384 (twice).
[81] Ibid., 96.
[82] McGrew writes, "We must keep our real-world imagination engaged in order to do good historical work" (355). We wish McGrew would follow her own advice.

alterations fulfill McGrew's 3 criteria for fictionalization. But how many of you would charge Matthew of being guilty of perverting the truth by doing these things?

In Jesus's parable of the Vineyard and Wicked Tenants, Mark and Luke portray Jesus asking and answering his own question. But Matthew appears to transfer the answer to the chief priests and Pharisees then elaborates their response. I don't think such moves are what Cicero had in mind when he said that the first law of history is "an author must not dare to tell anything but the truth."[83] Neither do I think Polybius would have objected to Matthew's moves when he said the historian must record what really happened, the true words and deeds. But McGrew thinks that if the differences in Matthew resulted from him transferring the answer to Jesus' question from Jesus to the chief priests and Pharisees then using elaboration to boot, he would have been "fictionalizing" and "changing historical facts." That's a black & white concept of truthful reporting. McGrew does not believe such moves are ethically allowable. However, we saw in Part 3 that Theon prescribed such devices. And we will now see that there are no reasons to think that any other ancient historian disagreed with Theon.

When it came to sticking to the facts, Thucydides and Polybius were some of the more scrupulous historians in the Greco-Roman period. But even they sometimes invented content for their speeches. Of course, they learned to do this using the compositional textbooks. Others such as Josephus speak of the importance of accurate reporting and that they will proceed to report with accuracy. However, what they say they will do and what they actually do are often two different things. Regarding Josephus, classicist Paul Maier writes,

> Another fault in Josephus is one he shares with most of the ancient historians: a propensity to exaggerate, particularly with numbers. Casualty lists after some of the battles are so implausibly high that even to note such overstatements would clutter too many pages in the text. The reader must also discount such hyperboles as, for example, the claim that so much blood was shed in Jerusalem during its conquest that streams of gore extinguished fires there. Exaggeration, however, was so common a conceit among most of the ancient sources that if a Herodotus could claim Xerxes invaded Greece with a total force of 5,283,220, Josephus may have felt it unwise to provide accurate figures if such inflation was common fare at the time.[84]

Josephus also claims that he will accurately describe what is contained in the Jewish Scriptures without adding to them or subtracting from them.[85] However, Josephus adds and subtracts from the Scriptures, though not in a major way. He also rearranges the order of events.

McGrew cites a number of texts from Lucian of Samosata:

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[83] Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.62.

[84] Paul L. Maier, *Josephus: The Essential Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994), 11.

[85] Jos. *Ant*. 1:17; cf. 4:196.

> [H]istory has one task and one only—what is useful—and that comes from truth alone.[86]
>
> The historian's one task is to tell the thing as it happened. . . . For history, I say again, has this and this only for its own; if a man will start upon it, he must sacrifice to no god but Truth.[87]
>
> Above all, let him bring a mind like a mirror, clear, gleaming-bright, accurately centered, displaying the shape of things just as he receives them, free from distortion, false coloring, and misrepresentation. His concern is different from that of the orators – what historians have to relate is fact and will speak for itself, for it has already happened.[88]

"[T]ell the thing as it happened." Tell it "free from distortion, false coloring, and misrepresentation." Sounds very good! But would Lucian approve of an author such as Matthew changing a question to a statement or creating a short dialogue that includes a very slight bit of elaboration? McGrew thinks not. But what does Lucian mean by "free from distortion, false coloring, and misrepresentation"? Would he regard the changing of a question to a statement to be a "misrepresentation"? When Matthew moves Jesus' temple cleansing from Monday to Sunday and conflates it with his temple visit on the previous day during which Jesus merely looked around and left, would Lucian have regarded this as a "distortion, false coloring, and misrepresentation"?[89] We may never know for sure. However, if we observe how Lucian reports historical events in the *Passing of Peregrinus*, we will be prone to conclude that, either he would not have regarded them as misrepresentations or he did not live up to the standards he articulates.

McGrew quotes Polybius who wrote, "The peculiar function of history is to discover, in the first place, the words actually spoken, whatever they were."[90] This does not mean Polybius had in mind that every word must be written precisely as spoken, that paraphrase and approximation are verboten, and that numbers could not be rounded up or down. McGrew does not think Polybius had these things in mind either. For she acknowledges that Polybius and Thucydides fabricate to some extent the content of some speeches and that Lucian permits certain rhetorical moves, including the historian making full use of his rhetorical skills in order to improve a known speech. Yet McGrew proceeds to overstate her case by referring to the statements she quotes by Polybius and Lucian as "the *absolutely unequivocal* statements of

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[86] Lucian, *How To Write History*, 9.

[87] Ibid., 39.

[88] Ibid., 50.

[89] See Part 6 for an examination of this story.

[90] McGrew, 121.

ancient historiographers concerning historical accuracy."[91] Her black & white concept of truthful reporting impairs how she interprets their statements while she never appears to stop to consider why classicists do not interpret them as she does.[92]

She repeats this error when providing similar quotes from the Gospels and other New Testament literature.[93]

> John 19:35: "And he who has seen has testified, and we know that his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may also believe."
>
> John 21:24: And "we know that his testimony is true"
>
> John 20:30: "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples" who were attesting to "incidents that *really happened*" (238).
>
> John 15:27: "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also, because you have been with me from the beginning."
>
> 1 John 1:1: "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands."
>
> Acts 4:20: "we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."
>
> 2 Peter 1:16: "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales . . . but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. . . . [speaking of the transfiguration] and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain."

McGrew then writes, "Again and again, the literary device view would require us to reinterpret radically the Gospel authors' and apostles' own explicit statements of what they were attempting to do and to ignore clear statements by other early Christians about the importance of truth."[94]

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[91] Ibid., 108.

[92] McGrew (105-08) charges me of misinterpreting statements by Lucian and Quintilian pertaining to the proper manner of connecting stories in a narrative. I'm not going to take the time to argue for why I think I've interpreted them more accurately than has McGrew. However, I will say that I think that any informed reader of Lucian and Quintilian can at least see how my readings of both are both plausible and reasonable.

[93] Ibid., 238-41.

[94] Ibid., 243.

McGrew appeals to John 14:26 where Jesus tells his disciples the Holy Spirit will remind them of everything he had taught them. She then comments,

> The verse does not speak of a function in which the Spirit gives the author license to write 'as if' Jesus is teaching the theology that the author *extrapolates* from Jesus' authentic statements. On the contrary, the very fact that John chooses to record a promise to bring to their remembrance what Jesus has said implies that John considers it important that they remember and relay to others what Jesus historically said.[95]

McGrew is too hasty in her interpretation of the text. Jesus is only telling his disciples that the Holy Spirit would remind them of what he had taught them. He provides no instructions pertaining to the manners by which they were permitted to communicate his teachings. And there are no hints whatsoever forbidding them from redacting Jesus's words while maintaining the message behind those words.[96] McGrew is reading her own black & white view of truthful reporting into Jesus's intention to have him say something he does not say. Furthermore, she cannot know whether John has not already done with Jesus's words in 14:26 what she imagines Jesus would have forbidden. These biblical authors are claiming to be serious about reporting their message accurately. But, contrary to McGrew, what they said is not even close to suggesting they would have eschewed compositional devices in their own reporting.

This seems to be an appropriate time to touch on John's Gospel. McGrew fails to appreciate all that John is doing in his Gospel. In Craig Keener's very large and historically informed commentary on John's Gospel, he says that "all scholars acknowledge *some* adaptation and conformity with Johannine idiom."[97] If you would like to see this for yourself, read through the Synoptic Gospels 5 times in a row. Read Matthew 5 times, then Mark 5 times, then Luke 5 times. You'll notice that Jesus sounds very similar in all of them. Then read John's Gospel 5 times. Finally, read 1 John 5 times. You'll observe that, although Jesus's message in John is very much like what we read in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the way Jesus *sounds* in John is very different than the way he *sounds* in the other Gospels. You'll also observe that the way Jesus *sounds* in John's Gospel is very much like how John *sounds* in 1 John. The grammar, vocabulary, and overall style of writing in both are astonishingly similar.

The second observation could have resulted from John adjusting his style to be similar to that of his Master after spending much time with him. This would be similar to how some married couples adapt their laughs and expressions to one another's over time. The other option

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[95] Ibid., 129-30.

[96] In fact, in Part 8, you will see that the Gospel authors clearly redacted Old Testament Scriptures on occasion, which they regarded as God's holy Word. Now since they did that with Scripture, why are we to think redacting Jesus's words would be off limits?

[97] Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary, Volume One* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 52.

and the one held by most Johannine scholars is that John often paraphrased Jesus using his own style and words. The reason scholars go with this latter view is because Jesus *sounds* so differently in John than he does in the Synoptic Gospels.

There are additional items that draw attention to how John differs from the other Gospels. Consider the following reported by Matthew:

> Jesus said all of these things in parables to the crowds. And He did not speak to them without a parable, so that what was spoken by the prophet may be fulfilled, saying, "I will open my mouth in parables. I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." (Matt. 13:34-35)

Not only does Jesus teach in parables, He does so in fulfillment of prophesy. It is of interest, then, that, in John, *none* of Jesus' teachings appear in parables.

These are just some of the reasons why scholars think John adapted Jesus' teachings. Jesus' precise words (*ipsissima verba*) may not be preserved in John but His voice (*ipsissima vox*) is. It's determining the extent to which John adapted Jesus' teachings that perplexes scholars. N. T. Wright's humorous comment accurately summarizes the thoughts of many Johannine specialists. He said, "I feel about John like I feel about my wife; I love her very much, but I wouldn't claim to understand her."[98]

Even such a conservative scholar as F. F. Bruce wrote of John's different way of reporting. In the introductory matter of his commentary on John's Gospel, Bruce refers to how John retells the words of Jesus as "an expanded paraphrase," "a translation of the freest kind," "a transposition into another key," "all this and much more the Holy Spirit accomplished in our Evangelist. . . . It is through the Spirit's operation that, in William Temple's words, 'the mind of Jesus himself was with the Fourth Gospel disclosed'; and it is through the illumination granted by the same Spirit that one may still recognize in this Gospel the authentic voice of Jesus."[99]

The point I'm making is there is so much more going on behind John's Gospel that McGrew fails to appreciate. Despite the fact that Johannine specialists find John's Gospel to be a challenging conundrum, including evangelical scholars who have spent years focused on John and have published commentaries on it, McGrew apparently thinks the matter is grossly overblown and has announced that she is presently working on her book on John's Gospel. One wonders what she will find that has gone totally unrecognized by those who've spent lifetimes studying the Fourth Gospel.

