

(Letter #1) An Open Letter to Mike Licona on his View of the Resurrected Saints in Matthew 27:52-53*

Dear Mike:

I have examined your work on the resurrection (*The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (IVP, 2010)). Overall, it is a massive (718 pages), scholarly resource, and I commend you for your efforts and for your defense of the bodily resurrection of Christ.

There is, however, one thing I found in it that raises some serious questions. You speak of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27:52-53 after Jesus' resurrection as a "strange little text" (548 cf. 556). Indeed, you call it "poetic" or "legend" (185-186). You appear to include the angels at the tomb (Mk. 16:5-7) in the same category (186). You speak of it as similar to Roman legends that use "phenomenal language used in a symbolic manner" (552). You add, "...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" (552). You say that by this legend "Matthew may simply be emphasizing that a great king has died" (552). You add, "If he has one or more of the Jewish texts in mind [that contain similar legends], he may be proclaiming that the day of the Lord has come" (552). You conclude that "It seems best to regard this difficult text in Matthew as a poetic device added to communicate that the Son of God had died and that impending judgment awaited Israel" (553).

Then you address the obvious problem that **"If some or all of the phenomena reported at Jesus' death are poetic devices, we may rightly ask whether Jesus' resurrection is not more of the same"** (553, emphasis added). This is a very good question. However, your answer is disappointing.

First, you say that "There is no indication that the early Christian interpreted Jesus' resurrection in a metaphorical or poetic sense to the exclusion of it being a literal event that had occurred to his corpse" (553). But neither is there any indication in the text that a historical understanding of the resurrection of the saints should be excluded from this text. Indeed, the reference to these saint's "bodies" coming out of "tombs" and going into the "holy city" (Jerusalem) and "appeared" bodily to "many"—all as a result of Jesus' literal death and physical resurrection—are too many physical details to take this as purely poetical. And just because one event (Jesus' resurrection) is a bigger event would not, by the same reasoning, make it any less a legend. There is no less evidence in the text that the smaller event (the resurrection of the saints) is any more metaphorical, to the exclusion of life returning to their dead corpses as well than there was Christ's resurrection which was the cause of it.

Your second reason is even less convincing. You argue that Jesus' resurrection must have been literal (and the resurrection of these saints was not) since "no known Christian opponent criticized the early Christians or their opponents for misunderstanding poetry as history" (553). But this is a well-know fallacy of an argument from silence. Further, why should the enemies of Christians focus on this relatively minor byproduct of Christ's

resurrection when the major issue was whether Christ had risen bodily from the grave. Neither did they concentrate on attacking the resurrection (resuscitation) of Lazarus or others who came back from the dead by the hands of Jesus and the apostles. After all, the essential truth of Christianity did not rest on these resurrections, as it did on the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:12-19).

Finally, the same mistake seems to be occurring in your interpretation of this text as is made by many current liberal scholars in dehistoricizing other biblical texts, namely, using extra biblical sources as determinative for understanding a biblical text. So what if other Roman or Jewish legends are similar? The context of biblical text and other biblical texts are the best way to understand what a given passage is teaching. And both of these favor a literal interpretation of the resurrection of these saints as a “firstfruits” of Jesus’ resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20). Using extra-biblical sources in this way is similar to the false analogies used to deny the Virgin Birth of Christ because there are similarities with other non-Christian “virgin birth” stories. They both overlook crucial differences! None of these legends involve the Second Person of the Triune God becoming incarnate in human flesh as the New Testament does.

In short, dehistoricizing a seemingly incidental event in the biblical record may seem to be a relatively minor issue, but it is in fact very important. This is so for several reasons.

First of all, what is being done here is the same basic thing that Robert Gundry did in dehistoricizing sections of Matthew and for which he was asked to resign from the Evangelical Theological Society in 1983. How then can another evangelical interpretation of the same kind be overlooked as unimportant to orthodox Christianity? In fact, being one of the ICBI framers, I can tell you that we had Gundry in mind when we framed Article XVIII of the famous “Chicago statement” (which speaks against “dehistoricizing” the Bible). And even The Evangelical Theological Society has adopted the ICBI statement as its guideline for understanding inerrancy.

