LICONA AND INERRANCY

We want to consider some claims made my Dr. Michael R. Licona in his book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.[1] In recent days, certain of these claims have raised the question of whether Licona is denying inerrancy. There is, of course, a number of different ways that the term 'inerrancy' has been understood over the years, so it is important that we set out immediately what sense the term is uses in this essay. The standard of measure that will be used herein is the statement formulated by the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy which, in Article XII, states:

> **We affirm** that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit.
> **We deny** that Biblical infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual, religious, or redemptive themes, exclusive of assertions in the fields of history and science. We further deny that scientific hypotheses about earth history may properly be used to overturn the teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.[2]

Although many scholars would not subscribe to the Chicago Statement, this is, nevertheless, the standard that will be employed in considering the claims of Licona. First, the Chicago statement is the statement to which most Evangelicals point when discussing the topic of inerrancy. Second, this is the statement upon which is based the doctrinal statement of the institution at which I am a professor. Third, the Chicago Statement is unique in its structure of affirmation and denial. This structure makes it difficult to misunderstand what is meant.

Another important distinction that is important in this essay is the distinction between infallibility and inerrancy. Many Evangelicals are abandoning the term 'inerrancy' for the term 'infallibility.' But this term is mean that God's Word will infallibly accomplish the task to which it is sent. One reason for the use of 'infallibility' rather than 'inerrancy' is that the use of the former term allows for the possibility of factual errors without having to abandon a belief that the Scriptures are God's Word and inspired. As a result of this definition, we will not be using these terms interchangeably as some have done in the past. Concerning infallibility, the Chicago Statement asserts:

> **We affirm** that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses.

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[1] Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downer Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010).

[2] R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary* (Oakland, California: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980), 45 (emphasis in original).

We deny that it is possible for the Bible to be at the same time infallible and errant in its assertions. Infallibility and inerrancy may be distinguished but not separated.[3]

Is Licona's Claim a Matter of Interpretation

Licona argues that his take on the statement in Matt. 27:52 is a matter of interpretation, not inerrancy. He makes this claim by asserting that the reference to the raising of many bodies of the saints should be seen as symbolic. In his presentation at the *Evangelical Philosophical Society* in 2011, he presented arguments to support his view after he had briefly considered arguments for taking the statement as literal. One of Licona's analyses of the argument for taking the statement literally is presented below:

> Another argument supporting interpreting Matthew's raised saints in a historical manner is that they appear within a context of other historical details such as Jesus' death. Thus, it's claimed that to understand them in anything other than a historical sense would be a forced interpretation.
> But one may immediately cite Jesus' Olivet Discourse just three chapters earlier in Matthew. In the context of speaking of the coming of many false prophets and false messiahs, the abomination of desolation standing in the temple and people fleeing to the mountains, Jesus says that the sun and moon will go dark and the stars will fall out of the sky. Jesus says that they will then see the Son of Man coming on the clouds and gathering His elect.
> Many scholars interpret the celestial phenomena involving the sun, moon, and stars as purely apocalyptic symbols even though they're sandwiched between events generally interpreted in a fairly literal sense. Craig Blomberg writes: "Jesus portrays his return with the typical apocalyptic imagery of cosmic upheaval. He does not intend his language to be taken as a literal, scientific description of events but as a vivid metaphor, much as we speak of earth-shaking developments. From this moment on, the universe can no longer continue as it has been (cf. Rev 6:12-17; 8:12). Jesus' imagery may well also point to the overthrow of the cosmic and demonic powers often associated in paganism with the sun, moon, and stars." If Blomberg and many others holding the same position are correct, we have poetic or apocalyptic symbols sandwiched between the historical.
> Accordingly, what are perhaps the two strongest reasons for interpreting the raised saints in a historical sense cannot be ignored. But their limitations should likewise be noted.

