

A Roundtable Discussion with Michael Licona on The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach

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STR: Dr. Licona, thank you for joining *Southeastern Theological Review* in this roundtable discussion. Your work has been praised by a number of scholars from a variety of quarters: evangelical to atheist and agnostic. But it remains to ask a really simple question: why did you write *The Resurrection of Jesus*? And secondly, for whom did you write it?

Licona: By nature, I'm a second-guesser. I don't like it but that's the way I'm wired. I question everything from whether I should have purchased a different bottle of cologne, bought a different car, married a different woman, or chosen a different worldview. Of course, the last is most important because if I make a mistake on that option, it may cost me eternity. This book is my journey. It's an investigation of the data as honestly as I was able in order to determine whether the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection is actually strong enough to conclude that it occurred using the same method properly employed by many professional historians outside the community of biblical scholars. I wanted to investigate the subject of Jesus' resurrection this way because I realized that in previous books I had made my case in order to prove the truth of Christianity rather than engage in an authentic examination of the data. I do not at all regard the former as inappropriate. But, as a second-guesser, it did not help me to know that was my motive for writing previous books. I embarked on my journey with the hopes of satisfying my questions and doubts. The book is a slightly revised version of my doctoral research and took a little over six years of research. I wrote it primarily for myself. I published it in order to strengthen the faith of believers, challenge non-believers to take an honest look at the data, and challenge the prevailing paradigm in the academy that miracle claims are beyond the purview of historical investigation.

STR: In your book, you demonstrate the plausibility of the resurrection of Jesus by virtue of a unique historiographical approach. Why did you do this, and what benefits emerge from this method?

Licona: I was unaware of any scholar who had subjected their hypothesis to a careful comparison with competing hypotheses using controlled historical method. Such a practice is foreign to the disciplines of biblical studies and theology and scholars in those disciplines rarely receive any training in this area. Just check the course catalogues of any university or seminary in their department of religion and count the number of courses offered students pertaining to the philosophy of history and historical method. It's very rare to find any. Yet, many graduates from these departments will refer to themselves as historians of Jesus without having engaged in any serious study in this area.

This can have tragic consequences. Imagine building a skyscraper without blueprints or running a water treatment facility without quality control procedures in place and you'll get an idea of what it's like to practice history without the use of a strictly controlled method. The historian J. H. Hexter wrote in his history primer, "Partly because writing bad history is pretty easy, writing very good history is rare."

When conducting authentic historical investigation, one cannot presuppose that the sources with which they are working are inerrant or divinely inspired. Otherwise, we would simply conclude everything reported in those sources is true and wrap up the investigation. A theologian can do that when studying Jesus. A historian does not have that luxury. Theology and history are different disciplines with different objectives and approaches. Now, I believe that everything in the Bible is true. But that's a statement of faith and has to be argued by reasons of a different sort. My objective in the book was to see what I could prove concerning Jesus' resurrection with reasonable and adequate historical certainty and apart from any faith commitment. This was extremely important to me as a second-guesser. The benefit to the Church is that this approach provides yet another tool for demonstrating the truth of the gospel, which Paul said is contingent on the historicity of Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor. 15:17)

STR: How does your book reinforce the reliability of the resurrection accounts in the Gospels?

Licona: Two ways immediately come to mind. First, since Jesus actually rose from the dead, we can know that He was far more than just a remarkable person. Therefore, we would expect that those who had walked with Him would continue to promote His teachings. As they began to die and to suspect that Jesus was probably not returning within their lifetimes, it is natural that they would desire to preserve His teachings in writing. A number of sources present themselves as candidates. But the canonical Gospels by far have the most respectable pedigree. Accordingly, the historicity of Jesus' resurrection is a fair starting point for showing, at minimum, that the canonical Gospels are probably trustworthy sources on Jesus. Gospel studies from experts such as Prof.

Blomberg make the case even stronger. His book *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* is a must read.

Second, I have based much of my historical case on the earliest knowable teachings on the subject: the teachings of Paul and the earlier *kerygma* preserved primarily in his undisputed letters. Over the years, many scholars have contended that Paul had a different view of the nature of Jesus' resurrection than the one presented by the Evangelists; that he believed Jesus was raised as an immaterial spirit whereas the Gospels report a bodily resurrection. If this hypothesis is true, then it could be that the resurrection narratives in the Gospels are creative products of the Evangelists as many skeptics have claimed. In my book, I addressed all of the major arguments offered to that end and demonstrate with historical certitude that Paul and the Jerusalem apostles understood the nature of Jesus' resurrection in a physical/bodily sense. This means that the earliest proclamation of Jesus' resurrection is completely compatible with the core components in the resurrection narratives. I believe this latter finding is one of the most important contributions of the book and gives us additional confidence in the historical reliability of the Gospels.

STR: Dr. Copan, you are a noted philosopher and apologist. In your view, has Dr. Licona argued his case well, and what is the apologetic value of this book?

Copan: Some of the book's endorsers have praised this landmark accomplishment as "the most thorough treatment on the resurrection and historiography to date" (Craig Keener), "an astonishing achievement" (Behan McCullagh), "a tour de force" (Daniel Wallace), "a necessary book" (Gerd Theissen)—to whose plaudits I add only "Yea" and "Amen." Licona's singular contribution to the literature on Jesus' resurrection is in his extensive engagement with professional historians, building his case for Jesus' death and resurrection using the very criteria to which they routinely appeal. Licona does not restrict his interaction to biblical scholars writing about biblical history—scholars who are often far more skeptical than professional historians and who, unlike most professional historians, are enamored of postmodern historical methodology. Licona writes with an eye to historical methodology and philosophy ("historiography"). In doing so, he is in a better position to assess the literature surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection by working with the solid historical bedrock of facts related to these events.

STR: Dr. Licona, in recent months, you have been challenged by other scholars – particularly Dr. Norman Geisler and Dr. Albert Mohler – on

your interpretation of Matthew 27:52-53, the passage referring to the raised saints.¹ What is your interpretation of this passage?

Licona: As I broadened my reading in the Greco-Roman and Jewish literature of the period, I began to observe numerous reports containing phenomena similar to what we find reported by Matthew at Jesus' death. The frequent mention of darkness, apparitions of the dead, the earth shaking, and celestial phenomena peaked my interest. I wondered whether these things reported by Virgil, Dio Cassius, and Josephus were all intended to be understood as events that had occurred in space-time. Or were they an ancient literary device—"special effects"—meant to accentuate an event of cosmic, even divine significance?² So, it appears that this ancient practice continues in some locations to this day.

Then I observed similar phenomena in Acts 2 when Peter addressed the crowd, saying the speaking in tongues they were witnessing was in fulfillment of Joel 2. He goes on to list other phenomena mentioned by Joel, including *wonders* in the sky involving the sun going dark, the moon turning to blood, and *signs* on the earth such as blood, fire, and smoke. Joel concludes by saying that in that day everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Peter then testifies how Jesus performed *wonders* and *signs* while among them. He rose from the dead and now they should call upon His name for salvation. Similar phenomenal language appears in Jesus' Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 where the sun and moon will go dark and the stars will fall out of the sky.

Many evangelical scholars interpret the celestial phenomena in Acts 2 and Matthew 24 as apocalyptic symbols with no corresponding literal events involving those celestial bodies. I became persuaded that the raised saints in Matthew 27 belonged to the same genre.

Since my book was published, I have found additional ancient reports that confirm this interpretation and others that cast doubt on it.³ Accordingly, I am presently undecided pertaining to how Matthew intended his readers to understand the saints raised at Jesus' death. More research needs to be conducted. It's a tough passage

¹ See the posts of Dr. Norman Geisler at: <http://www.normgeisler.com/articles/Licona/default.htm> . The post of Dr. Albert Mohler is found at: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2011/09/14/the-devil-is-in-the-details-biblical-inerrancy-and-the-licona-controversy>.