Wrapping up Part 4, we've observed that McGrew has a black & white view of truthful reporting. This results in her use of numerous loaded terms, such as "fictionalize," "fact-

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[98] N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 35.

[99] F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 16-17.

altering," and "changing historical facts." That she uses these terms repeatedly throughout the more than 500 pages of her book creates false impressions for her readers. McGrew also projects her view of what is allowable in truthful reporting into what ancient authors stated, resulting in questionable interpretations.

In Part 5, we will observe McGrew's clouded reasoning and additional questionable readings of ancient texts.

Part 5: Plutarch's Compositional Devices

Many classicists regard Plutarch as being the greatest of all ancient biographers. Of the more than 60 biographies Plutarch wrote, 48 have survived. Nine of them have main characters who knew one another. And several of them participated in the same events. There are 36 stories that appear in two or more of those nine biographies. For example, the assassination of Julius Caesar is mentioned in Plutarch's *Lives* of Caesar, Cicero, Brutus, and Antony. So, we can compare how Plutarch reports the same story in all four accounts. This differs from comparing how the story of Caesar's assassination is told by several different authors. By focusing on Plutarch, we can assess how the same author, very often using the same sources, and writing at the same time reported the same stories.

What I discovered surprised me. Plutarch never copies and pastes. We do not find the very close verbal similarities between the parallel accounts in Plutarch's *Lives* that we observe in the Synoptic Gospels. Since we can be quite confident that Plutarch had been exposed to the compositional textbooks, we now have the unique opportunity of observing how the exercises in those textbooks played out in his writing. And they frequently do. Moreover, classicists have proposed that there are additional compositional devices not mentioned in the textbooks but are practically universal in ancient historiography. These include compression, conflation, displacement, transferal, and others. I observed Plutarch employing these quite often.

McGrew, however, disagrees in a manner that stuns. She writes,

> [I]f we go so far as to conclude (as I shall argue) that there is no case for the objective existence of the defined devices (such as displacement, transferal, etc.) *even in the Greco-Roman literature itself* [emphasis orig.], we have no reason to think that they exist in the Gospels, either.[100]

Now that's an audacious claim! Classicists who have spent decades immersed in the classical literature, reading it in its original languages, carefully researching the cultural and historical milieus in which the literature was written and who have identified various compositional devices that they say are practically universal in ancient historical literature, well, they're all wrong according to McGrew. New Testament scholars who have likewise spent decades immersed in the biblical literature, reading it in Greek, and carefully researching the cultural and historical milieu in which it was written and have identified various compositional devices, they're all wrong, too. Of course, we cannot dismiss an audacious claim on the grounds that it challenges a majority view. McGrew's arguments will need to be assessed. However, since she's

[100] McGrew, 71.

operating outside of her fields of English literature and philosophy, we can anticipate that she may occasionally misconstrue some items and err as a result. That happens with all scholars, myself included, when researching in their own fields. How much more then when one comments on matters in a field that's entirely unrelated to one's own?

Perhaps the compositional device I observed more than any other is literary spotlighting. Think of a theatrical performance. During an act in which several are simultaneously on the stage, the lights go out and a spotlight shines on a particular actor. Others are present but are unseen. In literary spotlighting, the author only mentions one of the people present but is aware that others were present. Let's look at a couple of examples of literary spotlighting in Plutarch's *Lives*.

In 64 BC, corruption in the city combined with the absence of Pompey who was fighting others in foreign lands made Rome fertile ground for a revolution. Some revolutionaries led by Lucius Sergius Catilina (known in English as Catiline) decided to make their move. In order to lead a revolt from a position of power, Catiline stood for consul in 64 BC but was defeated by Cicero. The following year, Catiline sought the consulship a second time and lost again. Since the people would not have Catiline lead Rome as a consul, he planned to attack the city and take it by force. As his fellow conspirators began to come together, Crassus received some letters at his house informing him of the conspiracy. He joined Marcus Marcellus and Metellus Scipio and went to Cicero's house on the night of October 20 and had him awakened in order to bring the letters to his attention. This is the manner Plutarch reports the event in his *Life of Cicero*. However, in his *Life of Crassus*, Plutarch only mentions Crassus coming to Cicero at night. Plutarch shines his literary spotlight on Crassus, but he's aware of the others who had accompanied him.

Let's fast forward six weeks. Cicero once again learns of others who are plotting to overthrow the city. He secures the evidence and calls another meeting of the senate. When the senate met, Caesar suggested that the property of the conspirators should be confiscated and the conspirators should remain under arrest until Catiline had been defeated, and then they would be tried. Caesar's speech persuaded most of the senators. However, Catulus opposed Caesar's proposal and was followed by Cato. Both argued so passionately against the conspirators that they turned the senate's opinion. The conspirators were condemned and put to death.

There are numerous differences in this story. But I'm going to focus on one. In Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, Cato and Catulus opposed Caesar's proposal. In Plutarch's *Life of Cicero*, Catulus was the first to oppose Caesar, followed by Cato. However, in his *Life of Cato Minor*, Plutarch shines his spotlight on Cato, choosing not to mention Catulus, and leaving the reader with the impression that Cato alone opposed Caesar.

Here's another example: Pompey Delivers an Illegal Encomium.[101] In 52 BC, Rome was in chaos and Caesar was becoming a threat to the Republic. So, a drastic measure was taken by the senate, electing Pompey as sole-consul for that year and giving him virtually absolute power. Pompey proceeded to establish a number of new laws to bring about order. One of those stated that encomiums could not be read at trial on behalf of a defendant. Plutarch reports that Pompey then broke the very law he had established when he wrote an encomium and had it read at the trial of his friend Plancus. In Plutarch's *Life of Cato Minor*,[102] Pompey writes the encomium and has an emissary read it at the trial. But Pompey is not present. This scenario is confirmed by Dio and Valerius.[103] However, in Plutarch's *Life of Pompey*, he reports that Pompey himself appeared in court and read his encomium.[104] Plutarch simplifies the narrative by brushing out the emissary from the story and transferring the reading of the encomium to Pompey, since he had composed it. I'll return to this story in a moment where I'll assess McGrew's explanation of what she thinks is going on here.

So, we've just observed a few examples where Plutarch uses compositional devices. And I provide many more in my book. Now let's examine McGrew's reasons for rejecting the position that ancient authors of historical literature often made use of compositional devices. McGrew created a flowchart providing a step-by-step method for determining if a compositional device is present.[105] I use the term "compositional device," because this is the term used by classicists. However, McGrew uses the loaded term "fictionalizing literary device." When differences between accounts are present, McGrew's first step is to determine if a difference rises to the level of an apparent discrepancy. If so, step two seeks to determine if the difference can be reasonably harmonized.[106] If it cannot, step three assesses whether the author included the item in question while knowing it was false. If one answers yes, step four asks if the author was engaging in propaganda, deception, or fabrication. If one answers no, the fifth and final step is to determine if the original readers would have considered the author's alteration to have been allowable.[107] If one answers in the affirmative, only at this point, when all of the other options have been ruled out, may we affirm that the author used a compositional device.

It's important to observe, not only each step in McGrew's flowchart, but also her contention that each step must be passed before those like myself are justified to conclude that a compositional device is responsible for the difference. In fact, at minimum, the first step must be passed prior to considering the others. She writes,

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[101] Plut. *Caes*. 28; Plut. *Pomp*. 54-55; Plut. *Cat. Min*. 47-48.

[102] Plutarch, *Cat. Min*. 48.4.

[103] Cassius Dio 40.55.1-4; Valerius Maximus 6.2.5. I am grateful to John Ramsey for alerting me to these references.

[104] Plut. *Pomp.* 55.5.

[105] McGrew, 180.

[106] Ibid., 180; cf. 184.

[107] Ibid., 180; cf. 178.

> "The **first question we should ask** is whether these differences even amount to an *apparent* discrepancy." (180)
>
> "It is particularly poor reasoning to leap from the mere presence of *differences* between accounts to the theory that an author has deliberately changed history. . . . [T]**he other questions make no sense until we answer this first question.** If there is no apparent discrepancy to harmonize, it makes no sense to ask whether it can be harmonized without undue strain." (181)

McGrew accuses me of having "extremely poor methodology" (183), because I prefer to ask whether a compositional device is responsible for a difference prior to seeking to harmonize differing texts. She also refers to her 5 steps as "hurdles," which classicists and New Testament scholars must jump over successfully before they would be justified in concluding that a compositional device is present.[108] Otherwise, she says one is guilty of "jumping the line."[109]

Now, it seems to me that McGrew's flowchart is problematic on several accounts. And the problems begin at the first step. This step asserts that, one cannot conclude that a difference resulted from the author employing a compositional device, if the difference does not rise to the level of an apparent discrepancy. However, it's unclear to me why this must be. So, let's put it to the test. We will consider a story from Plutarch and a story from the Gospels.

On 104-08 of my book, I assess the story of the defeat of Brutus and Cassius by Octavian and Antony at Philippi. I draw attention to numerous differences between the manner Plutarch tells the story in his Lives of *Brutus*, *Caesar*, and *Antony*, most of which are insignificant. I then focus on how Plutarch reports the first battle. In Plutarch's *Life of Brutus* 41, Octavian is not present at the first battle because (1) he did not expect Antony's men to attack and (2) he was sick. He left camp after a friend informed him of a dream he had in which Octavian was ordered to rise from his bed and leave camp. He barely escaped. Plutarch goes on in the next chapter to say that neither Antony nor Octavian were with their men. For Antony had withdrawn into a marsh while Octavian had left camp. However, in Plutarch's *Life of Antony* 22, Antony is "everywhere victorious and successful."

> Octavian suffered a crushing defeat from Brutus, his camp was taken and he barely managed to escape, although he makes out in his *Memoirs* that he withdrew before the battle because of a dream which one of his friends experienced. Antony on the other hand, overcame Cassius's army – though some writers have said that Antony was not

[108] Ibid., 188.

[109] Ibid., 224, 334, 367-68.

present at the battle, but only joined in when his men were already in pursuit of the enemy.[110]

McGrew observes that Plutarch states in his *Life of Antony* that sources exist saying Octavian and Antony were not present during the battle and that Plutarch does not reject their claims.[111] Therefore, no discrepancy is present. I don't view it that way. Although in the *Life of Antony*, Plutarch does not reject the claims that Antony and Octavian were not present on the battlefield, he prefers to report that they were present, merely adding the note that some other sources report that they were absent. But in his *Life of Brutus*, Plutarch prefers to report that they were absent and does so without any mentioning of reports to the contrary. In my opinion, Plutarch chose to use the reports that best suited his purpose in the relevant biography. I'm not obligated to prove that a discrepancy exists, McGrew's first step, and that harmonization is unlikely, McGrew's second step, before positing this. If we are seeking for what truly happened, we consider what appears to be most probable.