Second, the size and relative significance of the event that is being dehistoricized is not relevant to the importance of the hermeneutical issue, namely, the principle being used to undermine the historicity of biblical events. Once upfront genre decisions are made based on extra-biblical legends, then one has adopted a hermeneutic that can undermine orthodox Christianity

In brief, I heartedly agree with the first part of your title (“The Resurrection of Jesus”) but cannot concur with the last part of it (“A New Historiographical Approach”). We don’t need a “new” historical approach. The “old” historical-grammatical approach is sufficient, as it has been down through the centuries. Indeed, if the principles of your historical approach (of using extra-biblical material as determinative of the meaning of a biblical text) were used consistently on the Bible, then it would undermine orthodoxy by dehistoricizing many crucial passages of the Bible.

Sincerely,
Your brother in Christ,
Norm Geisler

A Second Open Letter to Mike Licona on the Resurrection of the Saints of Matt. 27

Professor Norman L Geisler, Ph.D.

August 21, 2011

Almost two months ago, I wrote Mike Licona a private letter expressing my concerns about his published view in *The Resurrection of Jesus (RJ)* that the story of saints resurrected after His resurrection in Matthew 27:52-53 was not historical. He spoke of it as a "strange little text" (548 cf. 556). Indeed, he called it "poetic" or a "legend" (185-186). He appears to include the angels at the tomb (Mk. 16:5-7) in the same category (186). He speaks of it as similar to Roman legends with "phenomenal language used in a symbolic manner" (552). He adds, "...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" (552). He says that by this legend "Matthew may simply be emphasizing that a great king has died" (552). He adds, "If he has one or more of the Jewish texts in mind [that contain similar legends], he may be proclaiming that the day of the Lord has come" (552). He concludes that "It seems best to regard this difficult text in Matthew as a poetic device added to communicate that the Son of God had died and that impending judgment awaited Israel" (553).

In my Open Letter to Mike Licona a few weeks ago (see www.normangeisler.net) I spoke of how this dehistoricizing of Matthew's inspired account was contrary to the stand of The Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) which asked Robert Gundry to resign by an overwhelming vote of the membership in 1983 for the same basic reason. I also pointed out that this kind of "dehistoricizing" of the Gospel record is contrary to the statements of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) whose statement was accepted by the ETS (of which Mike Licona is a member) in 2003 as a guide in understanding of what their inerrancy statement meant.

Unfortunately, since Mike has chosen not to respond publically to my Open Letter, or to me privately, I wish to appeal again for him to reconsider his view. There are two major points I wish to express. First, there is no good grounds for taking Matthew 27:15-53 as not historical. Second, this dehistoricizing of sections of a Gospel inconsistent with the standard view on inerrancy as held by the Evangelical Theological Society and the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy.

On The Inconsistency of Licona's View with the Text of Matthew 27:50-53

This text at issue is in Matthew 27 which affirms that when he died "*Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many*" (vv. 50-53 ESV). Now there are many reasons this text in this context should be taken as historical and not as a legend.

First of all, in this very text the resurrection of these saints occurs in direct connection with two other historical events—the death and resurrection of Jesus (vv. 50, 53). There is no reason here to take the resurrection of Jesus as historical and the resurrection of the saints as a legend. Hence, to borrow the subtitle from Licona's book, it appears that this "New Historical Approach" which employs extra-biblical sources to determine the meaning of this text has led him astray. Indeed, there are many reasons in the text itself to take these resurrections as a literal events, including the terms like "earth," "quake," "temple," "veil," "rocks," "tombs," "bodies," "asleep" (dead), "raised," and "appeared"—all of which speak of a physical event elsewhere in the New Testament. Indeed, the crucial word associated directly with the resurrection of these saints resurrection (viz., "raised"—*egiro*) is also used of Jesus' resurrection in the 1Corinthians when Paul speaks of Jesus dying for our sins and being "raised" (*egiro*) again (1 Cor.15:3-4). And the word for "appeared" (Mt. 27:53) after his resurrection is an even stronger word than usual, meaning "**become visible, appear...make known, make clear, explain, inform, make a report esp. of an official report to the authorities**" (Arndt and Gingrich, *A Geek-English Lexicon of the NT*, p. 257, emphasis added).

Second, there is a direct connection between the resurrection of these saints and Jesus' resurrection. For the text is careful to mention that they did not come out of the tombs until "**after**" Jesus' resurrection (v. 53). Indeed, Paul calls Jesus' resurrection "the firstfruits" (1 Cor. 15:23), so, it is only proper that He should emerge from the dead first. Thus, speaking of the resurrection of these saints after Jesus' resurrection and as a result of it makes no sense, if their resurrection, unlike Jesus' resurrection, is a mere legend.