² It is of interest that when North Korea's leader Kim Jung-il recently died that a number of phenomena are reported to have occurred: A snowstorm hit as Kim died. Ice cracked on the volcanic Chon lake near his reported birthplace at Mount Paektu. When the snowstorm ended at dawn, a message carved in rock glowed brightly until sunset saying, "Mount Paektu, holy mountain of revolution. Kim Jong-il." Finally, on the day after his death, a Manchurian crane also adopted a posture of grief at a statue of Kim's father in the city of Hamhung (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16297811> [accessed December 22, 2011]).

³ Note my paper read at the 2011 annual meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society in San Francisco. A pdf and mp3 of this paper are available at www.risenjesus.com.

STR: Dr. Licona, is it not better to understand the description in Matt. 27:52-53 simply as a historical description of what happened at the moment of Jesus' death?

Licona: Not necessarily. The "better" way to understand Matthew's description of the raised saints is the way Matthew intended for them to be understood. If they are an apocalyptic symbol or poetic device, interpreting them in a literal-historical sense, that is, to "historicize" them, could lead one to misinterpret what Matthew was actually saying.

Literal interpretations can sometimes lead to tragic consequences. Did Jesus teach that His followers should actually pluck out their eyes if they're struggling with lust? The answer may seem clear to us now. However, there was a time in the early Church when its leaders had to speak against maiming oneself, since a number of believers had taken Jesus' words literally. Even the Church father Origen castrated himself as a result of his literal understanding of Matt. 19:12. Hermeneutical blunders can have tragic consequences!

Just three chapters prior to his mentioning of the raised saints, Matthew reports Jesus' teaching that the sun and moon will go dark and the stars will fall out of the sky when He returns. Are these meant to be understood as describing literal events or is Jesus using apocalyptic symbols to communicate that the coming events will have divine significance? Scholars differ in their opinions.

The bottom line is that most scholars who have spent an appreciable amount of time with Matt. 27:52-53 recognize that it's a difficult text. Since there are decent reasons for interpreting the raised saints as apocalyptic symbols, we ought to be slow to demand that one interpret them in a particular sense. The key question here pertains to how Matthew intended his readers to understand the raised saints. This must be thoroughly addressed prior to any charge that I have, or anyone holding a similar position has, "dehistoricized" them. For that charge presupposes that Matthew intended for them to be understood in a literal-historical sense

STR: Dr. Quarles, you in particular have addressed Licona's monograph in an extensive review in a recent edition of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.⁴ What are your reasons for disagreeing with Dr. Licona's interpretation of Matt. 27:52-53?

Quarles: The context of the passage suggests that Matthew intended his readers to understand these words as descriptions of actual occurrences. First, the phenomenon of the darkness mentioned in Matt. 27:45 seems

⁴ Charles L. Quarles, "Review of Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010)," *JETS* 54 (2011): 839-44.

intended to be interpreted literally. Dr. Licona acknowledged that the secular historian Thallus apparently confirmed the darkness. Furthermore, the author stated the hour that the darkness fell and the hour that the darkness lifted. The temporal indicators do not appear to be symbolic and give the impression that Matthew is describing an historical event.

Second, the rending of the veil is not Matthew's creation, but (assuming Markan priority) was derived from his written source, Mark. Although the descriptions of the other three phenomena in Matthew may allude to OT texts, no OT parallels to the rending of the veil exist and the only extrabiblical references to the rending of the veil (Gospel of Peter and Testament of Levi) postdate the Gospels. This makes it unlikely that the rending of the veil was a special effect inspired by OT references or current Jewish expectations and suggests that Matthew intended to portray the phenomenon as an historical event.

The literal nature of these portents prepares the reader to interpret the other portents literally as well. In the Greek text, vv. 51-53 form a single sentence in which the description of each portent is connected to the description of the previous portent by the Greek conjunction *kai*. Thus, the "special effects" interpretation requires a shift in genre from historical narrative to apocalyptic in the middle of a single sentence, then back to historical narrative in the next sentence. If a writer flows so quickly and freely from historical narrative to apocalyptic, one could hardly ever know the author's intention.

Third, although Matthew alludes to OT texts in his description, his last clause in the sentence, "and they appeared to many," has no OT parallel and strongly implies resurrected saints were actually seen by eyewitnesses. The closest parallel to this statement is the claim of Paul that many eyewitnesses saw Jesus after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:5-6).

Fourth, the statement in v. 54 confirms that the Roman centurion and other bystanders saw the earthquake and at least some of the other phenomena. It is difficult to see how the previously mentioned portents could be mere special effects without Matthew's claim that "they appeared to many" and "they saw the earthquake and the things that happened" turning into a deception. These evidences strongly imply that Matthew intended to communicate that the portents actually occurred.

STR: Dr. Blomberg, some evangelical NT scholars have held similar interpretations on Matthew 27:52-53 as does Licona, although many do not. In your view, is Dr. Licona's interpretation implausible, in terms of the intention of the Matthew?

Blomberg: First it's important to remember that Dr. Licona has clarified his position by stating that he is at least as convinced by the historical interpretation as by the one that takes it as an apocalyptic symbol. But I don't find the latter option at all implausible. That's not to say

that I'm confident it's the correct one, just that no one should excoriate a scholar who suggests it.

Authorial intent is tied closely to literary form. It is widely understood that one does not interpret a parable the way one interprets a historical narrative, or a proverb like an extended sermon, or apocalyptic the same as pure prophecy. As Dr. Licona has already highlighted in his book and in his on-line postings, there are numerous passages in Old Testament apocalyptic literature alone, to say nothing of later Second Temple Jewish literature, that bear certain striking similarities to the cosmic upheavals of Matt. 27:51-54. This does not prove that any or all of these verses are, in fact, apocalyptic symbols, but it certainly means scholars should have the academic freedom to explore the possibility without fear of losing their jobs or their reputations.

Dr. Geisler has argued on-line that he would be more open to the proposal if it involved a book that was not historical in genre overall (presumably, like Revelation). But apocalyptic is not just a genre, it is a literary form that is often interspersed within larger works of different genres. Daniel and Zechariah are prophetic overall but contain significant segments of apocalyptic. Matthew only a couple of chapters earlier included his account (the longest in any of the Gospels) of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse (chapters 24-25). So we should not at all be surprised if another, shorter apocalyptic section were to appear elsewhere in his book.

STR: Dr. Quarles, some have suggested that Dr. Licona's interpretation de-historicizes the account of the resurrection, which at best threatens or at worst invalidates the doctrine of inerrancy – a crucial evangelical tenet of faith. In your judgment, has Dr. Licona diverged from historicity of the account of the resurrection and diverged from the Chicago Statement and inerrancy? Why or why not?

Quarles: This is a difficult question to answer. The difficulty arises in part because it seems that Dr. Licona's position is evolving. Although the debate now seems to center on the legitimacy of the use of apocalyptic symbolism by Matthew, I do not recall him specifically stating that the text contained apocalyptic symbolism in *The Resurrection of Jesus*. Dr. Licona's original discussion involved discussions of "legend," "story embellishment," "special effects," and portrayal of the phenomena as "poetic devices." Some elements of the original discussion were alarming and, I fear, did have the potential to undermine a high view of Scripture. I am grateful that Dr. Licona had the humility to listen to the concerns of fellow inerrantists and to more carefully state his position.