Let's now consider a story from the Gospels and compare how Matthew, Mark, and Luke report Jesus' answer when the high priest commands him to tell the council whether he's Messiah, the Son of God.

> In Mark: "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:62)

> In Matthew: "You have said so. Only I say to you, from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matt. 26:64)

> In Luke: "If I told you, you would never believe. And if I asked you, you would never answer. But from now on, the Son of Man will be sitting at the right hand of the power of God." And they all said, "Are you, therefore, the Son of God?" And he answered, **"**You say that I am**."** (Luke 22:67-69)

Assuming Markan priority and that Matthew and Luke are very likely using Mark as their source here, we can observe the editorial hands of Matthew and Luke at work. Jesus's simple "I am" answer in Mark becomes "You have said so" in Matthew and two different sentences in Luke. It's likewise interesting to observe how Luke's version differs in another way. Matthew and

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[110] Plut. *Ant*. 22 in *Rome in Crisis: Nine Lives by Plutarch: Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius Gracchus, Sertorius, Lucullus, Younger Cato, Brutus, Antony, Galba, Otho*, Ian Scott-Kilvert and Christopher Pelling, transl. (New York: Penguine Classics, 2010), 345.

[111] McGrew, 212.

Mark report Jesus saying they will see him "sitting at the right hand of Power." The word "Power" is here used as a synonym for "God." But Luke's patron Theophilus may not grasp this so easily. So, Luke adds "of God" for clarity (i.e., "power of God"). Furthermore, when Jesus says they will see him sitting at the right hand of Power, Matthew and Mark report the high priest tearing his clothes, charging Jesus with blasphemy, and the council condemning Jesus to death. However, in Luke's version, there is no tearing of clothes. There is no charge of blasphemy. And there is no condemnation of death at this time. Instead, the council follows up with the question, "Are you, therefore, the Son of God?" When Jesus answers in the affirmative, the council is satisfied that they now have enough to bring him before Pilate.

Luke's reader Theophilus was Greek and likely unfamiliar with the divine Son of Man figure Jesus had claimed to be and why that claim would have elicited the emotion-filled, clothes-ripping charge of blasphemy. So, Luke appears to have provided a cultural translation, much like Philo and Josephus do on occasion, and elaborated by having the council follow up by asking Jesus if he is the Son of God, a concept of the divine with which Theophilus would have been familiar. This looks very much like the technique in the compositional textbooks we observed earlier called elaboration.[112]

These are differences. But do they rise to the level of apparent discrepancies? Even if you think that Luke's cultural translation rises to that level, one must strain to get a discrepancy out of Luke's paraphrase "right hand of the power of God" for Mark's "right hand of Power." So, contrary to McGrew, it's not necessary to recognize that a difference rises to the level of an apparent discrepancy before judging that the difference resulted from the use of a compositional device. McGrew would charge me here of "jumping the line." But this example nicely illustrates why compositional devices can be considered simultaneously with other options.

This brings us to McGrew's second step, which says that, if the differences can be reasonably harmonized, there is no reason to think that a compositional device was involved. This does not seem quite right. One can surely acknowledge that occasions may exist when it seems more plausible that the difference resulted from the author using a compositional device than from the best harmonization posited. For example, many New Testament scholars acknowledge that there could have been two temple cleansings. But, for a number of reasons, most regard it as being MORE plausible that John has dislocated Jesus' temple cleansing from its actual setting on the final week of his life and transplanted it at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. One can reasonably harmonize and claim there were two temple cleansings. However,

[112] Even McGrew admits that Luke may have been familiar with Greco-Roman historical conventions, given the way he prefaces his writings (79; cf. 83-84), although she conveniently insists that his familiarity with Greco-Roman devices does not go beyond the preface.

chronological displacement may be the more plausible explanation. McGrew disagrees and insists that such is what she calls an "utterly unforced error" and a fictionalization of the story.[113]

McGrew appeals to harmonizing by recognizing normal differences and discrepancies among eyewitness testimonies.[114] For her, this provides a simple explanation and, therefore, is to be preferred over what she regards as the "highly complex and unusual" proposal that compositional devices are in play. She says one should be guided by the principle: When you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras. McGrew reiterates this principle several times throughout her book.[115] In Part 3, I described what she posits as plausible harmonizations related to the parable of the vineyard and wicked tenants; specifically, whether Jesus asked and answered his own question or whether he asked a question that the scribes and Pharisees answered. But it's worth repeating. She writes,

> One possibility is that Jesus paused for a moment and that some in the crowd spoke up at approximately the same time that Jesus decided to go ahead and answer his own question. Another possibility is that someone in the crowd spoke up and answered the question approximately as given in Matthew, and that Jesus affirmed, 'That's right, he'll come and destroy those tenants,' or words to that effect, remembered and recorded by Peter as told to Mark. This sort of natural harmonization hardly stretches the bounds of credibility. In fact, it describes quite a common interactive teaching situation.[116]

Now, we may ask why McGrew's entirely invented scenarios must be regarded as a hurdle one must jump, that is, demonstrate to be improbable, prior to considering the possibility that Matthew employed the rhetorical techniques of creating a dialogue and elaboration, techniques that either Matthew or the secretary he used had learned in the compositional textbooks? Such a requirement by McGrew is the product of faulty reasoning.

Of course, there are innocent differences among eyewitness accounts that can and should be harmonized. There are many occasions in my book on Gospel differences where this could be the best solution. But since my focus is on identifying compositional devices, when the presence of one seems unlikely, I often note the difference and leave it at that, without speculating why the difference is there. Also, the 19 stories in the Gospels I provide in my book are those in which I think the presence of compositional devices are *most likely*.[117] There are many more differences in the Gospels I didn't mention because I think that either it's not as clear

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[113] Ibid., 337, 368-75.

[114] Ibid., 184.

[115] See Ibid., 175, 184, 186, 211, 224, 226, 395.

[116] Ibid., 267.

[117] Licona, 182.

that a compositional device is present or I think there may be a better explanation for those differences than compositional devices. So, McGrew's warning is overstated when she writes,

> Indeed, if we were to apply consistently the methods used by Licona and some classicists, we would virtually erase normal variation and discrepancy due to human limitations, varied interests, and error.[118]

. Such normal variations are even less relevant when we have one author, Plutarch, who's reporting Furthermore, the observation that normal variation and discrepancies exist in eyewitness testimony is limited in its relevance when assessing Plutarch and the Gospels. Keep in mind that Matthew and Luke are very often using Mark as their primary source. Moreover, either Luke is also using Matthew as a source, or Matthew is also using Luke as a source, or both are also using a common source we no longer have and that has been nicknamed as "Q." Many times Matthew and Luke quote their written sources verbatim. Other times they edit them. And we can observe how they do it. That's quite a different scenario than the normal variation and discrepancy between how multiple eyewitnesses describe the same item.

Let's play this out in a hypothetical scenario. You're in a restaurant having lunch with a few colleagues. You overhear a couple seated at the table next to you having an argument, which becomes progressively heated over a five-minute period. Finally, the woman picks up a wine bottle on the table and strikes the man's face, creating a large gash in his cheek. EMTs arrive and dress the man's wound while a police officer arrests the woman. Another police officer comes to your table and asks each of you to write down your recollections of the event and summarizing what was spoken by the couple. Imagine how each of those accounts would differ in how they're worded. 20 minutes later the police officer collects your testimonies. What do you think the police officer would be thinking if all of you had summarized the precise wording of that 5-minute conversation in a manner that's almost verbatim? Would she recognize that the striking similarities are akin to those normally present when 2 or more eyewitnesses provide testimony? Or would she suspect you all had collaborated on what had been said?

Oh, but there's another detail that must be considered: The couple was arguing in Spanish. Fortunately, you and your colleagues are all fluent in Spanish! But the officer is not. So, all of you are to recall the event and summarize the conversation *in English*. Now anyone who has even a basic knowledge of a second language understands that translation is not precise. How I translate a paragraph today will likely be a little different than how I translate it tomorrow. Syntax will differ and I may use some synonyms. Now what if the police officer found that all of

[118] McGrew, 224.

your *translated accounts* of the quarreling couple's conversation were almost verbatim? The police officer would be quite justified in concluding that you had collaborated to a large extent.

This is precisely what we often have when we compare how Matthew, Mark, and Luke narrate the same story: Three authors narrating the same events and words, the large majority of those words being originally spoken in Aramaic but recalled in Greek, and often virtually verbatim with one another. And we must add that they're recalling these events and words, not within 20 minutes of their occurrence, but a few decades later. Now you can understand just some of the reasons why New Testament scholars recognize that a *relationship* exists between Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

And this was often a *literary* relationship. Consider the following. In his Olivet Discourse, Jesus is discussing the signs of when the temple will be destroyed. At one point, Mark reports Jesus saying,

> But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Mark 13:14)

Now notice how Matthew reports the same part of the Olivet Discourse:

> So, when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Matt. 24:15-16)

Of particular interest is the parenthetical statement, "Let the reader understand." This was either a note Mark included for the reader of his Gospel, perhaps to suggest that the reader could here expound on the relevant text in Daniel, or it was Jesus telling his disciples to read the text in Daniel for understanding. I lean toward the former reading, since the latter would not have made much sense if most of the disciples were illiterate, as most scholars think. Moreover, the same awkward location of the parenthetical clause in both Matthew and Mark is a much cleaner fit with there being a literary relationship between Matthew and Mark than with McGrew's appeal to normal variation in eyewitness reporting. Nevertheless, McGrew downplays the literary relationship between the Gospels and goes straight to harmonization efforts.

It's very difficult to dispute that a literary relationship exists between the Synoptic Gospels. And this is why I place a priority on identifying how Matthew and Luke use Mark over harmonizing the differences by viewing them as normal variations when multiple eyewitnesses

are testifyingthe same stories, composing several of them simultaneously, perhaps within only a few months,[119] and likely using the same sources, perhaps even only a few.

So, the role of step 2 in McGrew's flowchart is misguided. Although one is free to consider whether differing accounts are possible to harmonize reasonably, one is under no obligation to do so prior to considering whether the author's use of a compositional device produced the difference.