Third, this text lists the same kind of evidence for the resurrection of these saints as is listed elsewhere for Jesus' resurrection: [1] the tombs were opened; [2] the tombs were empty; [3] the dead were raised; [4] there were physical appearances; [5] many people saw these resurrected saints (cf. Mt.27; 1 Cor. 15). In brief, if this is not a

physical resurrection, then neither was Jesus' resurrection (that preceded and prompted it) a physical resurrection. Or, conversely, if Jesus' resurrection was physical, then so was the resurrection of these saints in Matthew 27 a physical resurrection. Thus, denying the physical resurrection of these saints undermines belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus.

Fourth, as *Ellicott's Commentary* puts it, "the brevity, and in some sense, simplicity, of the statement differences [sic] it very widely from such legends, more or less analogous in character... and so far excludes the mythical elements which, as a rule, delights to show itself in luxuriant expansion" (vol. VI, p. 178). In brief, the typical characteristics of a myth as found in apocryphal and other literature of that time is not found in this text.

Fifth, some of the elements of this story are confirmed by two other Gospels. For both Mark (15:38) and Luke (23:45) mention the renting of the veil in the temple (Mat. 27: 51) as a result of Jesus' death as well. But Luke's writings in particular have been historically confirmed in nearly one hundred details (see Colin Hemer, *Acts in the Setting of Hellenic History*). There is no reason to believe he is less historically accurate in mentioning this detail. And if this part of the story is factually confirmed, there is no good reason to reject the rest of it.

Finally, the cumulative evidence for the historic and non-legendary nature of this text is strong. In fact, the story is interwoven with the historic evidence surrounding the death and resurrection of Christ in such a manner that the denial of the resurrection of the saints undermines the historicity of the resurrection of Christ in the same text.

On the Inconsistency of Licona's View with the ETS and ICBI View on Inerrancy

The Evangelical Theological Society is on record in the Robert Gundry case as rejecting this kind of dehistoricizing of the Gospel record as inconsistent with their view of the inerrancy of Scripture. In 1983 by an overwhelming vote the ETS members Robert Gundry was asked to resign from the ETS for holding a similar view in which he dehistoricized sections of Matthew's Gospel. Since Mike Licona is a member of ETS, it follows that his view is inconsistent with the ETS stand on inerrancy.

Of course, Licona can argue that it is not inconsistent with his personal or private view on inerrancy, but that is not the point we made in our Open Letter, nor is it the point

here. The fact is that the society of scholars to which he belongs has already ruled against the view which he embraces. Further, Licona is on record affirming that a text should be interpreted in accord with the "author's intent" (RJ, 85) or "authorial intent" (RJ, 195). Thus, it would be inconsistent, if not dishonest, to reject the ETS and ICBI framers' intent when interpreting its inerrancy statement. Unfortunately, it is this kind of dishonesty that erodes the integrity of a doctrinal statement. For example, in 1976 the ETS Executive Committee confessed that "Some of the members of the Society have expressed the feeling that a measure of **intellectual dishonesty prevails among members who do not take the signing of the doctrinal statement seriously**. Other members of the Society have come to the realization that they are not in agreement with the creedal statement and have voluntarily withdrawn. That is, **in good conscience** they could not sign the statement" (1976 Minutes of the ETS Executive Committee, emphasis added). If one cannot sign a statement in good conscience according to the intent of the framers, then, of course, resigning is the honest thing to do.

Furthermore, in 2003 the ETS accepted the ICBI interpretation as the guideline for interpreting what inerrancy means by an overwhelming 80% vote. Thus, it too can be used as a test of whether Licona's view is consistent with what the framers mean by inerrancy. And an examination of the following citations from official ICBI statements and official commentaries on them make it clear that denying the historicity of sections of the Gospels is inconsistent with its view on inerrancy.

Consider the following ICBI statements (emphasis added): "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" (Article XII). And "By biblical standards of truth and error (in Article XIII) is meant the view used both in the Bible and in everyday life, viz., **a correspondence view of truth**. This part of the article is directed toward those who would redefine truth to relate **merely to redemptive intent**, the purely personal, or the like, rather than to mean **that which corresponds with reality**" (Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy (EI)*, 43-44). Thus, "... **all the claims of the Bible must correspond with reality**, whether that reality is **historical**, factual or spiritual" (Sproul, EI, 41).