I am confident that it is not Dr. Licona's intent to "dehistoricize" the account. His goal is to interpret this text responsibly in light of its literary form and author's purpose. I also suspect that his experience as a Christian apologist has confirmed that this text is a bit of a stumbling

block to many skeptics and that he desires to remove unnecessary barriers to acceptance of Jesus' resurrection. If he is mistaken about the form and purpose, and in this case I think that he is, he has proven his personal errancy, but not invalidated biblical inerrancy.

The most relevant section of the Chicago Statement regarding these issues is Article XVIII: "We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, taking account of its literary forms and devices, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture." (See also Articles 13-15 of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics) If Matt. 27:52-53 uses a literary form or device that is non-historical, interpreting it as historical would constitute a hermeneutical error contrary to the prescription of the Chicago Statement. If, on the other hand, the text uses a literary form or device that is intentionally historical, non-historical interpretation would constitute a hermeneutical error contrary to the prescription of the Chicago Statement.

Although I am confident that it is not Dr. Licona's *intent* to dehistoricize the account that would be the unintended *effect* of his interpretation, *if* his interpretation is incorrect. Dr. Licona seemed to acknowledge this earlier in the discussion here:

The key question here pertains to how Matthew intended his readers to understand the raised saints. This must be thoroughly addressed prior to any charge that I or anyone holding a similar position have "dehistoricized" them. For that charge presupposes that Matthew intended for them to be understood in a literal-historical sense.

Raymond Brown argued that interpreting this text literally involved "too facily historicizing the symbolism."⁵ On the other hand, if Matthew intended this text to be interpreted as literal history, any interpretation that denies the text is literal history necessarily dehistoricizes the Scripture. This is not to cast stones, it is simply to admit that, as Dr. Licona pointed out earlier "hermeneutic blunders can have tragic consequences." The misinterpretation of a text as important as the Bible can have rather grave consequences, even if it is not a direct denial of a carefully nuanced statement on biblical inerrancy.

STR: Dr. Licona, you have suggested that the objections of Drs. Mohler and Geisler really center upon a question of interpretation rather than inerrancy. Why do you say this?

Licona: There are two issues for consideration: Is the interpretation of Matthew's raised saints as apocalyptic symbols incompatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and is the interpretation correct? These are separate issues and should not be confused. J. I. Packer was one of the

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah, Volume 2* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1139.

framers of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, the Statement appealed to by Drs. Mohler and Geisler. Prof. Packer has opined that Gen. 1:1-2:4 is “prose poem” and a “quasi-liturgical celebration of the fact of creation [...] and certainly not a kind of naïve observational account of what we would have seen if we could have traveled back in time and hovered above the chaos and watched how things got sorted out during a hundred and forty-four hours of our time.”⁶ He adds that stories such as Eve’s being created from Adam’s side, of her encounter with the serpent, and of the tree of life are symbols and may not at all have been what we would have seen had we been there as observers.⁷ Many evangelicals will have problems with Prof. Packer’s interpretation of Genesis. But that’s a disagreement with his hermeneutics. It would be difficult to charge him with denying biblical inerrancy, since he was one of those who wrote the definition. Commenting on his symbolic interpretation of Genesis, Prof. Packer says, “What I’m trying to do as a theologian is to read my Bible in a way which receives the message that it intended to give me.”⁸

I took a similar approach when proposing that Matthew intended for his readers to understand the raised saints as apocalyptic symbols. I’m still open to interpreting the raised saints in a literal-historical sense and I’m hard-pressed to choose between the two at the moment. But I would only be denying the inerrancy of the text if I knew that Matthew meant for his readers to understand the raised saints in a literal-historical sense but was interpreting them as an apocalyptic symbol anyway. So, this is a matter of hermeneutics rather than inerrancy.

STR: Dr. Copan, how do you understand the issue? Does Dr. Licona’s interpretation of the raised saints in Matt. 27:52-53 violate the doctrine of inerrancy? Why or why not?

Copan: This debate is one of hermeneutics rather than inerrancy; I consider Licona’s apocalyptic view *consistent* with inerrancy. I’m glad, though, he dropped the term “legend,” which understandably raises red flags. That said, a good deal of confusion has been created because some of the “damning” quotations attributed to Licona by Geisler are actually citations from non-evangelical critics such as John Dominic Crossan.⁹

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See http://risenjesus.com/images/stories/mp3s/creation_evolution_problems%201.mp3. Packer’s comment that it is a “prose poem” begins 28:10 into the presentation. His other comment begins at 24:53.

⁷ Ibid., 40:30—49:24.

⁸ Ibid., 36:14.

⁹ See Max Andrews, “In Promptu Ponere—A Response to Norm Geisler’s Petition Against Mike Licona: “<http://sententias.org/2011/11/17/in-promptu-ponere-a-response-to-norm-geislars-petition-against-mike-licona/>.”

And when Geisler disapproves of Licona's use of the word "strange" for this text, why should this be a criticism? There are plenty of odd passages in Scripture.

I would take the *historical* interpretation on this passage. However, the passage does contain stock apocalyptic images—earthquake, tomb-opening, veil (the latter representing the heavenly firmament in Second Temple Judaism and Qumran). One reason for at least a *partly* apocalyptic reading is the well-recognized theological awkwardness created by tombs opening with saints being raised *before* Jesus—who is the resurrection's "first fruits" (1 Cor. 15:20). True, the saints enter Jerusalem *after* Jesus' resurrection, but the rapid succession of dramatic scenes on Good Friday suggests they are all triggered at the crucifixion event.

Given this theological awkwardness, various evangelical interpreters have deemed plausible the apocalyptic interpretation as highlighting the crucifixion's cosmic significance. Consider the words of the evangelical stalwart Michael Green:

Does Matthew mean us to take this literally? ... It is possible but unlikely ... After all, he says that these bodies of the saints went into the holy city *after* Jesus' resurrection. By that phrase he is guarding the primacy of the resurrection of Jesus, "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"; yet he presents us with these resuscitated bodies at the cross itself, long before the resurrection.¹⁰ If Matthew meant us to think of these people from a bygone age walking into Jerusalem that Friday evening, how would that accord with his plain insistence (especially [vv.] 40-50) that no compelling proofs of Jesus' deity were given at this time of his death any more than they were during his life? No, Matthew seems to be giving a profound meditation on what the crucifixion of Jesus means for the destiny of humankind. His death is an eschatological event; it is a foretaste of the age to come that has broken into this age.¹¹

We could likewise add other noted evangelical New Testament scholars who take such a view, including Ben Witherington,¹² Donald Hagner,¹³ and R.T. France.¹⁴

¹⁰ Leon Morris also acknowledges resurrection at the time of the crucifixion, not after Jesus' resurrection. See: Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 724-6.

¹¹ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (BST; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 302-3. Note that this series was edited by the late John Stott, a strong defender of the complete trustworthiness of the Scriptures.

¹² Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 522. In personal correspondence (email), Witherington says that, if historical, it's hard to see the point of this passage (October 19, 2011).

¹³ Donald A. Hagner says that this passage makes "little historical sense." See *Matthew 14-28* (WBC 33b; Nashville: Nelson, 2003), 850-52.

¹⁴ R.T. France states that Matthew tells for its "symbolic significance." *The Gospel According to Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1082.

Moreover, apocalyptic symbolism is in fact connected to historical events elsewhere in Matthew (chapter 24). We witness a string of *historical* predictions leading up to Jerusalem's AD 70 destruction—famines, earthquakes, wars, the gospel's proclamation throughout the Roman Empire, messianic pretenders, persecution. Then, *bam!*—we have the clearly *apocalyptic* symbolism of the sun and moon going dark. Such stock apocalyptic imagery in the Old Testament denotes earth-shattering national disasters of “cosmic” proportions for Edom, Egypt, Babylon, and other nations. The sun wasn't *literally* darkened when these ancient Near Eastern nations were destroyed—nor with Jerusalem's later demise in AD 70.