McGrew's third step asks whether the author included the item in question while having no reason to believe it's true. If so, step four asks if the author was engaging in propaganda, deception, or fabrication. It's undeniable that people sometimes lie. They will also reframe a story to serve as propaganda. It's done all the time in politics. We can also ask whether a difference resulted from information in another source with which the author is familiar, or if there was a difference in the oral tradition, or whether the author desired to make a political or theological point more clearly, or if the author had an intent to deceive. All of these options may be considered simultaneously and done so alongside harmonization efforts.

But what if we knew in advance that two accounts written by the same author differed because one of the accounts was written as propaganda? In that case, we would be wasting our time if we attempted to come up with a reasonable harmonization of the differences or if we attempted to account for the difference by appealing to the author's use of a compositional device. There's no good reason for why steps 3 and 4 could not be considered simultaneously with steps 1 and 2, or with the consideration that the author made use of a compositional device. So, in McGrew's flowchart, it's not logically necessary to place one option prior to another, despite her warnings that one should not "jump the line."[120]

Now let's suppose McGrew were to agree that it's not necessary for steps 3 & 4 to be considered after step 2 but she adds that the main point of her flowchart is to demonstrate that steps 1 through 4 must all be answered in a favorable manner before one is justified in concluding that the author used a compositional device, which produced the difference. That still would not work for McGrew, since I've already shown several times why none of the steps in her flowchart must be followed prior to considering that the author's use of a compositional device produced the difference. I demonstrated this related to Jesus's confession before the Sanhedrin (Step 1), the timing of his temple cleansing (Step 2), and the Parable of the Vineyard and Wicked Tenants (Step 2). I also showed how steps 3 & 4 could be considered simultaneously with steps 1 & 2. In fact, the only step discussed thus far for which McGrew is correct is that step 2 must follow step 1: One can attempt to harmonize only when an apparent discrepancy is present.

[119] Pelling, *Plutarch and History*, 22.

[120] McGrew, 224, 334, 367-68.

This brings us to McGrew's fifth and final step, which is to determine if the original readers would have considered the author's alteration to have been allowable. But is even this a reasonable step? We saw in Part 3 that such practices for altering details were actually prescribed in the compositional textbooks and that historians were to use the techniques for paraphrasing and composing narrative when writing historical accounts. So, those possessing a reasonable degree of literacy would have considered many of the compositional devices eschewed by McGrew to have been acceptable. McGrew might cite Augustine's obsession with harmonizing differences, thus contending that he would not have recognized or approved of an author's use of compositional devices. But as we will see in Part 6, Augustine wasn't born until 3 centuries after Jesus and there is no reason to believe that his thinking was representative of everyone's at that time. In fact, we will see that a church father much closer to the time of Jesus recognized that the authors of the Gospels altered minor details.

In addition to all of these problems, McGrew's flowchart has the appearance of having been conveniently framed to render it virtually impossible to identify a compositional device, since all other options must first be ruled out. If it's *possibly* an error, a compositional device was not used. If it's *possible* that Plutarch found another source that changed his mind resulting in the difference, then a compositional device was not used. If it's *possible* to harmonize the differences, a compositional device was not used. This is not how historians operate. Historians look for the *most probable* explanation. And as I said earlier, I'm open to compositional devices, harmonization efforts, and other causes that resulted in differences. I did not give attention to harmonizations in my book on Gospel differences because I was focused on identifying instances where a compositional device seems likely.

This is a good time to return to the story of Pompey delivering an illegal encomium, which we looked at earlier. Let's see how McGrew accounts for the difference. Following her flowchart, she acknowledges that the difference rises to the level of an apparent discrepancy and admits that it's quite difficult to harmonize the accounts. So, the difference passes her first two steps. Proceeding to step three, she asks whether Plutarch deliberately presented details he knew were false and says we have no reason to believe that he did.[121]

She then charges me of leaping to conclusions without first considering other options, such as those in her flowchart:

> Licona does not offer an argument that Plutarch's change here between the two *Lives* is a deliberate deviation from truth. Having claimed a discrepancy, he asserts a literary device, taking several stages of conjecture [in view of McGrew's flowchart] in one flying leap. He does not argue, for example, that Plutarch *must have known while writing*

[121] Ibid., 216.

> *Pompey* [ital. orig.] that Pompey did not personally come into court. Indeed, it would be very difficult to argue any such strong thesis.[122]

So, how does McGrew account for the difference? She writes,

> [T]he difference can be quite readily and more simply explained by his remembering the story wrong on one occasion or gaining new information in between writing the two documents.[123]

She then posits a few harmonizations:

> One conjecture that seems fairly plausible is that Plutarch heard or read something that was unclear on the matter, perhaps saying that Pompey 'gave' an encomium for Plancus. Such a report would be ambiguous as between his delivering it personally and turning it in. If Plutarch misinterpreted such a statement, he might have written as he did in *Pompey* in good faith and then might have obtained information that clarified the matter before he wrote *Cato Minor*. Even reading the same source more carefully and thoroughly could account for the difference. This theory cannot, of course, be proven, but it is the kind of misunderstanding that happens quite commonly in daily life and therefore has more to commend it than the far more elaborate theory that Plutarch knowingly stated an explicit falsehood about Pompey's personal action in one of his *Lives*.
>
> If Plutarch did do so, of course, that *still* does not mean that he was engaging in a literary device, for his fabricating such a detail need not mean that he believed that this was a societally accepted device and that his audience would not be misled.[124]

This is a nice example whereby we can observe McGrew applying her method as she proceeds through her flowchart step-by-step. Stated succinctly, the matter of who read the encomium rises to the level of an apparent discrepancy. But there are a number of harmonizing solutions that are "possible." And Plutarch may plausibly may be guilty of an innocent error. Furthermore, even if he changed the story to have Pompey himself read the encomium, this does not suggest that Plutarch believed such was acceptable to others. McGrew insists that all of these possibilities are more likely than what she refers to as the "elaborate theory" that Plutarch knowingly wrote an "explicit falsehood."

If we overlook her loaded terms "elaborate theory" and "explicit falsehood," McGrew's conjectures are *possible*. However, she fails to appreciate how ancient writers conducted their

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid., 217.

work. Christopher Pelling, the foremost authority on Plutarch, and others, have argued that Plutarch's *Lives* that feature those of the late Roman Republic, are largely based on the contemporary history of Rome written by Asinius Pollio. Pelling holds that Plutarch's wide reading of other sources is reflected in not more than 25 percent of his overall narrative. He adds that this practice "is not unique to Plutarch, nor to biography," but is shared by other historians such as Cassius Dio, Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and even Tacitus.[125] This has implications for the Gospels. Given this practice by ancient historians, should we be surprised when we observe Matthew and Luke making such robust use of Mark and only supplementing him? Back to Plutarch. Pelling argues that Plutarch composed the *Lives* featuring those of the late Republic as a set, with three of them composed simultaneously. So, the Pollio-source and a handful of other sources may very likely have been all that he was using during the composition phase of those Lives.[126] In that case, it's unlikely that Plutarch came across another source since writing *Pompey* or read his source more carefully at a later time.

Furthermore, as I state in my book, the trial at which Pompey's speech would have been read occurred between December 10, 52 BC and the end of January 51 BC. Pompey may have decided to break his own law and read the encomium at trial only after he learned that the trial was not going as well for his friend Plancus as he had hoped. This would likely place Pompey's illegal act in January. As I explain in my book, Pompey would most likely have left the city by the time the encomium would have been needed. All of this increases the likelihood that Plutarch deliberately simplified his account in his *Life of Pompey* and narrated Pompey appearing in person to read his speech at the trial of his friend Plancus. Contrary to McGrew, this is not "very difficult to argue." And it's not even close to being an "elaborate theory." Finally, it's very unlikely that those not prone to black & white thinking would regard Plutarch's simplification to be an "explicit falsehood." Therefore, in answer to the question "Who read Pompey's illegal encomium: Pompey or an emissary," McGrew's method, articulated by her flowchart, leads her to embrace a solution that's less probable than the very simple explanation that Plutarch simplified the story in his *Life of Pompey* and transferred the action to Pompey who had composed the encomium.

Let's now return to McGrew's claim that I mentioned at the beginning of this Part. She contends that "there is no case for the objective existence of the defined devices (such as displacement, transferal, etc.) *even in the Greco-Roman literature itself.*" She also asserts that the steps articulated in her flowchart result in the inability of classicists and many New

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[125] Christopher Pelling, *Plutarch and History*, 1-44, esp. 19-20; Plutarch, *Caesar: translated with introduction and commentary* by Christopher Pelling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 39-40.

[126] See chapters one and three in Pelling, Plutarch and History. 75 years prior to when Plutarch wrote his Lives, Valerius Maximus reports the story of Pompey's illegal encomium as Plutarch does in his Cato Minor. And Plutarch is aware of Valerius' writings because he mentions them elsewhere. So, he probably consulted those writings during his research phase.

Testament scholars to establish that a compositional device was used in a specific instance. Therefore, she contends that

> we are justified in strongly suspecting that those literary devices are a figment of the imaginations of modern professors. In other words, we may justly doubt whether these devices were real things *at all*.[127]

As I said at the beginning of this segment, this is an audacious claim and it's a gamechanger if true. However, we observed clouded reasoning in McGrew's flowchart at multiple steps and levels. I also provided a few examples where Plutarch quite probably employs the use of compositional devices. Therefore, McGrew's assertion is demonstrably false that "there is no case for the objective existence of the defined devices (such as displacement, transferal, etc.) *even in the Greco-Roman literature itself*."

McGrew asserts that the claim that an author has made use of a compositional device "has a heavy burden of proof, since the claim is highly complex and unusual."[128] She continues,

> When confronted with differences in two reports, we should 'think horses, not zebras.' We should try to use a simpler, more common explanation rather than an elaborate, uncommon explanation for which we have no independent evidence.[129]

Compositional devices are far from being "highly complex," unusual," "elaborate" and "uncommon." In fact, they are devices we often use even today in our everyday communications. They are so common that we often use them without ever thinking about them. We sometimes describe an event as though occurring over a shorter period of time than it had actually occurred. We sometimes conflate events, mention only one person saying or doing something while having knowledge of others who were involved. We do these things to abbreviate, to make a point more clearly, or merely because we're not concerned with precision. We don't regard these as errors or deceit or "fictional." Perhaps you may not even want to call them "compositional devices," because they are so common. Whatever you may call them, when we do them with thought in written communication, they are deliberate. This does not make us unreliable or deceitful.