There is a serious problem with Licona's analysis, however. In the passages to which he points, it is certainly clear that commentators take the reference to the sun and moon going dark, etc., as symbolic. However, the point that Licona misses is that, although these statements are symbolic, the nevertheless refer to actual historical events that either did or will occur. His quote from Craig Blomberg's commentary on Matthew shows that, although taking these specific statements as apocalyptic imagery, Blomberg nevertheless states that this imagery refers to actual historical events. But, Licona does not argue that the raising of the bodies of the saints in Matt. 27:52 refers to any

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[3] Ibid., 44–45 (emphasis in original).

actual historical event that took place. Consequently, the analogy of his take on Matt. 27:52 with Blomberg's take on the statements in the Olivet Discourse is a faulty analogy. Also, Licona neglects to note that Blomberg takes the events in Matt. 27:52–53 as literal resurrections:

> The resurrections illustrate the teaching of 1 Cor 15:20–22. Christ is the firstfruits of the new age, guaranteeing the bodily resurrection of all his people. "Holy people" (often translated saints) apparently refer to selected Old Testament believers.89 This episode further foreshadows 1 Cor 15:23. As the NIV stands, Matthew's account contradicts Paul, inasmuch as the saints actually precede Christ out of the tomb. But the text should probably be punctuated with a period after the "tombs broke open." Then the rest of vv. 52b–53 would read, And the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life, and, having come out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection, they went into the Holy City [i.e., Jerusalem]. Contra the NIV rendering of v. 53, there is no "and" in the Greek nor any other reason to pause between "tombs" and "after."90 If these saints were genuinely resurrected rather than simply revivified or reanimated like Jairus's daughter or Lazarus, then presumably, like Jesus himself, they appeared to others only for a short time and were eventually taken to heaven. But the text refuses to satisfy our curiosity about these points.91 It is interesting, however, to note Matthew's twofold reference to Jews and Jerusalem as "holy" ("holy people," v. 52; "holy city," v. 53) even after his sweeping condemnation of Israel in chaps. 23–24. Hints again emerge that a remnant in Israel will be preserved.[4]

It is one thing to take a statement as symbolic of actual historical events. It is a completely different matter to take a statement as symbolic of no actual historical events at all, which is what Licona does. In one place Licona refers to such statements as "phenomenal and perhaps nonhistorical peripheral events such as darkness and the tearing of the temple veil (at minimum)."[5] With reference to Matt. 27:52–53, Licona asserts that the reference to the raising of some saints is a "special effect" not referring to any historical event:

> Given the presence of phenomenological language used in a symbolic manner in both Jewish and Roman literature related to a major event such as the death of an emperor or the end of a reigning king or even a kingdom, the presence of ambiguity in the relevant text of Ignatius, and that so very little can be known about Thallus's comment on the darkness (including whether he was even referring to the darkness at the time of Jesus' crucifixion or, if so, if he was merely speculating pertaining to a natural cause of the darkness claimed by the early Christians), it seems to me that an understanding of the language in Matthew 27:52–53 as "special effects" with eschatological Jewish texts and thought in mind is most plausible. There is further support for this interpretation. If the tombs opened and the saints being raised upon

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[4] Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 421.

[5] Licona, *Resurrection*, 545. In this context, Licona quotes an observation made by the Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide: "I cannot rid myself of the impression that some modern Christian theologians are ashamed of the material fact of the resurrection" (Ibid., 545–46). Might the same be said of Licona? He seems to be embarrassed by the notion of taking the resurrection of saints in Matt. 27:52–53 as a "material fact."

Jesus' death was not strange enough, Matthew adds that they did not come out of their tombs until *after* Jesus' resurrection. What were they doing between Friday afternoon and early Sunday morning? Were they standing in the now open doorways of their tombs and waiting?[6]

To deny the historicity, whether by apocalyptic symbol or not, is not a matter of interpretation. Although whether a statement is symbolic is certainly a hermeneutical question, denying historical reality certainly is.