Licona's measured work has been unfairly compared to Robert Gundry's. Ironically, the careful New Testament scholar Douglas Moo both strongly disagreed with Gundry in dialogue in the *Journal for the Evangelical Theological Society* and considers Licona's view consistent with inerrancy. Former ETS president and—carefully note—*historian* Edwin Yamauchi as well as other CSBI signatories with whom I've interacted don't see Licona's view to be in conflict with inerrancy. And I wonder why other prominent evangelicals holding Licona's earlier-held apocalyptic view haven't been so targeted.

In closing, I cite another ICBI signatory, the New Testament scholar Eckhard Schnabel:

This is a notoriously difficult passage: Matthew appears to be narrating an historical event, but clearly does not address the (equally historical!) issues that result from such an interpretation. This is certainly not a matter of orthodoxy—a commitment which should not be tied to the interpretation of difficult passages but, fundamentally, to Jesus' death and resurrection.¹⁵

STR: Dr. Blomberg, in your view, does Dr. Licona's interpretation of the raised saints in Matt. 27:52-53 violate the doctrine of inerrancy? Why or why not?

Blomberg: It most certainly does not violate the doctrine of inerrancy, at least not as conceived by the widely used Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. Article XIII of that document explicitly declares, “We deny that it is proper to evaluate Scripture according to standards of truth and error that are alien to its usage or purpose.” If a scholar makes a proposal that a certain text of Scripture falls into a certain literary form or genre, understands the truth claims made by that genre, and believes and fully submits himself or herself to those truths, inerrancy is being upheld.

For example, although virtually every scholar I've ever read agrees that Luke 16:19-31 is a parable, I can count on students or laypeople

¹⁵ Personal correspondence (email), October 8, 2011.

everywhere I teach asking me, “What about the view that sees this as a real story about a beggar named Lazarus and a rich man?” There is absolutely nothing in the text that calls this passage a parable or conclusively proves that it is one. But no one accuses me of violating inerrancy, and I explain why even conservative evangelical scholarship is virtually unanimous that it is a parable, and that there are important theological lessons to be learned from the text, whether or not these two characters ever existed.

If people are unpersuaded by the case for Matt. 27:52-53 as an apocalyptic symbol, let them demonstrate *exegetically* why they would exclude this option and then let others judge as to who has made the better case. Those who bypass this process make it *appear* as if they know they cannot make a better case, but because they disapprove of the conclusion they simply want to censor it. Meanwhile, *they* are the ones who are violating the Chicago Statement, not those like Dr. Licona

STR: Dr. Quarles, what are some objections to the responses offered up to this point?

Quarles: In the Round Table discussion thus far, scholars have referred to Matt. 27:52-53 both as containing apocalyptic imagery and as “special effects” as if the two were equivalent. I think that the two are quite distinct. In the context of this discussion, “special effects” appears to refer to an ancient literary device in which an author described portents accompanying the death of an important individual which he did not intend to be understood as events that occurred in space-time. No compelling case for the existence of this “ancient practice” has yet been made. Although the present discussion appeals to descriptions of portents in the writings of Josephus as a possible example, *The Resurrection of Jesus* admitted that “Josephus reports that even the strangest of these actually happened” (p. 550). Josephus’ testimony is corroborated by Tacitus. That Josephus intended to portray the portents as actual historical events seems clear from his statement: “a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared: I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those who saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals” (Jewish War 6:297-298).

The *Resurrection of Jesus* mentioned Lucian’s imaginative creation of portents accompanying the death of Proteus. However, this is clearly not an example of an ancient practice in which writers described phenomena but did not intend them to be understood as actual historical events. Lucian’s embellishments were designed to deceive “dullards” to give him a laugh at their gullibility. When speaking to “men of taste,” who might have had the sophistication to recognize a literary device such as “special effects” if such a device existed, Lucian told the facts “without embellishment.”

The appeal to claims of portents at the time of the death of Kim Jung-Il is not really helpful either. The BBC article made no suggestion that the portents were widely recognized by the people of North Korea as a mere literary device. On the contrary, the article implies that the reports were generated by the state-run news agency as propaganda supporting veneration of the leader and noted that “an elaborate personality cult, involving multiple stories of alleged miracles or astonishing deeds, has been built up around him.”

An argument for classifying the portents of Matt. 27:52-53 as “special effects” is premature until one first demonstrates that writers who described such portents 1) did not intend to portray the portents as actual historical events observed by eyewitnesses (unlike Josephus) and 2) had no intention to deceive their audiences (unlike Lucian, and apparently, the North Korean News agency).

STR: Dr. Kruger, do you read the entirety of Matthew 27 as a historical description, including the passage on the raised saints? If so, then why do you do so?

Kruger: Let me begin by saying, along with the other scholars here, that I very much appreciate Mike Licona’s new book on the resurrection. It will no doubt prove to be a fundamental resource for defending the historicity of that event from the challenges of critical scholars. However, we do have a disagreement when it comes to how to understand the descriptions of Matt. 27:52-53. I take this portion of the text as straightforward historical narrative. There are many reasons I am not persuaded that these verses are non-historical apocalyptic symbolism, but let me just focus on a primary one: *all of these events described at the death of Jesus were seen (or could be seen) visually by eyewitnesses.*

The earthquake is a key example. In the above discussion, Licona appeals to how earthquakes are used in Greco-Roman literature to provide “special effects” around important events (even though they didn’t really happen). The problem, however, is that Matt. 27:54 plainly states, “The centurion [...] *saw the earthquake and what took place.*” Unless we want to suggest the centurion is himself symbolic, then we must regard the earthquake as something that really happened. No doubt the darkness in the sky was also something witnessed by bystanders because Matthew tells us the actual hours it lasted (from the sixth to the ninth). And certainly we have good reasons to think the temple veil was actually torn in two. This account is included in all three Synoptics and we are told specifically that the veil was torn “from top to bottom” (although scholars debate whether the tearing was seen the moment it happened, depending on the location of the crucifixion).

If so, then the only remaining event that could possibly qualify as apocalyptic symbolism is the raising of the saints. But, if all the surrounding events, which are also supposedly apocalyptic symbolism, ac-

tually happened, then why would we think differently of this one? If the other “cosmic” events really took place, then what grounds do we have for taking this single event as symbolic? I would suggest we would need a very compelling exegetical reason to do so. However, not only does the text provide no such reason, it actually provides reasons to think it is historical. First, just like the other events, the raising of these saints is something observed by eyewitnesses: “they went into the holy city and appeared to many.” Indeed, authors often appeal to eyewitnesses for the very purpose of proving that the events they are describing *actually happened* (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:6). The implications of this verse, therefore, run in the opposite direction of the symbolic view—it implies that people in Jerusalem really saw these saints.¹⁶ Second, scholars have argued that Matthew likely presents the earthquake as the *cause* for the temple veil being torn, the rocks being split, and the tombs being opened.¹⁷ Thus, if the earthquake really happened, then these other events must have really happened.

Even though Licona says he is “undecided” about which direction to take this passage, he defends the possibility of the symbolic view by drawing comparisons between Matt. 27:51-54 and the apocalyptic imagery in Matthew 24. However, the nature of these two passages is very different. Most notably, Matthew 24 is the *teaching of Jesus about the future*, whereas Matthew 27 is the *description of the narrator/author about the past*. If apocalyptic portions were to be inserted into a book that is primarily historical narrative (which certainly can happen), we would expect it to be done more often in the former manner and less often in the latter.

STR: Dr. Kruger, in your view, does Dr. Licona’s interpretation of the raised saints in Matt. 27:52-53 violate the doctrine of inerrancy? Why or why not?