ICBI added, "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." Hence, "We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, **dehistoricizing**, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship" (Article XVIII). The official ICBI commentary adds, "Though the Bible is indeed *redemptive* history, it is also redemptive *history*, and this means that the acts of salvation wrought by God **actually occurred in the space-time world**" (Sproul, EI, 37). "When the quest for sources produces a **dehistoricizing** of the Bible, a rejection of its teaching or a rejection of the Bible's own claims of authorship [then] it has trespassed beyond its proper limits" (Sproul, EI, 55). Also, an official commentary titled *Explaining Hermeneutics (EH)*. It reads: "**We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual**" (EH, XIII). Further, "**We deny that any event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated**" (EH, XIV).

As one of the framers of the ICBI statements, I can say with certainty that our expressed intentions of the ICBI framers is directly contrary to Licona's dehistoricizing of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27:51-53. In fact, Robert Gundry, who was asked to resign for a similar view, came up by name to the framers when we penned our statements.

Objections Sometimes Raised Against the ETS and ICBI View of Inerrancy

Those who defend the Gundry-Licona type view of "dehistoricizing" parts of the Gospels have offered several objections to this kind of critique over the years. These will be brief addressed here.

Objection One: ETS and ICBI are not the Final of Infallible Word on Inerrancy

Some have disowned the ETS and ICBI statements on inerrancy. After all, as these objectors correctly point out, these statements are not infallible. This is true, but then too no creedal statements are infallible, even *The Apostle's Creed* is not infallible. Only the Bible is God's infallible written Word of God. Nonetheless, there are good reason to accept these early creeds as a guideline for Christian belief. And, since there were no explicit early creedal statements on the Bible, there are several reasons to accept the ETS and ICBI statements as guides on this inerrancy issue.

First of all, it is the standard to which Licona and supporters refer when they claim his view is consistent with inerrancy. After all, Licona is listed as a member of the ETS which has adopted the ICBI statement as a guide to understanding inerrancy. So, he is being judged by his own standard.

Second, it has been well established that the total inerrancy view expressed by the ICBI has been the historic view held by the great church teachers down through the centuries (see John Hannah, *Inerrancy and the Church*; John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: The Roger/McKim Proposal*).

Third, ETS is the largest conservative scholarly society in the world (with some 4000 members). Hence, its statement on inerrancy carries more weight than any private opinions on the matter, even among some of its members.

Fourth, since the ETS statement is short, its members decided to accept the ICBI statement on inerrancy as a guide to its meaning in 2003 by an overwhelming 80% vote.

Fifth, the ICBI statement has been the standard view on the topic among American evangelicals for the last generation. Hence, there is no need to reject it now, particularly for "a new historical approach" that is contrary to the historical-grammatical approach which has been at the basis of orthodoxy down through the centuries.

So, in view of the foregoing evidence, the burden of proof falls on any individual who pits their private view of inerrancy against the historic view down through the centuries, as is expressed in the ICBI statements on the issue. And, as we have shown, Licona's position clearly contradicts what the ETS (to which he belongs) and ICBI framers meant by inerrancy.

Objection Two: Matthew 27 is the Only Reference to this Event.

It is objected that since the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 is based on a single text, its historicity is in doubt. However, from an evangelical view of Scripture (which Licona claims to hold), this is clearly an unjustified assertion. How many times does an inspired record have to mention an event for it to be true? Many historical events in the Gospels are mentioned only once, including Jesus talking to the woman at the Well (Jn. 4) and his speaking to Nicodemus (in Jn. 3) in which He used the famous words,

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). Also, the encounter with the Rich Young Ruler and the story about Zaccheus are only mentioned once (Lk. 19), as are numerous other things. Further, as noted above, there are some aspect of this story (namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus and even the renting of the temple veil which is confirmed by both Mark (15:38) and Luke (23:45).

Furthermore, many events from the ancient world survive by only one record. So, by the logic of this objection, we would have to eliminate much of ancient history, to say nothing of much of the Bible!