That said, this analogy to modern usage goes only so far. Although it makes clear that such compositional/rhetorical devices are harmless, simple, and common today, we also understand that the degree of flexibility acceptable in recalling events in an email is much greater than that allowed in a legal deposition. It's also the case that ancient historians did not

[127] McGrew, 179.
[128] Ibid., 226.
[129] Ibid.

have the same aims and conventions as those embraced by modern historians. We have observed in the compositional textbooks that historians were expected to paraphrase and elaborate using the techniques discussed in those textbooks. We have also observed that Plutarch and at least some of the Gospel authors appeared to have employed some of these techniques and others. These were acceptable in ancient historical writing, even if not all of them would be acceptable in modern historical writing.

That classicists who have spent their entire careers immersed in the ancient literature and have the impression that compositional devices "are practically universal in ancient historiography" suggests that a strong possibility exists that McGrew may be reading ancient literature through the wrong lens. She insists that when we hear hoofbeats we should think horse, not zebra. But she overlooks the fact that, as South Africa is a foreign land to North America, antiquity is a foreign land to us moderns. We need to be sensitive to this so that when we hear hoofbeats and see that the animal has stripes, we *should* think zebra, not horse.

In Part 6, I'll be exposing more methodological missteps in McGrew's approach.

Part 6: More on McGrew's Methodology

Up to this point, we've observed that McGrew's approach to Gospel differences suffers from a black & white concept of truthful reporting and unsound methodology. Moreover, it does not comport with practical observations of our everyday ordinary communications. As we begin to switch the focus of our attention to the Gospels in Part 6, I'm going to discuss more examples of McGrew's methodological missteps.

Chronological Differences

In my book, I provide a few examples in the Gospels in which it appears that one of the authors has altered the chronology of events and that the alteration was both intentional and not merely a topical arrangement with no chronological ties. It's there that I draw a distinction between 3 types of chronological reporting: "floating chronology," where no timing is stated, "explicit chronology" (e.g., "it was two days before Passover" or "later that evening"), and "implicit chronology." This third category is important, since there are different degrees by which timing could be implied. In some instances, the implication that Event B had occurred immediately following Event A may be present but not strong. The story of Jesus healing a man with a withered hand is a good example of a weakly implied chronology. In all 3 Synoptic Gospels, the story appears immediately after Jesus' dispute with some Jewish leaders on the matter of his disciples picking grain on the sabbath. Following the dispute, Luke says Jesus went into a synagogue on a different sabbath and healed a man's withered hand (Luke 6:6). Mark says nothing of the chronology ("And he entered again into their synagogue"). But Matthew's wording could imply that the healing had occurred on the same sabbath as the dispute: "And going down from there, he went into their synagogue." (Matt. 12:9) If Matthew implied the healing occurred on the same sabbath, it's weakly implied.

In other instances, the implication that Event B had occurred immediately following Event A may be so strong as to be almost explicit. A nice example is found in the story of Jesus cleansing the temple and cursing a fig tree (Mark 11:1-19; Matthew 21:1-22). Mark narrates that, after making his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, Jesus goes into the temple, looks around, then leaves. He and his disciples then go to Bethany where they spend the night. On Monday morning, Jesus and his disciples return to Jerusalem. While on their way Jesus is hungry and sees a fig tree. However, when he observes there are no figs on it, he curses it. They then proceed to Jerusalem. When they arrive, he goes into the temple a second time, this time observing some activities of which he disapproves. So, he cleanses the temple, overturning tables and driving away the merchants and money changers. Later that day, Jesus and his disciples leave Jerusalem and return to Bethany where they will spend another night. On Tuesday morning, they're

returning again to Jerusalem. When they come to the fig tree Jesus had cursed on the previous day, they observe it had since withered and died.[130]

Matthew narrates the events differently. He also has Jesus going into the temple after his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. However, Matthew moves the temple cleansing from Monday to Sunday and conflates it with the first temple visit reported by Mark. Later that day, they return to Bethany where they will spend the night. On Monday morning, Jesus and his disciples are returning to Jerusalem when he sees a fig tree without any figs on it. So, he curses the fig tree and it withers on the spot.[131] Matthew has compressed the account, combining Mark's 2-step process into a single step. Matthew does not explicitly state that Jesus cleansed the temple immediately after Jesus's triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. Nor does he explicitly say the fig tree withered before their very eyes. However, both are so strongly implied that those who would contend otherwise bear the burden of proof.

McGrew uses a different approach to distinguishing chronology: "achronological" and "dyschronological."[132] Her term "achronological" is fairly similar to what I have called "floating chronology" while her term "dyschronological" would be similar to an author narrating an event to have occurred explicitly at a time that he knew differed from the actual time. In my book, I refer to this as "synthetic chronological placement" and "displacement."

I'm not fond of McGrew's distinctions because they do not recognize nuances. In fact, the failure to consider implied chronology that varied in strength is yet another instance of McGrew's black & white thinking. For her, even if the timing of an event is strongly implied but not explicitly stated, it's achronological.[133] Therefore, in some cases, a possible tension between the accounts cannot be recognized. But the way people communicate is not always with black & white clarity. In fact, when we describe a series of events that had occurred closely in time, we often don't feel obligated to state the explicit timing of each event. I provide several examples in chapter 5 of my book where I regard the chronology as being so strongly implied that we probably have synthetic chronological placement.

Citing Augustine's attempt to harmonize the day on which Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, 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's discussion here is utterly at odds with the idea that John would have thought himself

[130] Mark 11:1-19.

[131] Matt. 21:1-22.

[132] I had never heard of these terms. McGrew admits to coining them on page 18.

[133] cf. McGrew, 254. For an example, see her comments of Luke's omission of the flight to Egypt on page 281.

> licensed to change the year of the Temple cleansing, and Augustine himself expressly held that Jesus cleansed the Temple twice, stating that two cleansings were "evident."[134]

McGrew is correct that this is what Augustine thought. However, she makes a hasty generalization when she claims this is "evidence *against* the idea that Christians of his own time accepted dyschronological order." All it suggests is that this was Augustine's thinking. There were probably others who agreed with him. But certainly not all. In fact, about 150 years earlier and closer to the time the Gospels were composed, Origen thought quite differently. He had a high view of Scripture and believed that if the Gospels contained discrepancies, one would be required to jettison belief that they're divinely inspired and trustworthy. However, he thought discrepancies would have to be in their underlying message rather than in surface details.[135] He then adds,

> I do not condemn them [i.e., the authors of the Gospels] if they even sometimes dealt freely with things which to the eye of history happened differently, and changed them so as to subserve the mystical aims they had in view; so as to speak of a thing which happened in a certain place, as if it had happened in another, or of what took place at a certain time, as if it had taken place at another time, and to introduce into what was spoken in a certain way some changes of their own. They proposed to speak the truth where it was possible both materially and spiritually, and where this was not possible it was their intention to prefer the spiritual to the material. The spiritual truth was often preserved, as one might say, in the material falsehood.[136]

It's obvious that at least Origen had no problems with the Gospel authors using compositional devices. Though I cannot affirm the totality of Origen's hermeneutical approach to Scripture and everything he believed (for reasons I can't go into here), I do think it's important to note that there's a historical precedent in the early church, much earlier than Augustine, revealing that compositional devices are not a novel and new idea posited by classicists and New Testament scholars.[137]

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[134] Ibid., 236.

[135] Origen, *Commentary on John* 10.2.

[136] Ibid., 10.4.75 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. and trans. Allan Menzies [New York: Christian Literature Company, 1897], 9:383. For an edition of this work featuring Greek and Latin side by side, see Origen, *Origenous ta euriskomena panta = Origenis opera omnia* (Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca, t. 13; Paris: Apud J. P. Migne, 1862). Those interested may access this Greek and Latin text at https://bit.ly/2o9mlRS and scroll to page 313. The Greek term translated "falsehood" in this text is *pseudeiōs*. Similar statements were made in the fourth century by Chrysostom (Hom. *Matt*. 1.6).

[137] As a neo-Platonist Origen believed in the pre-existence of the soul prior to the creation of the world. He also believed everything, including Satan, would finally be reconciled to God. On account of these, three centuries after

Undesigned Coincidences

McGrew has previously written on undesigned coincidences. In my opinion, undesigned coincidences are legitimate phenomena in the Gospels. Of course, some are stronger than others. The one that impresses me most pertains to Jesus's discussion with Pilate. When we read the story in Luke, Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" When Jesus answers in the affirmative, the very next thing Luke reports is that Pilate tells the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no cause for a crime in this man." (Luke 23:3-4). If we were only to read Luke's account, Pilate's response appears bizarre and unlikely. The Romans were conquerors and had no toleration for rebellion. Herod was merely a client king for the Romans, having only the powers Rome had granted him. So, for Jesus to tell Pilate that He's the king of the Jews, implying to Pilate that Rome's approved client king was not, the last thing we would expect for Pilate to say is, "I find no cause for a crime in this man." Surely this is a Lukan invention! Well, not so fast. John, who very likely writes without any dependence on Luke, reports Jesus's conversation with Pilate in more detail. When Pilate asks Jesus if he's a king, Jesus says he is but that his kingdom is not of this world and that he came to this world to testify to the truth. Pilate then understood that Jesus was no threat to Roman rule. So, he said to the Jews gathered, "I find no cause for a crime in him." (John 18:33-38). Luke provides a significantly abbreviated version of the conversation between Jesus and Pilate, which seems implausible until the fuller version in John's independent account is presented. It's an undesigned coincidence.

I think McGrew's book *Hidden In Plain View* is a nice improvement on J. J. Blunt's book on undesigned coincidences written nearly 200 years earlier. Unfortunately, her black & white concept of truthful reporting leads her to create a false "either/or" scenario when it comes to compositional devices. She writes,

> It should be evident by this time that the reportage model and the literary device model are incompatible, because they give us different concepts of what the authors of the Gospels were attempting to do.[138]

A few pages later she writes,

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his death, a church council condemned as heretical either Origen or some of his teachings. Still, Origen believed in the deity of Christ and had a high view of Scripture. When he was 67 years old, the Romans imprisoned and tortured him for two years in order to get him to deny Christ. But Origen would not recant. He was released but died less than a year later from the mistreatment.

[138] McGrew, 251.

> If we think that the statements we find in the biblical narratives are plausibly or even probably fabricated, even in part, we have no reason to think that there may be other confirmation of them, since they are not literally true in the first place. And if we think that such fabrication applies especially to details, then we should not look for the details to be confirmed. This theory makes it much more difficult to see such confirmations clearly when they *do* arise. The bias in favor of fictionalizing literary devices thus carries a great danger of blinding the theorist to the actual evidence for historicity.[139]

Now keep in mind that, in positing compositional devices, neither I nor most classicists nor most New Testament scholars are talking about inventing stories about events that had never actually occurred. We are almost always talking about the techniques for paraphrasing and writing narrative taught in the compositional textbooks and the compositional devices regarded by classicists as having a nearly universal presence in ancient historical literature. Most of these are quite minor. However, some are more radical.