Kruger: No, I do not think that Licona’s view would constitute a violation of inerrancy. In essence, the doctrine of inerrancy teaches that *whatever Scripture affirms* is true. But, this doctrine, in and of itself, does not answer the question of what Scripture affirms. Does Genesis affirm six 24-hour days? Some say yes, others say no. But, this is an interpretive issue; not an inerrancy issue. Inerrancy is violated if a person acknowledges that Scripture affirms something, and then also acknowledges that the thing it affirms is false. And Licona has not done this. However, when we evaluate a certain position, we should do more than answer the

¹⁶ As a side note, there is no indication that these saints had experienced the final resurrection and received new, imperishable bodies. Rather, these raisings were probably very similar to that of Lazarus (who would eventually die again).

¹⁷ E.g., R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1083.

narrow question of whether it violates inerrancy. Inerrancy is not the only critical issue we should consider. A view can have other problems—or could lead to other problems—even if it is not a violation of this important doctrine. My concern about Licona’s position falls into this camp. Personally, I think the evidence for taking Matt. 27:52-53 as non-historical and symbolic is pretty thin. And when the basis for a certain interpretation is that thin, it raises concerns about whether the same hermeneutical method could possibly be employed when we are faced with other passages that prove to be problematic or embarrassing. In fact, I think this is probably the main issue that has been driving this whole controversy (even though some have tried to make it about inerrancy). Of course, I am not suggesting Licona is trying to avoid difficult passages or that he is motivated by such things. Rather I am simply trying to put my finger what I believe is the real issue for myself and for many others.

STR: Dr. Licona, in light of Dr. Quarles’ and Dr. Kruger’s objections and analysis offered here, is it not apparent that your approach to the question the raised saints de-historicizes the account of Matthew?

Licona: I don’t believe so. Drs. Quarles and Kruger provide two primary reasons for holding that Matthew intended for his readers to interpret the raised saints in a historical sense. Their first reason is that this text forms one long sentence in Greek and that what I proposed requires a shift in genre twice within the same sentence. I agree. But this is precisely what we may observe going on elsewhere. Acts 2:17-21 forms one long sentence and includes details that are both historical and apocalyptic.¹⁸ Peter suggests in vv. 22-24 that the signs and wonders described in 19 as blood, fire and smoke had already taken place among them in Jesus’ miracles, exorcisms, and resurrection. The sun going dark and moon turning into blood may also refer to the same events, since Peter says whoever calls on the name of the Lord in that day will be saved. In vv. 22-39, Peter encourages his audience members to do just that, suggesting he believed that day had come.

Although not in a single sentence, we see a possible shift in genre twice within Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:4-31). Kruger answers that Matthew 24 and 27 are different, since the former speaks of the future whereas the latter about the past. However, he has not shown how this difference is important. And the same cannot be said of the phenomena in Acts 2 that Peter speaks of as having occurred in that time.

¹⁸ Quarles notes that the Greek conjunction *kai* appears six consecutive times in one long sentence in Matt. 27:51-52. In Acts 2:17-21, *kai* appears eight consecutive times in one long sentence.

In Matt. 5:28, Jesus teaches about lust and adultery. In the very next verse, he teaches that if your eye causes you to sin (i.e., to lust), pluck it out. For it is better to lose a body part than for your entire body to be cast into hell. Everything in the immediate context of v. 29 is understood literally. And there is no indication in the text itself that leads us to believe Jesus meant for His readers to understand v. 29 in anything other than a literal sense. Yet, there are no reports of Jesus' disciples gouging out their eyes. The appearance of a similar statement by Seneca informs us this was a figure of speech.¹⁹

The Greco-Roman literature contains numerous examples of historical and non-historical details being comingled.²⁰ One example is found in reports concerning the death of Julius Caesar in which as many as sixteen phenomena are reported to have occurred, including a comet and an eclipse of the sun.²¹ We know that a comet appeared a few months after Caesar's assassination because we have corroborating reports from the Chinese.²² It also appears very likely that Mt. Etna erupted around that time and may have been responsible for the darkness, although a year is unlikely. However, we also know that no visible eclipses were viewable from within the Roman Empire in 44 BC.²³

The second reason offered by Quarles and Kruger that Matthew's intent was to communicate historical details when reporting the raised saints is the presence of two elements that suggest eyewitness testimony: the statement "and they appeared to many"²⁴ and Matthew's statement that the Roman centurion and other bystanders saw the earthquake and at least some of the other phenomena. However, similar statements of appearances exist in the Greco-Roman literature of the period that we should probably regard as poetic or 'special effects.' When reporting the assassination of Julius Caesar, Plutarch writes that a phantom *appeared* to one of Caesar's assassins (Caesar 69.4) while Virgil reports that pale phantoms *were seen* at dusk (*The Georgics*, Georgic 1.466ff.). When report-

¹⁹ Sen. *Ep. Lucil.* 51.13.

²⁰ For a number of these, see my paper read at the 2011 annual conference of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, "When the Saints Go Marching In." A pdf and mp3 of this paper are available at www.risenjesus.com. See also Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 548-50.

²¹ Pliny the Elder reports an unusually long eclipse of the sun (*Natural History*, 2.30). Josephus, Plutarch, and Virgil report that the sun faded, turned away its light, and prolonged darkness. They do not describe this specifically as an eclipse and the darkness could have resulted from the eruption of Mt. Etna if that actually occurred.

²² See John T. Ramsey, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Greco-Roman Comets from 500 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Syllecta Classica, XVII; Iowa City, Iowa: The University of Iowa, 2006), 106-24.

²³ See the NASA eclipse web site: <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEcat5/SE-0099-0000.html>

²⁴ Quarles adds there are no OT parallels. However, see Ezek. 37:12-14; Isa. 26:19.

ing Caesar's enslavement of Egypt, Dio Cassius reports that apparitions *were seen* (*Roman History* 51.17.4-5) while Lukan says spirits walked the earth (*Civil War* 1.523-2.1). An appearance of spirits is only one of several phenomena reported to have occurred during these events.

The phenomena witnessed by the centurion and bystanders may only have been the darkness, the earthquake, the rocks splitting and the tombs opening. They would not have seen the temple veil tear in two. And they may not have seen the raised saints, since they did not walk in Jerusalem and appear to others until after Jesus' resurrection.

In the end, even if we understand the darkness, earthquake, and the tearing of the temple veil as historical, there is nothing to prevent Matthew from mixing non-historical details with historical ones. That we observe this practice occurring in both biblical and Greco-Roman literature of his time ought to leave us open to the possibility that Matthew is doing that here

STR: Dr. Akin, in your view, what is at stake in this discussion?

Akin: All of the other contributors have taken what I would call a "ground level" view of things. Let me move up and give a "bird's eye" perspective that also takes into account the responsibilities of a college and seminary president, as well as someone who is concerned about how evangelicals handle matters like this.

First, I am grieved at how all of this unfolded with Drs. Geisler and Licona. This issue, concern, debate or whatever we call it could have been handled better by all parties involved. This is unfortunate as participants have dug in their heels and talked at one another more than with one another. Christian brothers should be better than this.

Second, I am saddened that a superb work, in so many ways, on the resurrection is now tainted and the stain may never be removed. *The Resurrection of Jesus* should have been received as a landmark defense of the empty tomb and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Unfortunately, I doubt that will now be the case.