Objection Three: Open Genealogies Support a Non-Literal View of Matthew 27

Robert Gundry raised this objection when he was asked to resign from ETS in 1983. In short, it is argued that Matthew 1:8 leaves out three generations when it lists Jesus' ancestry (cf. 1 Chron. 3:11-12). Hence, it is argued that that there is no reason to take passages like Matthew 27:51-53) as historical. However, as any student of logic can quickly determine, this conclusion does not follow from the premises. For there is a big difference between abbreviation in a literal genealogy and taking the persons listed in it as non-literal. *Summarization* of historical facts and *dehistoricizing* of them are really different things. Thus, this objection is based on a false comparison.

Objection Four: Many Inerrantists take Sections of Prophecy as Non-literal.

It is sometimes objected that if some prophetic events can be taken in a non-literal way without denying inerrancy, then why can't some events in the Gospels (like Matt. 27:52-53) be taken as non-literal and this view still be considered consistent with the doctrine of inerrancy? Here again, we have a misplaced analogy for several reasons.

First of all, there is a difference between *history* and *prophecy*. The question in Matthew is about a historical book, not a prophetic book. Even *if* apocalyptic language can sometimes be taken to refer to non-literal events, it would not necessarily follow that this is true of historical sections of the Bible—especially those directly connected with the resurrection of Christ.

Second, the use of figures of speech in apocalyptic discourse does not necessarily mean that it is not referring to literal events. For example, speaking of the Devil as being "chained" (as a figure of speech) does not mean there is no literal Devil (Rev. 20:1), nor

that he won't be restrained in some manner. Likewise, other figurative language need not be taken to mean it does not refer to literal events.

Third, consistent evangelical inerrantists (whether Pre- Post or A-millennial) do not deny the literal, historical nature of the Second Coming regardless of whatever figures of speech may be used to describe it. But what Licona has done is to deny the very historical nature of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27. And he has done so with a text that does not use figurative, apocalyptic language, but refers to literal events like Christ's death, resurrection, and bodies being raised from tombs and appearing to many in the city of Jerusalem. Thus, it makes a big difference when one denies the historicity of this kind of event, as Licona has done.

Objection Five: Taking Matthew 27 as Non-literal is no Different than Accepting an Old Earth View.

It is argued that if one can take the "days" of Genesis in a non-literal way and yet be considered consistent with inerrancy, then why can't they take a section of Matthew 27 non-literally also be considered consistent with inerrancy? It is a known fact that many strict inerrantists from B.B. Warfield and A.A. Hodge to the modern ETS fathers and ICBI framers hold an "Old Earth" view which they believed was consistent with a strict view of inerrancy. However, this too is an unjustified comparison. For the Hebrew the term "day" (*yom*) is used of a literal but longer period of time than twenty four hours in many places in the Old Testament. This is true of numbered series of days (cf. Hosea 6:1-2) and days with "evenings and mornings" (Daniel 8:14, 26) connected to them. It is also used in the Genesis creation record (Gen. 2:4) of more than one twenty-four hour day, referring as it does to all six days of creation.

However, in none of these cases is "day" used of non-literal events. Thus, ICBI inerrantists insist that denying the literal historicity of Genesis 1-3 and beyond is inconsistent with inerrancy. Indeed, Article XII of the ICBI "Chicago Statement" reads: "We further deny that scientific hypotheses about **earth history** may properly be used to overturn the **teaching of Scripture on creation and the flood.**" And Article XIII of the ICBI statement on Hermeneutics reads: "**We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual.**" Thus it **rejects the view of "Some, for instance, [who] take Adam to be a myth**, whereas in Scripture he is presented as a real person." And indeed it should reject those views that deny the historicity of the Genesis record since many crucial New

Testament teachings are based on it, including the Fall (Rom. 5:12-17), and Christ's called the "Last Adam" after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:45).

So, while the age of the earth is not a test of inerrancy orthodoxy, the literal historicity of Genesis 1-3 and following is. So, contrary to this objection, accepting the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 as legend is contrary to orthodoxy, but accepting the Genesis record as history (regardless of the age of the earth) is not. Indeed, there are many orthodox ways to hold an "Old Earth" view and still believe that the "days" of Genesis are literal historic days, whether solar days or longer (see Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, Appendix 4).