Here's an example of a rather radical adaptation:[140] Ancient historians agree that, when Caesar was returning to Rome after experiencing military victories, many Romans went out on a several days journey to meet and congratulate him. They also agree there was a meeting between Trebonius and Antony in which the two discussed the possibility of assassinating Caesar. However, we do not know when Trebonius and Antony had this discussion, although it would have been close to the time of Caesar's return to Rome. Many classicists have suggested there were occasions when ancient historians would fabricate some details when they were unknown in order to make for a good narrative. Pelling has suggested that, since Plutarch was unaware of the time and location of the meeting between Trebonius and Antony, he invented the location and timing to have been when they went to meet Caesar on his return to Rome. But notice that Pelling is not suggesting that Plutarch invented the excursion of others to greet Caesar as he returned to Rome. Nor is he suggesting that Plutarch invented the fact that Trebonius and Antony had a conversation about the possibility of assassinating Caesar. He's only suggesting that Plutarch fabricated the time and location of that conversation. Now McGrew thinks that, if the biographical genre made allowance for such a move, a large question mark would hang over many incidents in the historical literature. She adds,

> The theorists do not have the luxury of confining our skepticism only to those passages that they personally have chosen to question so far, since the devices they advocate would leave no clear tag to mark them out in the text itself.[141]

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[139] Ibid., 260.

[140] See Licona, 229, note 5 for this and a few other examples.

[141] McGrew, 245 note 28.

In other words, if ancient authors could engage in some minor fabrication to make for good literature, how can we trust anything they wrote?

Well, that's fairly easy to answer. Just as it is with any report in ancient historical literature, some things are fairly easy to verify, others are not so easy, and some cannot be verified. Of course, this does not mean that the unverified item did not occur. It only means we cannot verify that it did. That Jesus was crucified and died as a result is fairly easy to verify. That he fed the 5,000 is not as easy. That he was born of a virgin cannot be verified by the historian. That Jesus caused a great disturbance in the temple is fairly easy to verify. That he said something about the temple being destroyed is fairly easy to verify. That he made the statement when he cleansed the temple is not so easy. Responsible historical work yields conclusions that are carefully nuanced and do not go beyond what the evidence can bear.

Still, it's fair to ask just how much flexibility was acceptable in the finer historical writing of that era. In my book, I sought only to identify instances where it's quite plausible that a difference resulted from the author's use of a compositional device. I made no attempt to discuss the limits, other than to observe at the end that the Synoptic Gospels appear to take fewer and smaller liberties with their sources than did most other ancient biographers. Craig Keener has taken the matter further. He and several of his doctoral students combed through much of the ancient literature written in the first century and within a few centuries of it. They examined the extent of flexibility in their reporting. Of course, some ancient historians exercised greater flexibility than others. Keener concludes with the following general observation in his recent volume *Christobiography*:

> [A]udiences from the Gospels' era did not expect biographers to freely invent events, but they did allow them to flesh out scenes and discourse for the purpose of what they considered narrative verisimilitude. Biographers were not supposed to invent a teacher's message, but they could interpret and communicate it from their own perspectives. . . . If biographers of recent figures in the early empire felt free to adapt wording, chronology, and so forth, then this expectation likewise follows, to a reasonable degree of probability, for the Gospels.[142]

> What can be concluded already is that the Synoptics, and probably all four Gospels, fit within the range of variation found in ancient historical sources in general. These sources reflect a significant core of prior information and a degree of flexibility in recounting it.

[142] Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 488-500.

> Most ancient historical writing was, in other words, both history and literature, both information and it's rhetorical shaping.[143]
>
> Traditional skeptical and fundamentalist approaches to the Gospels have generally committed the same error: judging the Gospels by standards foreign to their original genre.[144]

Keener subsequently communicated with me in an email that he regards it as being clear that some ancient biographers would craft a scene when certain details were unknown, such as when Pelling suggests that Plutarch crafted the scene where Trebonius aired the possibility of an assassination plot with Antony.[145]

In short, ancient authors of historical literature would adapt their sources to varying degrees. However, there was a limit. Good historians did not fabricate events out of nothing. Acknowledging that ancient historians often adapted details and on rare occasions narrated an actual historical event in a context they had created could potentially frustrate McGrew's efforts to identify undesigned coincidences and overturn some of those she puts forth as examples. Perhaps this is what's behind McGrew's passionate resistance to compositional devices. If it is, her fear is disproportionate to the threat posed by compositional devices.

Let's return to our example of the discussion between Jesus and Pilate. Let's speculate that, had we been present, we would have heard Jesus answer Pilate's question about whether he was a king with a simple affirmation followed by stating that his kingdom is not of this world and that he had come to communicate the truth. However, having spent a lot of time with Jesus and understanding Jesus's overall message, John adds Jesus's words, "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18:37). Perhaps he might do this because he believed it to be an appropriate occasion for reminding his readers of an earlier time when Jesus says he must bring Gentiles into his flock "and they will hear my voice" (John 10:16) and a few verses later, "My sheep hear my voice" (10:27). I'm not saying this is what happened. Jesus may, indeed, have said those words to Pilate about hearing his voice. This is one of those occasions for which there's not enough data for the historian to verify that Jesus uttered those words. However, I present this hypothetical to show that even if Jesus did not utter those final words and John added them for the reason I mentioned, this would do nothing to undermine the undesigned coincidence of John's more detailed version informing Luke's very abbreviated one.

Therefore, McGrew's "all or nothing" reasoning is problematic. She claims that, if the ancient authors adapted their sources as many classicists, New Testament scholars and I have suggested, we could not rely on details such as undesigned coincidences to confirm their

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[143] Ibid., 500.

[144] Ibid., 497.

[145] Personal email dated May 4, 2020.

accurate reporting, "since they are not literally true in the first place."[146] This is a black & white concept of truthful reporting that simply doesn't work.

Now some of you may be thinking that McGrew should take a softer approach. Why not allow one to opt for the approach that best fits the difference at hand, such as harmonization, compositional device, or possibly an error? McGrew recognizes some will be inclined to travel this road. But she discourages it. She writes,

> It might be tempting to believe that one can take a smorgasbord approach to undesigned coincidences and literary devices—a little bit of this and a little bit of that. . . . [W]hen one has trouble harmonizing an alleged contradiction between two Gospel accounts, then one might think it expedient to jump to the literary device school of thought and claim that a literary device (say, dyschronological displacement) was 'accepted at the time,' explaining the Bible difficulty in that way.[147]

But McGrew eschews such an approach. She writes,

> The *ad hocness* and epistemic lack of principle in such an approach is evident when one asks this question: What kind of author is one creating in such a process? Not a psychologically coherent author. If one actually believes that the literary device view of the Gospels is correct, that such fact-changing devices were 'part and parcel' of the Gospel genre, and if one interprets the Gospels consistently in this way, then to be consistent one should have a high probability from the outset that what appear to be undesigned coincidences are *unlikely* to be correctly explained by the activities of literally truthful authors. After all, *highly scrupulous*, *literally truthful authors*, giving us what they believe to be historically accurate reports even in matters of detail, are precisely what the literary device view tells us we do *not* have. The smorgasbord approach is untenable.[148]

McGrew's criticisms are saturated with her black & white concept of truthful reporting, while literary sensitivity is given very little attention, if any. For her, authors who are "highly scrupulous" and "literally truthful" would never retell the story of Jesus using a parable and alter Jesus asking and answering his own question to having the Jewish leaders answer him with the same answer. They would not consider adding elements to a dialogue in a true story, in order to clarify what was said to one belonging to a different ethnic culture. It's also clear that, in her mind, compositional devices pose a serious threat to undesigned coincidences. Now, there may

[146] McGrew, 260.

[147] Ibid., 261.

[148] On the same page, McGrew also says such an approach fosters "epistemic inconsistency."

be occasions when a difference resulting from a compositional device discredits one of McGrew's examples of an undesigned coincidence. And there may be occasions when an undesigned coincidence sheds clearer light on a text than appealing to a compositional device. However, they are not mutually exclusive as tools for identifying why there are differences between parallel reports. Black & white thinking argues either/or. But a carefully nuanced approach is more reasonable.

This conclusion is, once again, reinforced by our ordinary conversations. Every spring, I teach a course at HBU named "Scripture & Apologetics Implications." Students are exposed to various matters in New Testament criticism, such as textual criticism, canonicity, the Synoptic Problem, Gospel authorship, and Gospel differences. After reading my book on Gospel differences, there are usually a few students in each class who say that, having now been exposed to a different approach to Gospel differences that acknowledges the use of compositional devices, they are surprised to observe themselves doing many of the same things in their everyday conversations. Yet, they don't at all think they're falsifying their stories or compromising the trustworthiness of their modified accounts.

In summary, McGrew's black & white concept of truthful reporting leads her to read into the New Testament literature something its authors never intended, just as she does with literature written by other ancient historians. Her method fails to appreciate the varied degrees of strength by which something can be implied. And it inappropriately insists on an either/or approach to understanding Gospel differences.

In Part 7, I'll be focusing on how McGrew's method plays out in some examples in the Gospels.

Addendum: Did I Misrepresent McGrew on Chronology?

Shortly after the video version of this Part 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?[149]

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.

> 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:

[149] Posted on June 18, 2020, 6:45pm.

> 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.[150] 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.[151] In fact, there were not even spaces between words! Reread 14:1-3 above and ask yourself whether you think Mark intends for his readers to understand that the anointing occurred within two days of Passover.[152]

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 . . .

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[150] 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.

[151] See also Matt. 16:1-19.

[152] 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.

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.[153]

McGrew likewise acknowledges a chronological difference here. She includes it in her list of probable errors in the Gospels.[154] Recall that her flowchart requires her to go with error prior to acknowledging a compositional device (see 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."[155]

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

> 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

[153] Licona, 150.

[154] McGrew, 52 note 2.

[155] Ibid., 391.

or John, telling us that it is either one or the other."[156] 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."[157] 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.[158]

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.[159]

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 Part 5 above how her flowchart is founded on faulty reasoning.

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."[160] 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

[156] Ibid., 393-394.
[157] Ibid., 394.
[158] Ibid., 394-95.
[159] Ibid., 395.
[160] Ibid., 116-118. The quote appears on 118.

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).[161] 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 err 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

[161] Ibid., 52 note 2.