Third, though I agree this is first a matter of hermeneutics, I also believe it is more than just a matter of hermeneutics. Though the issues of biblical inspiration and biblical hermeneutics are separate categories, they are clearly related. The tragic fact is one can become so adept at "hermeneutical gymnastics" that they can wittingly or unwittingly compromise a high view of the Bible's inspiration. Do I think Dr. Licona intended to do that with his interpretation of Matt. 27:51-54? No, I do not. Do I think he runs a very real risk of doing so anyway with his view of the text as "special effects," "legend," "story embellishment," and "poetic devices?" Yes I do. Why? First, these literary categories are foreign to the Scriptures. Second, there is nothing in the text that would lead us to de-historicize it. Particularly important is the near proximity of the resurrection passage in Matthew 28! In my judgment this is a death-knell

to Dr. Licona's position and raises the stakes to a crucially high level. If you de-historicize one resurrection what keeps you from de-historicizing the other?!

STR: Dr. Copan, in your view, what is at stake in this discussion?

Copan: In terms of how we engage over these disagreements, one thing at stake is the gospel's reputation. James 1:19 exhorts us to be "quick to listen" and "slow to speak." Unfortunately, some evangelicals have the reputation of being "quick to speak" and "slow to listen"! These have a tendency to swiftly condemn, censure, and bully; they bypass gracious, patient engagement, and this results in division, hurt, and damage to the cause of Christ. Former Evangelical Theological Society president Darrell Bock has rightly urged evangelicals to do better in this regard, and this present forum exemplifies the kind of gracious exchange he exhorts us to pursue.²⁵

Another matter at stake is the question of historicity, and Licona's shift away from "legend" language in favor of "apocalyptic," "symbolic" and "figurative" is a welcome change. The fact that we are having this discussion highlights the importance of the Bible's historicity, which is foundational to our faith (1 Cor. 15:17)—a point Licona takes very seriously in his defense of Jesus' resurrection. Clearly, Licona does not deny the historicity of an event in Scripture if he thinks the biblical author affirms it.

Yet discerning what is historical and what is figurative can get tricky in certain places. Genre issues do present a challenge here and there, and we should acknowledge that at certain points there will be honest disagreements between evangelicals equally committed to the Bible's historicity. So, for instance, when it comes to the Genesis "days" controversy, I think it unfair that certain young-earth creationists, insisting on a "literal" or "historical" understanding of Genesis 1, accuse old-earth evangelicals of denying inerrancy or being hermeneutically inconsistent.

In the case of Matt. 27:52-53, as I have noted above, a good case can be made for a mix of history and apocalyptic, though I lean toward the historical. It is precisely because of a certain theological inelegance and a seeming conflict with other relevant biblical texts (e.g., Christ being "the first fruits of those who are asleep" [1 Cor. 15:20]) that has led some prominent evangelical interpreters to offer an apocalyptic rendering of the raised saints.

Perhaps another parallel would help. In light of my book *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Baker), some (thankfully friendly!) evangelicals have

²⁵ Darrell Bock, *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

raised the question about my views of “literal history” in certain Old Testament narratives. I, along with other evangelical scholars like Christopher Wright, Kenneth Kitchen, and Tremper Longman, have interpreted as hyperbolic Canaanite “annihilation” passages (“utterly destroy,” “leave alive nothing that breathes,” “no survivor was left”)—a common feature in ancient Near Eastern war texts.²⁶ Yet one important factor leading me to this conclusion of hyperbole is that the Scriptures *elsewhere* (e.g., Josh. 23:12; Judges 1-2; et al.) affirm there were many Canaanite survivors. We have here, not the *apocalyptic*, but the *hyperbolic* incorporated into historical narrative. We’re told by the biblical authors that both (a) no survivors and (b) survivors are found in these historical narratives—which is an excellent reason not to interpret both statements literally!²⁷ Furthermore, historical texts that refer to “driving out” or “dispossessing” the Canaanites would be in conflict with purported “obliteration” texts, if the latter be taken literally.²⁸

So some ask, “Well then, what’s the precise line between the literal/historical and the hyperbolic in Scripture?” I urge them, “Let’s keep reading and comparing the relevant biblical texts—along with vital background information—in order to more accurately interpret and discern what is going on in these texts.”

STR: Dr. Quarles, in your view, what is at stake in this discussion?

Quarles: I fear that more is at stake than we would like to admit. Of course I agree with Dr. Blomberg that Scripture must be interpreted according to its genre and that disputes about the genre of a particular passage do not necessarily threaten biblical inerrancy. On the other hand, certain classifications of the genre of biblical texts are precluded *a priori* by those who affirm biblical inerrancy. For example, Dr. Licona entertained the possibility that the resurrection narratives “could possibly be mixed with legend” and listed Matt. 27:51-54 as a potential example of such legend. Had he concluded that the NT contained legend, I would adamantly object to that classification and regard it as a serious denial of biblical inerrancy. Dr. Copan acknowledged that this discussion “raised red flags.”

Some scholars on both sides of this debate have compared the current controversy to the controversy over midrash criticism in the ETS in the 1980’s. Whether this comparison is fair depends on whether the cur-

²⁶ For examples, see Kenneth Kitchen’s *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 173-4.

²⁷ Thus, Joshua’s carrying out “all that Moses commanded” should not be interpreted that he literally left “alive nothing that breathes.” Also, we have indications that “utterly destroy/utter destruction” need not be understood literally (cp. Isa. 43:28; Jer. 25:11).

²⁸ Adam and Eve as well as Cain were “driven out” by God, and David was “driven out” by King Saul—and they survived!

rent debate focuses on the possible presence of apocalyptic imagery or categories such as legend and “special effects.” Biblical inerrancy *was* at stake in the debate over midrash criticism. The midrash critics incorrectly defined “midrash” as a “theological tale” in which authors invented complete narratives about Jesus by weaving together motifs from the OT. Various scholars labeled large sections of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as midrash and raised serious challenges to nearly the entire historical foundation of the Christian faith. Although some argued and continue to argue that the debate was merely over hermeneutics, I strongly disagree. “Midrash,” as it was defined by the midrash critics, was the equivalent of “Jewish myth.”²⁹ The apostle Paul spoke rather clearly about how the church was to treat works of this genre: “So, rebuke them sharply that they may be sound in the faith and *may not pay attention to Jewish myths* and the commandments of men who reject the truth” (Titus 1:13-14).

Certainly one must interpret Scripture according to its genre and form. However, this does not mean that biblical inerrantists may classify Scripture as belonging to any and every genre. If someone were to posit that a biblical text belonged to a genre labeled “yarn spinning” defined as “deception within bounds generally acceptable and considered humorous in the first-century Mediterranean world,” most readers would recognize that such a classification was unacceptable given biblical standards for honesty and integrity. Similarly since clear statements of Scripture urge Christians to reject certain genres like myth (1 Tim. 4:7), classification of Holy Scripture or portions of it as “myth,” “legend,” “midrash” (as improperly defined by midrash critics) and the like is unacceptable.

On the other hand, “apocalyptic” is a genre widely recognized by conservative scholars much like poem or parable. Thus, I do not regard classification of a particular text as apocalyptic as an automatic and direct denial of biblical inerrancy. However, given the fact that scholars have redefined seeming harmless terms like “midrash” as the equivalent of Jewish myth, we must be alert to the dangers posed by appeals to particular genres that are not clearly defined and indicated by objective textual features. Just as our Lord taught us to beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing, the history of biblical interpretation warns us to beware of legend in apocalyptic clothing.

STR: Dr. Licona, in your view, what is at stake in this discussion?