In his presentation at EPS, Licona makes an analogy between his treatment of Matt. 27:52–53 with the Jehovah's Witnesses take on statements about Christ's deity:

In it's most basic form, biblical inerrancy states there are no errors in Scripture. It says something about the character of the literature. It doesn't interpret the literature. As Professor Michael Bird says, "Many preach the inerrancy of the Bible, but they practice the inerrancy of their hermeneutics." The next time Jehovah's Witnesses come to your home, ask them whether they hold to biblical inerrancy. Without any hesitation, they'll say "yes, of course!" When they then deny the deity of Christ, they are not saying Paul was mistaken on the matter. Instead, they are interpreting Paul's statement that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation as meaning He was created and, thus, could not be deity. They are not denying the inerrancy of the Bible. Rather, they are denying a certain interpretation of it. They are mistaken. But that's a hermeneutical matter rather than one concerning the inerrancy of the text.[7]

Once again Licona has missed the point and has given another faulty analogy. The Jehovah's Witnesses do not deny that the statements by Paul are non-historical, and this is the distinction that makes all the difference. The way the Jehovah's Witnesses take the statements of Paul is certainly a matter of interpretation. However, had they denied the historicity of Paul's statements, as Licona does with the statements of Matthew, then this would not be merely a matter of interpretation. Licona does not seem to understand that denying the historicity of the events is not the same as interpreting the events differently. Not only is Licona's interpretation wrong, but his denial of the historicity of the events, whether taken literally or symbolically, is indeed a matter of inerrancy. Licona does not say that he takes these statements as symbolic of some actual historical event. Rather, he claims that they do not refer to any actual historical events, and this is a matter, not of interpretation, but of inerrancy. Matthew presents these events as having actually, historically occurred.

But, Licona's denial of the historicity of biblical statements is even more blatant when he deals with certain statements in the Gospel of John.

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[6] Licona, *Resurrection*, 552 (emphasis in original).
[7] Michael R. Licona, "When the Saints Go Marching In (Matthew 27:52-53): Historicity, Apocalyptic Symbol, and Biblical Inerrancy," *Evangelical Philosophical Society*: 9.

Matthew and Daniel

Licona completely misses the theme of Matthew's Gospel which prevents him from seeing the significance of the resurrection of the saints in Matt. 27:52–53. That there is a strong link between Daniel and Matthew's Gospel has been acknowledged by scholars for many years. This link is especially strong in Matthew's account of the transfiguration. A. D. A. Moses has closely examined the transfiguration pericope and Daniel 7.[8] As he says, "Since (1) Matthew shows considerable interest in Daniel 7 and Danielic motifs, and since (2) he brackets his transfiguration pericope with four Son of Man verses (16.27; 16.28–17.1-8–17.9; 17.12), we may reasonably infer that Matthew has been influenced by Daniel 7."[9] Moses goes on to make a connection between the Danielic motifs and Jesus' resurrection:

> The idea of resurrection is not seen in Daniel 7, but there is some evidence of *Matthew* applying Daniel 7 to Jesus' resurrection elsewhere, (a) in Jesus' saying anticipating resurrection (26.64) and (b) in his post-resurrection appearance and exaltation (28.19–20). The latter will be dealt with in Chapter 6. In 26.64 where Jesus' inquisitors are told that 'from now on' they will see the Son of Man coming..., the force of ἀπ᾿ ἄρτι [*ap arti*, "from now on"] has often been missed. ἀπ᾿ ἄρτι [*ap arti*, "from now on"] here, as in 23.39; 26.29, signifies a new period *beginning from now;* and it is arguable that this must in context include the immediately forthcoming events, including Jesus' death-resurrection (note also Matthew's distinctive 'saints-resurrection' motif in 27.52-53). Thus it is arguable that *theologically* Matthew has linked the resurrection with Daniel 7.[10]

Unless the raising of the saints in Matt. 27:52–53 is taken literally, this association is lost and the significance of this event is completely missed. This is precisely what Licona does. Not making the connection between Matthew's Gospel and the book of Daniel in terms of Danielic motifs, Licona has completely missed the point.[11] An example of this lacuna by Licona is his discussion of the term 'the vision' [τὸ ὅραμα, *to horama*] as this is used by Matthew in reference to the transfiguration.[12] Licona deals with this term by considering its use in the LXX and the New Testament. In his conclusions, he does not refer to Matthew's use as a characterization of the transfiguration. A. D. A. Moses, however, focuses on this word as important for understanding Matthew's depiction of the transfiguration: "Of the evangelists Matthew (alone) categoises the transfiguration as τὸ ὅραμα. This usage functions as a window into his unique understanding of the transfiguration, since he blends Moses-Sinai particularly with Danielic motifs. This blending in his

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[8] A. D. A. Moses, *Matthew's Transfiguration Story and Jewish-Christian Controversy* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 89–101.