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 yet 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.[162]

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).[163] 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→ 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).

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[162] Licona, 191-93.

[163] 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. While true, this does not eliminate its chronological sense.

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.[164] 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 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

[164] "When evening came" (Ὀψίας 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 New Testament, 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.

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. [165]

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

[165] 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.

> 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.[166]

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 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.

[166] McGrew, 236.

Part 7: Differences in the Gospels

In previous Parts of this series and especially in my book, I argue that ancient authors of historical literature employed techniques they had learned in the compositional textbooks for paraphrasing and composing narrative. They also used compositional devices identified by classicists such as compression, conflation, displacement, transferal, and others. Classicists regard these as being practically universal in ancient historiography. I have provided numerous examples in Plutarch's *Lives* where he likely employs these techniques and devices. Since the Gospels share much in common with ancient biography, we should expect that their authors wrote within the parameters of that genre. In fact, we should be surprised if they had not.

In this Part, we will be examining a number of differences in the Gospels and assessing whether the solutions McGrew offers are worth embracing. I'll be focusing on 3 stories. And here's the first:

Jesus raises Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:21-43; Matt. 9:18-26; Luke 8:40-56)

Mark and Luke report that Jairus came to Jesus and said, "My daughter is *about to die.* Please come heal her." Jesus agrees and, while on their way, some servants from Jairus's house come and tell him that his daughter has just died. Jesus tells Jairus to have faith. They then go to Jairus's house and Jesus raises his daughter from the dead.

When Matthew reports the same story, Jairus comes to Jesus and says, "My daughter *has just died*. Please come heal her." Jesus agrees, they go to Jairus's home, and Jesus raises the girl from the dead. Matthew doesn't mention the servants who come to tell Jairus that his daughter had died, because there was no need, since, in Matthew's version of the story, she was already dead when Jairus approached Jesus. Matthew simplified the story.

But McGrew insists on harmonizing. She writes the following,

> If the girl's breathing were slowing and she scarcely seemed to be breathing at all when he left, Jairus may have left his house in a great hurry, hoping to catch Jesus before her death. As Augustine suggests, he may have been mentally despairing. Or he may have been wavering between believing that she was dead and believing that she was not dead yet. This is, after all, a world without stethoscopes or other ways to check vital signs. It is not especially implausible, given the two accounts, that in his mentally agitated state he may have actually said something like this, "My daughter is dying. She's probably just now died! But if you come and lay your hands on her, she will live."In that case, both Matthew's and Mark's versions of his words would fall well within the range of normal paraphrase, and the differences can easily be attributed to the variations of truthful

> witness memory. It is interesting that both versions say that the girl will live if Jesus lays his hands on her. A harmonization of this kind takes account of this: If Jesus comes and touches her, she will live, whether she has died already, as Jairus in his fear and grief is inclined to believe, or is alive, as he still partly hopes. This harmonization is one that Licona does not consider. Whether or not Matthew knew (either from witnessing the scene and/or from Mark's account) that the servants came later and told Jairus that the girl was dead, simply not including that part of the story is not the same thing as deliberately suppressing it to try to make it look like she was dead before Jairus left the house. Omitting that part of the story could be a matter of benign compression—merely telling a story more briefly, without altering facts.[167]

I regard McGrew's harmonization as *possible*. However, I think it's *much less probable* than the one proposed by myself and others. I think Matthew's omission of the servants who inform Jairus of his daughter's death carries more weight than McGrew is willing to acknowledge. That Matthew simplifies his accounts elsewhere, for example, Jesus healing the centurion's servant, Jesus cursing a fig tree, Jesus's parable of the Vineyard and Wicked Tenants, suggests Matthew's tendency to abbreviate, a tendency acknowledged by most Gospels scholars. Moreover, classicists and Gospels scholars alike have long acknowledged that *compression* is a compositional device employed by ancient writers.

The following evangelical commentators interpret Matthew as representing Jairus' daughter as being already dead when he approached Jesus: Darrell Bock, D. A. Carson, Craig Evans, R. T. France, Donald Hagner, Robert Hahn, Craig Keener, John Nolland, Grant Osborne, and Stuart Weber.[168] Carson, who can hardly be accused of having a low view of Scripture, flat out rejects the view for which McGrew contends. He writes,

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[167] McGrew, 383.

[168] See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 792-93; Craig A. Evans, *Matthew*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 206; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 359; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13, Vol. 33A*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1993), 248; Roger L. Hahn, *Matthew: a commentary for Bible students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007), 128; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2009), 302; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 394-95; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew, Vol. 1*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Clinton E. Arnold, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 346-47 (In addition to acknowledging that Matthew narrates that the girl is already dead, Osbourne adds, "the essential details are present, and the gist of the story is much the same"; Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew, Vol. 1* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 127. Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) is open to either abbreviation or imprecise language: "There is a problem in that in Mark and Luke the daughter was no more than ill and that while Jesus was on his way to the house news came that she had died. It may be that we should understand Matthew to mean that the man's daughter was as good as dead, a view that was shortly confirmed by news of the actual death. Or once again Matthew may have abbreviated a

> His daughter 'has just died': attempts to make *arti eteleutēsen* mean 'is now dying' (NIV mg.) stem not from Greek syntax but from too simplistic a desire to harmonize this account with Mark and Luke. Better to recognize that Matthew, having eliminated the messengers as extraneous to his purposes, condenses 'so as to present at the outset what was actually true before Jesus reached the house' (Broadus): such is Matthew's condensed style elsewhere (see on 8:5).[169]

Let's now move to our second story:

Jesus Cleanses the Temple & Curses a Fig Tree (Mark 11:1-23; Matthew 21:1-21)

In Part 6, I discussed three ways of expressing chronology: floating, explicit, and implicit. I provided the example of Jesus cleansing the temple and cursing a fig tree to reflect an implicit chronology that's so strong as to be virtually explicit.

To recap that story, Mark narrates that, after making his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, Jesus goes into the temple, looks around then leaves. He and his disciples then go to Bethany where they spend the night. On Monday morning, Jesus and his disciples return to Jerusalem. While on their way Jesus curses a fig tree. When they arrive in Jerusalem, he goes into the temple a second time, this time observing some activities of which he disapproves. So, he cleanses the temple, overturning tables and driving away the merchants and money changers. Later that day, Jesus and his disciples return to Bethany where they spend another night. On Tuesday morning, they're returning again to Jerusalem. And they notice that the fig tree Jesus had cursed on the previous day had withered and died.

Matthew narrates the events differently. He also has Jesus going into the temple after his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday. However, Matthew moves the temple cleansing from Monday to Sunday and conflates it with the first temple visit reported by Mark. On the next morning, Jesus and his disciples are returning to Jerusalem when he curses the fig tree and it withers before their very eyes.

McGrew disagrees with this assessment, asserting that Matthew was narrating either "achronologically" or "dyschronologically." If he was narrating dyschronologically, then he "falsely narrated" that the tree had withered before their eyes. If achronologically, there is no discrepancy.[170] Although McGrew does not offer her opinion related to why the difference is

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narrative by running together the opening of a story and the sending of messengers (as he did in the story of the centurion's servant, 8:5–13; in neither passage do the messengers play any significant role for Matthew)" (228-29).

[169] See also D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, in The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke, Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984): 229-30.

[170] McGrew, 118.

there, we are exposed, once again, to her black & white concept of truthful reporting. For her, it's either one or the other: achronological or dyschronological. There's no room for literary sensitivity whereby something might be implied. I agree that Matthew does not explicitly state that the temple cleansing was on the same day as the triumphal entry or that he explicitly states that the fig tree withered before their eyes. However, as stated previously, in my opinion, the chronology in both instances is so strongly implied that McGrew bears a much greater burden of proof to show otherwise than she appears willing to acknowledge. If you have any doubts about the truth of what I'm saying, I encourage you to take a moment now and read the text in Matthew. Then assess for yourself whether it's strongly implied that the temple cleansing occurred on the same day as Jesus' triumphal entry and that Jesus cursed the fig tree on the following day. Here's the reference: Matthew 21:1-21.

The chronology in Matthew is implied so strongly that even Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe were willing to acknowledge that Matthew moved the day on which Jesus cleansed the temple from Monday to Sunday.[171] Why then do some regard it as being anathema to suggest that John may have moved the temple cleansing to the beginning of Jesus's ministry or that he moved the day and time of Jesus' crucifixion or that either John or Mark moved the day that Mary anointed Jesus? Yet McGrew insists that John's placement of the temple cleansing at the beginning of Jesus' ministry requires that there were 2 temple cleansings and that "either Mark or John has simply made a minor, good-faith chronological error, and one that would be quite easy to make."[172] Now let's move along to our third and final example.

Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant (Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10)

Remember the story of Pompey giving an illegal encomium? The main difference in Plutarch's accounts pertains to whether Pompey had sent the encomium via an emissary who read it at his friend's trial or if Pompey himself had gone to the trial and read it in person. Well, the story of Jesus healing a centurion's servant is a very nice parallel and can be understood in a similar fashion.

A centurion wanted to ask Jesus to heal his servant who was very sick. Luke tells us the centurion sent some Jewish elders to make the request on his behalf. They come to Jesus and say, "There's a centurion who has been kind to our people. He has a servant who's sick. Please heal him." Jesus agrees, and they head toward the centurion's house. But when the centurion gets word that Jesus is on his way, he crafts a message and sends some friends to relay it to

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[171] Norman L. Geisler and Thomas Howe, *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties: Clear and Concise Answers from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992, previously published under the title When Critics Ask), 354. Gleason Archer likewise held this view in Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 335.

[172] McGrew, 391, cf. 368-75.

Jesus: "The centurion says he's not worthy for you to enter his house. But he knows you have authority. So, he says just give the command and his servant will be healed." Jesus praises the faith of the centurion and heals his servant without having seen the centurion. That's Luke's version of the story.

In Matthew's version, the centurion himself goes to Jesus and makes the request in person. When Jesus agrees to see the servant, the centurion tells him, "I'm unworthy for you to enter my house. But you have authority. So, just give the command and my servant will be healed." Jesus praises the centurion for his faith and heals his servant.[173] Matthew has simplified the story by air-brushing out the Jewish elders and friends the centurion had sent and, instead, has the centurion go to Jesus in person.

If you consult the commentaries, you'll see that what I have proposed is also the majority position taken by evangelical New Testament scholars, among whom are Darrell Bock, F. F. Bruce, D. A. Carson, R. T. France, Donald Hagner, Walter Liefeld, I. Howard Marshall, Leon Morris, Mark Strauss, Robert Stein, and Michael Wilkins.