Licona: In short, our academic integrity and our testimony to everyone outside the Southern Baptist Convention. I’ve been very disappointed to

²⁹ C.L. Quarles, “Midrash as Creative Historiography: The Portrait of a Misnomer,” *JETS* 39 (1996): 457-64.

see the actions of some evangelicals since this ordeal began last August. My leaving the North American Mission Board and Southern Evangelical Seminary were both on very amicable terms and yet the rumors circulated and were defended that I was fired from both, which are simply not true. In addition, calls were made behind the scenes to prevent me from earning an income elsewhere. Some SBC professors were harassed for taking the position that interpreting Matthew's raised saints in a non-historical manner is compatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Others were uninvited from established speaking engagements to being dismissed from their teaching position. And all of this occurred prior to any academic discussion on the subject. This communicates that academic discussion is not valued in some corners of the evangelical world and the Southern Baptist Convention. And it communicates to emerging evangelical scholars that they must "toe the line" proposed by a few influential leaders or you will be marginalized. This will thwart some future advances in evangelical scholarship, since scholars will fear proposing anything that may rock the boat. The SBC is a fine denomination. I hope that it will learn and grow from this controversy.

I don't agree with Dr. Akin that if you dehistoricize the resurrection of Matthew's saints there is nothing to keep you from dehistoricizing Jesus' resurrection. On pp. 553 and 400-37 of my book I have provided several reasons why dehistoricizing one on the basis of the other is an illegitimate move. Moreover, there is very strong historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

STR: Dr. Akin, what is necessary to move this discussion forward constructively?

Akin: How do we move forward? I believe forums like this is one avenue. It has allowed for gracious and respectful dialogue between brothers in Christ who love the Lord Jesus, the Word of God and the gospel. This is a model for how issues like this should be addressed.

Having said this, it is my earnest and sincere prayer that in the days ahead Dr. Licona will go back and seriously revisit his position of Matthew 27. I would hope that he would come to see that the text should be interpreted *historically* as Dr. Quarles excellent analysis has demonstrated.

Personally, I have found Dr. Quarles critique to be devastating to Dr. Licona's position. Dr. Licona's historiographic approach is to be applauded. The same cannot be said for his exegesis of the text in the context of 2nd Temple Judaism and the Jewish Scriptures which shaped and formed Israel's worldview and thinking.

Then, I would like to see Dr. Licona publicly acknowledge the change in his position, and to correct his view in future editions of *The Resurrection of Jesus*. Such a move will not be easy on his part I am sure. It will require grace and humility, two Christian character traits often ab-

sent in the academic world. However, it has the potential for great fruitfulness and blessing to the Church of the Lord Jesus.

STR: Dr. Licona, what is necessary to move this discussion forward constructively?

Licona: I think what *STR* has done in hosting this roundtable discussion is precisely what needed to be done. The participants in this discussion have demonstrated that Christian brothers can disagree and still live in community. That's biblical and refreshing.

But, outside of this roundtable discussion, this controversy has revealed an ugly side to the evangelical world. Publishing a barrage of Open Letters on the Internet, intentionally misrepresenting the views of another, circulating petitions and working behind the scenes to intimidate and marginalize those with whom one disagrees while refusing to engage in academic discussions on the disputed matter is both unprofessional and unchristian behavior. Others are watching us and this has hurt the cause of Christ where love and unity in the Body of Christ should always take precedence over theological differences in the non-essentials, such as whether Matthew even intended for the raised saints to be understood literally. Because evangelicals have deep theological convictions, we need to come up with a standard protocol for dealing with theological disagreements. Matthew 18 does not apply, since it is not a sin to have a different interpretation of the text. Standard protocol would include classroom discussions, academic roundtable discussions, papers read at academic conferences, and critical dialogue occurring in peer-reviewed journals. Hopefully, the next time interpretive disagreements arise, requiring established protocol to be followed will result in curbing and perhaps even avoiding the sort of missteps we have witnessed during this controversy.

STR: Dr. Blomberg, what is necessary to move this discussion forward constructively?

Blomberg: First, Drs. Geisler and Mohler need to apologize in the same public forums in which they censured Dr. Licona, for having been inappropriately harsh and unnecessarily simplistic in their analyses. Second, all the Christian leaders who worked behind the scenes to get Dr. Licona removed from various positions, including already extended speaking invitations, likewise need to publicly seek Dr. Licona's forgiveness. Then, if he wishes to remain within the SBC, a courageous SBC institution of at least comparable prestige to those that let him go needs to hire him.

Second, forums precisely like this one need to continue, so that scholars can weigh the "point and counterpoint" and arguments at some length before coming to conclusions, especially those they will promote dogmatically.

Third, interested parties should read Robert Gundry's preface and theological postscript to the second edition of his Matthew commentary to learn how he argued that his view was compatible with inerrancy and then read D.A. Carson's review article of Gundry in *Trinity Journal* to see why Carson *agreed* even while remaining profoundly unconvinced by Gundry's exegesis.³⁰ My own views match Carson's. The vote to ask Gundry to resign from the ETS might well not have carried had Dr. Geisler not orchestrated a campaign to bring in large numbers of like-minded members simply for the business meeting who had not otherwise been present at the conference.

Finally, the conversation really needs to take inerrancy off the table. Dr. Licona has never suggested that Matthew employed an intentionally deceptive genre in Matt. 27:51-53. Apart from this one qualifier, all genres remain open in principle, *including* myth and legend.³¹ Fictitious stories *can* teach theological truth. Not one of the five New Testament texts that uses $\mu\hat{\upsilon}\theta\omicron\varsigma$ says anything about the entirety of Scripture.

STR: Dr. Kruger, what is necessary to move this discussion forward constructively?

Kruger: In order for the discussion to move forward, three things must happen: (a) Our thinking about scriptural authority needs to be bigger than the doctrine of inerrancy. The doctrine of inerrancy is a critical piece of the puzzle and should be vigorously defended and affirmed. But, it cannot protect us from every sort of scriptural problem. A person's view of Scripture is not necessarily healthy just because they affirm this doctrine—they can still have other serious issues. If we forget this, we will find ourselves guarding only the front door while intruders continue to slip in easily through the back. (b) At the same time, we probably need to develop more clarity about different ways in which the doctrine of inerrancy can be violated. When does an appeal to genre protect someone from charges of violating inerrancy, and when does it not? Clearly there are some instances where the Scriptures so plainly teach that an event occurred that if someone denies the occurrence of that event, regardless of an appeal to genre, they would still be violating inerrancy. But how do we determine which passages these are? (c) We need to do more work on the question of how historical books (like the Gospels) employ apocalyptic/symbolic elements. We know it happens (e.g., Matthew 24) but more work is needed on the pattern and frequency of its occurrence. What features have to be present for us to realize this is

³⁰ Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (second edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); D. A. Carson, "Gundry on Matthew: A Critical Review," *Trinity Journal* 3(1982): 71-91.

³¹ For details see: C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Fount, 1974).

happening? And how objective are these features? Thus, the issue is not just about genre; but specifically about how genres are *mixed together*.

STR: Dr. Quarles, what is necessary to move this discussion forward constructively?

Quarles: The entire debate hinges on Matthew's purpose. I think that the internal evidence of Matthew's Gospel points to a historical purpose for these verses. My concerns about Dr. Licona's position at this point mainly relate to methodology and the potential consequences of others applying his methodology. We need much more discussion about the nature of apocalyptic elements and objective features of texts that help one identify them as apocalyptic. Without a clear method for identifying apocalyptic features that has appropriate safeguards, many important historical texts could be dehistoricized, including accounts of critical events of Jesus' life and ministry.

If terms like "special effects" continue to be used, scholars must clearly define the term. "Special effects" could be defined in a number of different ways and some definitions would be incompatible with biblical inerrancy. For example, "special effects" can refer to cinematographic techniques used to create the illusion that a phenomenon which was only imaginary actually occurred. One could foresee the possibility that accounts of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels might be classified as "special effects."

Once a clear definition of "special effects" is offered, scholars must identify clear examples of this literary device in ancient literature, preferably Jewish literature of the Second Temple period. Scholars must also determine if current assumptions about the non-historical intent of ancient writers who described portents involve imposing a 21st century Western worldview on these writers.