[9] Ibid., 90–91.

[10] Ibid., 98.

[11] Licona does indeed refer to the book of Daniel and many passages in Daniel, but he never makes the connection between these books the way A. D. A. Moses discusses them.

[12] Licona deals specifically with this term on pages 330–33.

transfiguration story also contributes to his understanding of the passage in terms of the 'coming of God.'"[13]

    Moses devotes many pages to his discussion of the Matthew's depiction of the transfiguration and its connection with Daniel 7. Moses points out that it is not without significance that Daniel uses the same term, ὅραμα, in his depiction of the coming of the Son of Man in Dan. 7:13: "I kept looking in the night visions [ὁράματι, *horamati*], and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him" (NASB).[14] Moses points out the significance of the similarity of structure between Daniel 7 and Matthew's account of the transfiguration:

> Dan. 7.13–28 is a passage that includes (1) a 'vision' (7.13–14), (2) the seer's reaction to the vision (7.15 also 28), (3) request for its explanation (7.16, also v. 19), and finally (4) interpretation of the vision (7.16–27, which also takes into consideration the vision in 7.2–12). Matthew's portrayal of the transfiguration is somewhat similar. For (1) the disciples see the 'vision' (τὸ ὅραμα) of the transfiguration (Mt. 17.2–5). (2) They react to what they saw and heard (17.6–8). (3) They query Elijah's coming (Mt. 17.9–13), presumably prompted by his appearance at the transfiguration, and (4) receive an explanation from Jesus, with Matthew alone stressing that they 'understood'. Mt. 17.9–13, of course, parallels Mk 9.9–13, but Matthew alone describes the transfiguration as τὸ ὅραμα (compare Dan. 7.13 LXX), and, given his use of apocalyptic language in 17.2 (to be compared with 13.34 and Dan. 12.3 etc.), the comparison with Dan. 7.13–18 is arresting.[15]

    The significance of the discussion, as we have alluded to already, is the connection that is made between the account of the transfiguration, with its Danielic motifs, and the resurrection, also in light of Danielic motifs. As A. D. A. Moses pointed out, although Daniel 7 does not refer to a resurrection, the connection with Daniel and Matthew's use of Danielic motifs strongly implies a connection between Danielic motifs and Matthew's account of the resurrection (see block quote above). A. D. A. Moses specifically argues that Matthew links Jesus' resurrection with Daniel 7. Also, he goes on to point out, "Another general but contributory argument is that the concept of 'resurrection' is found in Dan. 12.2–3. This Danielic description of resurrection is drawn on in the M passage Mt. 13.41–43, where it is applied to the final vindication of the 'righteous.'"[16]

    The Daniel passage reads, "Many of those who sleep in the dusty ground will awake – some to everlasting life, and others to shame and everlasting abhorrence. But the wise will shine like the brightness of the heavenly expanse. And those bringing many to righteousness will be like the stars

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[13] Moses, *Transfiguration*, 89–90.

[14] ἐθεώρουν ἐν ὁράματι τῆς νυκτὸς καὶ ἰδοὺ μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὡς υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου ἐρχόμενος ἦν καὶ ἕως τοῦ παλαιοῦ τῶν ἡμερῶν ἔφθασεν καὶ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ προσηνέχθη (Dan. 7:13 LXX).