However, there are three other approaches a minority of scholars take for dealing with the differences in this story. A *very* small number appeal to creative harmonization. These suggest that the centurion sent the Jewish elders, then his friends, then later decided to go see Jesus. Chrysostom took this approach in the fourth century.[174] A more recent interpreter was Gleason Archer.[175] Although this scenario is "possible," it's pure speculation. It's also wrong, since, according to Luke, "*The men who had been sent* [by the centurion] returned to the house." Luke doesn't include the centurion who had sent them, because, according to Luke, he didn't go to see Jesus. Moreover, Matthew tends to simplify throughout his Gospel. Even McGrew who virtually always prefers harmonization thinks this harmonization proposal is going too far.

Another approach also appeals to harmonizing: *metonymy*. Metonymy is a rhetorical device, a figure of speech whereby one thing is substituted for another with which it's closely related. For example, the Gospels report that Pilate scourged Jesus.[176] Most readers understand that Pilate had ordered the scourging rather than being the one holding the whip. Likewise, when the Jewish elders inform Jesus that the centurion had built the synagogue for them,[177] readers naturally understand that the centurion had funded or had overseen the project rather than having completed all of the work single-handedly. With metonymy, Matthew is doing

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[173] Matthew 8:13 reads, "And Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go! It is done for you as you believed." In Greek, the word "Go!" (hupage) is in the singular, meaning Jesus was speaking to a single person, i.e., the centurion, rather than the Jewish elders and friends of the centurion. This is another reason for understanding Matthew to be narrating the centurion himself appearing before Jesus.

[174] Chrysos, *Hom. Matt*. 26.3.

[175] Archer, 321-22.

[176] Mark 15:15; Matt. 27:26; John 19:1.

[177] Luke 7:5.

something similar when saying that the centurion went to Jesus. The centurion sent others to Jesus to deliver a message on his behalf. But Matthew is not saying the centurion appeared before Jesus in person. This approach was proposed by Augustine and Calvin and is held today by Vern Poythress.

The suggestion that metonymy is being used here by Matthew is also problematic. While one can easily see how saying the centurion had built a synagogue would have been understood by others to mean that the centurion had funded or delegated the task, I think it's a bit of a stretch to claim this is what Matthew was doing pertaining to the centurion's communications with Jesus. Consider the following statement: "President Trump attempted to negotiate North Korea's nuclear disarmament with Kim Jung Un." This statement could easily be understood to mean that he sent his secretary of state Mike Pompeo to do the work on his behalf. However, it would be a quite different matter if the statement were "President Trump *went* to Singapore in order to negotiate North Korea's nuclear disarmament with Kim Jong Un." In this case, we would think that President Trump himself had gone.

Vern Poythress understands that Matthew is not reporting the event precisely as it had occurred and appears somewhat uncomfortable with that observation. So, he claims that Matthew "does not specify exactly how the centurion's request reached Jesus."[178] However, there are several clues in Matthew and Luke that suggest Matthew indeed specifies how the centurion's request reached Jesus: Matthew first tells us that a centurion went to Jesus and made the request.[179] He then writes, "And Jesus said *to the centurion,* 'Go [singular verb]. Let it be done for *you* [singular pronoun] as *you have believed* [singular verb].'"[180] Matthew narrates Jesus speaking directly to the centurion who has appeared before him. Moreover, Matthew does not mention emissaries. So, everything in Matthew's report suggests that Matthew intended to communicate that the centurion came to Jesus in person, and Jesus spoke with him directly.

McGrew takes a different approach and I'm not aware of any New Testament scholar who shares her view; conservative, atheist, or anywhere in-between. McGrew appeals to an error on Matthew's part.[181] She thinks Matthew erroneously believed the centurion had gone to Jesus in person and that no emissaries were involved. She regards this as an innocent mistake on Matthew's part, but it's an error no less. She goes on to assert that had Matthew known that the centurion had sent emissaries and decided to simplify his account, streamlining it by omitting mention of the emissaries and narrating the centurion going to Jesus in person, Matthew would have been guilty of falsifying the narrative, deceiving his readers and "fictionalizing" his account.

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[178] Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 56.

[179] Matt. 8:5.

[180] Matt. 8:13.

[181] McGrew, 375–81, 391.

Once again, McGrew exhibits black & white thinking that's out of touch with how people wrote in antiquity and even how we communicate today.

But problems with McGrew's position do not stop here. She's also being inconsistent. Let's put a bookmark here and go to the story of Jesus' baptism where we observe a difference in the manner God's voice at Jesus's baptism is recalled in the Synoptics. Mark and Luke report God saying, "*You* are my beloved Son. With *you* I am well-pleased."[182] God is speaking directly to Jesus. However, Matthew reports God saying, "*This* is my beloved Son. With *Him* I am well-pleased."[183] God is speaking directly to the crowd. Given Markan priority, it appears that Matthew has transferred the recipient of the message from Jesus to the crowd. Why? One can only guess. Perhaps Matthew desired to make God's message more personal to his readers.

However, McGrew describes this explanation as "an unnecessarily complicated hypothesis" and "an odd idea."[184] Really? I don't mean to appear retributive here. But her response is exaggerated yet again and sounds like an attempt to add emphasis in order to bolster a very weak point.

So, how does McGrew explain the difference? She describes is as "ordinary paraphrase" that's "merely telling a story in slightly different words."[185] But observe her double standard: If Matthew had taken a message from a centurion and delivered through emissaries and transferred it to have been delivered by the centurion who authored it, McGrew says that's deceit and fictionalization. But if the same author takes a message from God that's spoken directly to Jesus and transfers it to have been spoken directly to the crowd about Jesus, she says that's "ordinary paraphrase" and "merely telling a story in slightly different words." Is this not a double standard?

In contrast, recognizing that the Gospel authors used compositional devices allows us to understand *why* the differences are there. It assists us in avoiding appeals to creative harmonizations, which may themselves be fictional. And it provides a more plausible reason than error for many of the differences.

In summary, we have witnessed even more examples of McGrew's black & white concept of truthful reporting. We have also seen that she's inconsistent in the application of her method. And we have observed another example of her offering an exaggerated response.

In the next and final Part, I'll be discussing why this matter is important and from where I think the divide may originate.

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[182] Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22.

[183] Matt. 3:17.

[184] McGrew, 23 note 1 and 124 note 21.

[185] Ibid., 23. Though it is omitted in the book, in a near final draft of her book, McGrew gave credit to her husband Tim for the idea.

Part 8: Summary & Conclusion: Why This is Important?

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, then 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, the claim should be rejected.

So, which approach is correct? Throughout these pages 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 & white thinking, which leaves her color-blinded to the way in which ancient historical literature in general and the Gospels in particular were written. This applies to her concept of what's acceptable in truthful reporting, a 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 misconstrue 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 evangelists used compositional devices to alter some minor details, philosopher J. P. Moreland says such an approach "tends to undermine the historicity of the Gospels and Acts"[186] and is "wanting and dangerous"[187] while apologist John Warwick Montgomery calls it "an approach that destroys both mind and soul."[188]

Why are these evangelicals loathe to accept the use of compositional devices, even using such strong terms to denounce them? For McGrew, it's her black & 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 authors' 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" (Matt. 2:15). Mathew 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 the 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

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[186] Moreland. See http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/02/j_p_moreland_endorses_my_criti.html

[187] Moreland: "*The Mirror or the Mask* is a massive piece of first-rate, rigorous scholarship that leaves no stone unturned. Replete with very careful distinctions, *The Mirror or the Mask* offers a precise analysis of the contemporary practice of employing 'fictionalization' to exegete various Gospel texts. McGrew's careful analysis finds such a practice wanting and dangerous and replaces this practice with an approach that treats the Gospels as honest historical reports based on eyewitness testimony. This book is a must read for all who are interested in the historical accuracy of our portraits of Jesus." McGrew states that even if the Gospel authors used detail-altering compositional devices, this "would render the Gospels unreliable as historical sources" (10).

[188] Montgomery: "Lydia McGrew's critique of the literary reductionism employed by many New Testament scholars, including some influential evangelicals, is the definitive refutation of this sad methodology, which dehistoricises the text, destroys any possible apologetic for its truth-value, and leaves the Christian in a position where he or she ends up with faith in the literary style of early church writers rather than faith in a historical Jesus. … The McGrew book is therefore a needed corrective to an approach that destroys both mind and soul."

drawing between Jesus and Israel in Hosea is one of typology.[189] 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 thirty pieces of silver in the temple sanctuary, Matthew states,

> Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, "And they took the thirty 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." (Matt. 27:9-10)

The careful reader will search in vain to find this text in Jeremiah. That's because it's in Zechariah (11:13). However, Matthew borrowed a single word from Jeremiah (27:9a), "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 has 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,[190] we learn 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 Evangelists' 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 foreign to what it originally meant, then claiming that Scripture was fulfilled? *By their standards*, isn't this practice by Matthew one that "tends to undermine the historicity of the Gospels and Acts," 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

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[189] Craig L. Blomberg, "Matthew" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 8; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 80-81.

[190] Sean A. Adams and Seth M. Ehorn, eds., *Composite Citations in Antiquity* (2 vols.; LNTS 525; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

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 Scripture's 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, prepackaged, 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, "[N]o man ever did more to demonstrate how evangelical faith and total academic integrity may walk hand in hand."[191] 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 is 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. . . . [I]nspiration 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.[192]

[191] J. I. Packer wrote these words in the Foreword to F. F. Bruce, *In Retrospect: Remembrance of Things Past* (Nashville: Kingsley Books).

[192] F. F. Bruce, *In Retrospect: Autobiographical Remembrances* (Nashville: Kingsley Books, 2017), Kindle loc. 5090–102; originally published as F. F. Bruce, *In Retrospect: Remembrance of Things Past* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1980).

Ben Witherington similarly writes,

> [I]nspiration 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.[193]

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 in divinely-inspired Scripture looks like.

So, why is this important? While Moreland and Montgomery assert that the use of compositional devices "is wanting and 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, then 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. Licona. 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. . . . [Y]our 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. I'm not at all

[193] Ben Witherington III, *The Living Word of God: Rethinking the Theology of the Bible* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 60; cf. 72.

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 raise 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 then 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 race 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 him? 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 then pressed enter, comments that had strained and even destroyed some of your friendships, 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 and 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 with them 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 together with our questions, arm-in-arm, as brothers and sisters in Christ!

This concludes my response to Lydia McGrew's book. I have provided this response at your request. But as I stated in Part 1, I do not intend to participate in further discussions on the matter due to other priorities that require my attention. Thanks so much for reading this response!