STR: At this time, it is appropriate to provide space for concluding thoughts. To each of the contributors on the panel, STR would like to thank you for your participation on this important and stimulating roundtable devoted to Dr. Licona's work. In conclusion, how would each of you characterize what needs to be heard in this discussion?

Quarles: Although I have explored other interpretive options with an open mind, I remain convinced that Matt. 27:52-53 is historical narrative. Although the interaction in this forum has been extensive, I find myself wishing for more. I hope that discussion will continue for months to come.

I would like to thank Mike Licona for his friendship. Even before this forum, he privately invited my critique and continued to relate to me graciously and respectfully even when I disagreed with his interpretation of the raising of the saints. Due to the purpose of this forum, I have not enumerated the many contributions that Dr. Licona's work has

made. I urge readers to consult my review in *JETS* for my general assessment of his book.

I would like to express appreciation to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary for the invitation to interact with other respected scholars on a matter of such importance. I would also like to thank my brothers for their obvious desire to speak candidly but kindly. The same God-breathed Word that contains Matt. 27:52-53 also contains 2 Tim. 2:24: “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.” I pray we will all strive for this ideal. Surely, this ideal challenges all of us to pursue greater conformity to the character of Christ and to crave a greater measure of his grace.

Copan: First, this kind of gracious, constructive discussion between evangelical scholars is how things ought to be done. I’m grateful to the *STR* editor for encouraging it. Second, I commend Mike Licona for his humility and graciousness throughout this controversy, even adjusting his view in light of persuasive reasons presented. Third, evangelical institutions should be careful not to prematurely circle their theological wagons on this and similar issues, censoring any who disagree. I’ve spoken to faculty at such institutions about this raised-saints controversy, and, because they fear for their jobs, they are cowed into silence, and scholarly discussion and research are stifled. Finally, this conversation has been helpful to me personally. Though I myself have taken an historical approach to Mat. 27:52-53, I have come to see that a strong argument can be made for including some apocalyptic aspects into an overall historical narrative—a perspective justified by the theological awkwardness presented by a strictly historical view in light of 1 Cor. 15:20.

Kruger: In sum, Licona has given us a wonderful book on the resurrection, and, in my opinion, has not violated the doctrine of inerrancy in his view of Matt. 27:52-53. As discussed above, this proves to be more of a debate over the *intent* of Matthew’s gospel rather than the *truth* of Matthew’s gospel.

However, I think there are still concerns about Licona’s approach to this passage. Given that this passage occurs within a book that is undoubtedly historical narrative, there should be clear and substantial reasons to take it as symbolic and figurative. We have such reasons in Matthew 24. But, I think they are lacking in Matthew 27. It is one thing to find apocalyptic elements on the lips of Jesus when he is speaking about the future, it is another to find them coming from the narrator/author when he is describing the past. To suggest a passage is symbolic without sufficient reasons is to run the risk of setting a hermeneutical precedent that may lead to other problems in the future. It is my hope that this roundtable discussion will generate further reflection on these important

issues so we will know how to address them more fruitfully when they come up again.

Blomberg: I am active in a young urban congregation that attracts a lot of people, including unbelievers and former believers, who have been deeply wounded by Christians. One of several recurring themes in their stories is the censorship they received from very conservative churches and schools when they proposed beliefs or behaviors they thought consonant with Scripture but others in positions of power did not. I wrote an article ten years ago for *JETS* during the open theism debate highlighting how the NT depicts Jesus and the apostles consistently bending over backwards to keep and attract those who are further “left-wing” than they, while reserving the harshest condemnation for the religious teachers who were too “right-wing.” Unfortunately, in many circles today we have precisely inverted this pattern.

The slippery slope argument was often applied in the ETS debate over Gundry. But look at the rest of his scholarly career—a detailed commentary on Mark with ringing endorsement of historicity, continued updates of a standard NT survey, and a collection of essays on how older Christian interpretations are often better than newer, revisionist ones. And none of this was done to placate his critics who had disowned him.

The pages in Dr. Licona’s book that have been debated are miniscule in number. The strengths of his apologetic so far outweigh the weaknesses that it is tragic to realize that his career could wind up being marked by this one controversy that was so unnecessary. Debate exegetical details in the standard scholarly outlets by all means, but please, Drs. Geisler and Mohler, stop ruining people’s lives. The world *is* watching and many of them are rejecting Christianity precisely because too many of us act like this too often.

Having said all that, I do think *this* forum has helped solidify my interpretation of the raising of the saints as historical.

Akin: Let me speak as clearly and plainly as I can as a former Academic Vice President and Dean of the School of Theology, and now the President of a “Great Commission” evangelical seminary. My perspective will be criticized by some and well received by others. I have learned this reality goes with the assignment the Lord Jesus has placed upon me.

Given his current understanding of Matthew 27 and what he thinks are acceptable literary genres that may be applied to the Bible, would I consider inviting Dr. Licona, as has been done in the past, to speak on the campus of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary? The answer is *yes*, I would. I do not have to be in lock step agreement with someone to have them come to our campus and speak to our students. I have often said that were he alive I would gladly invite C. S. Lewis to come to our campus and “stay awhile!” I do not agree with all that Lewis believed, but I know my students would be blessed and edified by expo-

sure to this man. When it comes to Dr. Licona, my critique of and opposition to his position is well known and is a matter of public record. I would have little fear that anyone would think that I endorse his position of Matthew 27. And, I believe he still could address well things of importance to our students. His defense of the empty tomb and bodily resurrection of Jesus certainly comes to mind.

But, I need to raise and answer a second question. Would I extend to Dr. Licona an invitation to join the faculty of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary? The unequivocal answer is *no*, I would not. There is too much at stake when it comes to “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). The apostle Peter makes it clear that “we did not follow cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet. 1:16). Dr. Licona’s view of Matt. 27:51-54 opens a theological Pandora’s Box that does not rightly interpret the text, nor does it encourage confidence in the historical veracity and accuracy of the Word of God. Dr. Licona may remain “presently undecided pertaining to how Matthew intended his readers to understand the saints raised at Jesus’ death.” I have no such ambiguity when it comes to the faculty that will teach at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Finally, let me say I regret Dr. Blomberg’s rhetoric concerning Al Mohler. His singular written response to Dr. Licona’s book was respectful and measured. Nothing he said could fairly be construed as attempting to ruin Mike’s career. Why Dr. Blomberg believes this, or that Al owes Mike an apology, mystifies me. I strongly disagree with him on both of these points

Licona: I would like for readers to hear that I have not called into question a historical interpretation of Matthew’s raised saints because I have an aversion to the supernatural. My book argues for the historicity of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. So, it should be clear that I have no such aversion. My objective is to understand what the text is actually saying and then bow to its authority. I don’t take Jesus’ command literally to sever one of my body parts if it causes me to sin (Matt. 18:8-9), although there’s nothing in the immediate text and context that suggests to our eyes that it’s to be taken in any other manner. Just the opposite, in fact. Jesus speaks of one going to heaven maimed! I also don’t understand in a literal manner the celestial phenomena in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24. Are the raised saints in Matthew 27 to be understood literally? It’s hard to say. Other evangelical scholars like N. T. Wright, Craig Blomberg, William Lane Craig, Leon Morris and Michael Bird are either undecided on the matter or hold that Matthew’s raised saints are not to be understood in a historical sense. Could we be mistaken? Certainly. Could those who interpret the raised saints in a historical manner be mistaken? Certainly. But none of us is denying the inerrancy of the text. It’s precisely because we respect the text as God’s Word that we are

seeking to understand what the author was trying to communicate. For the Lord will hold those of us who teach His Word to a higher standard (James 3:1). And I take that very seriously.

STR: Again, STR extends thanks to each of you for participating in this roundtable.