חָזֵה הֲוֵית בְּחֶזְוֵי לֵילְיָא וַאֲרוּ עִם־עֲנָנֵי שְׁמַיָּא כְּבַר אֱנָשׁ אָתֵה הֲוָה וְעַד־עַתִּיק יוֹמַיָּא מְטָה וּקְדָמוֹהִי הַקְרְבוּהִי׃

(Dan. 7:13 BHS)

[15] Moses, *Transfiguration*, 91.

[16] Moses, *Transfiguration*, 98.

forever and ever" (Dan. 12:2–3 NET).[17] The Greek of Daniel uses the expression "those who sleep," which in the NET Bible is a translation of the participial construction, τῶν καθευδόντων (*tōn katheudontōn*). The use of the concept of sleeping as a euphemism for death is not unusual. However, it is significant that of all the Gospels, only Matthew uses this expression in reference to a resurrection of saints. The following chart provides an interlinear arrangement of the Greek of Matt. 27:52.

Table #1: Matt. 27:52

καὶ	τὰ	μνημεῖα	ἀνεῴχθησαν	καὶ	πολλὰ
And	the	tombs	having been opened	and	many

σώματα	τῶν	κεκοιμημένων	ἁγίων	ἠγέρθησαν	
bodies	of the	having fallen asleep	saints	were raised.	

Of the four Gospels, Matthew is the only one that speaks of a resurrection of saints in terms of "having fallen asleep." The use of the term 'fallen asleep' in other places in the Gospels is listed below in Table #2.

Table #2: Uses of 'Fallen Asleep' in the Gospels

"The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (Matt. 27:52).
καὶ τὰ μνημεῖα ἀνεῴχθησαν καὶ πολλὰ σώματα τῶν κεκοιμημένων ἁγίων ἠγέρθησαν
"and said, 'You are to say, "His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep"'" (Matt. 28:13).
λέγοντες· εἴπατε ὅτι οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ νυκτὸς ἐλθόντες ἔκλεψαν αὐτὸν ἡμῶν κοιμωμένων.
"When He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow" (Lk. 22:45).
καὶ ἀναστὰς ἀπὸ τῆς προσευχῆς ἐλθὼν πρὸς τοὺς μαθητὰς εὗρεν κοιμωμένους αὐτοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς λύπης,

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[17] καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν καθευδόντων ἐν γῆς χώματι ἐξεγερθήσονται οὗτοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον καὶ οὗτοι εἰς ὀνειδισμὸν καὶ εἰς αἰσχύνην αἰώνιον καὶ οἱ συνιέντες ἐκλάμψουσιν ὡς ἡ λαμπρότης τοῦ στερεώματος καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν δικαίων τῶν πολλῶν ὡς οἱ ἀστέρες εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας καὶ ἔτι (Dan. 12:2–3 LXX).

וְרַבִּים מִיְּשֵׁנֵי אַדְמַת־עָפָר יָקִיצוּ אֵלֶּה לְחַיֵּי עוֹלָם וְאֵלֶּה לַחֲרָפוֹת לְדִרְאוֹן עוֹלָם: וְהַמַּשְׂכִּלִים יַזְהִרוּ כְּזֹהַר הָרָקִיעַ וּמַצְדִּיקֵי הָרַבִּים כַּכּוֹכָבִים לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד: (Dan. 12:2–3 BHS)

"This He said, and after that He said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep'" (Jn. 11:11).

Ταῦτα εἶπεν, καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο λέγει αὐτοῖς· Λάζαρος ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν κεκοίμηται· ἀλλὰ πορεύομαι ἵνα ἐξυπνίσω αὐτόν.

"The disciples then said to Him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover'" (Jn. 11:12).

εἶπαν οὖν οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτῷ· κύριε, εἰ κεκοίμηται σωθήσεται.

This connection between Daniel and Matthew indicates the necessity of taking the statement in Matt. 27:52 as an historical event. Also, this connection is used by Matthew as evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Daniel's prophecies. By taking references in Matthew's Gospel, such as 27:52–53, as non-historical, Licona has robbed the text of its witness to the Messiahship of Jesus.

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