Objection Six: Other Inerrantists Agree that This View is Orthodox

Sometimes others who claim to believe in inerrancy, even ETS and ICBI kind of inerrancy, are cited in support of Licona's view. Dr. William Lane Craig and Gary Habermas have been put in this category. However, it is important to note that neither of these men—nor others like them—accept Licona's view that the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 is a legend. And as for believing that Licona's view is consistency with inerrancy, as we have shown above, they cannot mean consistent with what the ETS and ICBI framers meant by inerrancy, and the ETS is the organization to which Licona belongs. And, as Licona himself holds, the intent of the author is definite for the meaning of a text. Further, as we have shown, the ETS rejected Gundry's view and adopted the ICBI interpretation of inerrancy which explicitly rejects dehistoricizing the Gospel record such as Licona does. Indeed, there is no real grounds for claiming that Licona's view is consistent with the framer's intent of ETS or ICBI.

Concluding Comments

In conclusion, Licona has not publically recanted his published view denial of the historicity of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27. Until he does so, his view on this matter should be considered unorthodox, non-evangelical, and a dangerous precedent for the rest of evangelicalism. And what is so sad is that his view is unnecessary. Actually, his otherwise generally good treatment of the resurrection of Christ would be enhanced, not diminished, by holding to the historicity of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 which, indeed, is listed as one of the literal fruits of Christ's own resurrection. My prayer is for Mike to make this change, improve his tome on the resurrection, and make his view consistent with his claim to believe in inerrancy. I like

Mike as a person and love him as a brother in Christ, and it would be a shame to see him fall permanently from the ranks of consistent biblical inerrantists.

With over a half century of experience in the scholarly world, I would also add one last word to other young evangelical scholars: resist the desire to be an Athenian (Acts 17:21). There is something more important than having a seat at the table of contemporary scholarship; it is putting Lordship over scholarship when necessary. Further, there is something more important than "a new historiographical approach"; it is the "old" historical approach which takes the Gospel record—all of it—as historical. It has served the Church well for nearly 2000 years, and there is no good reason to change it now.

Mike Licona's Response

An Open Response to Norman Geisler

Norman Geisler has taken issue with a portion of my recent book, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, in which I proposed that the story of the raised saints in Matthew 27:52-53 should probably be interpreted as apocalyptic imagery rather than literal history. In response, Dr. Geisler has offered strong criticisms in two Open Letters to me on the Internet. Until now I have been unable to comment because I have multiple writing deadlines, two September debates in South Africa for which to prepare, and, consequently, no time to be drawn into what would probably turn into an endless debate. I shared these first two reasons with Dr. Geisler in an email several weeks ago. Yet he insisted that I “give careful and immediate attention” to the matter. I simply could not do this and fulfill the pressing obligations of my ministry, which is my higher priority before the Lord.

Dr. Geisler questions whether I still hold to biblical inerrancy. I want to be clear that I continue to affirm this evangelical distinctive. My conclusion in reference to the raised saints in Matthew 27 was based upon my analysis of the *genre* of the text. This was not an attempt to wiggle out from under the burden of an inerrant text; it was an attempt to respect the text by seeking to learn what Matthew was trying to communicate. This is responsible hermeneutical practice. Any reasonable doctrine of biblical inerrancy must respect authorial intent rather than predetermine it.

When writing a sizable book, there will always be portions in which one could have articulated a matter more appropriately. And those portions, I suppose, will often be located outside the primary thesis of the book, such as the one on which Dr. Geisler has chosen to focus. When writing my book, I always regarded the entirety of Matthew 27 as historical narrative containing apocalyptic allusions. I selected the term “poetic” in order to allude to similar phenomena in the Greco-Roman literature in general and Virgil in particular. However, since Matthew is a Jew writing to Jews, “apocalyptic” may be the most appropriate technical term, while “special effects” communicates the gist on a popular level.

Further research over the last year in the Greco-Roman literature has led me to reexamine the position I took in my book. Although additional research certainly remains, at present I am just as inclined to understand the narrative of the raised saints in Matthew 27 as a report of a factual (i.e., literal) event as I am to view it as an apocalyptic symbol. It may also be a report of a real event described partially in apocalyptic terms. I will be pleased to revise the relevant section in a future edition of my book.

Michael R. Licona, Ph.D.
August 31, 2011

We the undersigned are aware of the above stated position by Dr. Michael Licona, including his present position pertaining to the report of the raised saints in Matthew 27: He proposes that the report may refer to a literal/historical event, a real event partially described in apocalyptic terms, or an apocalyptic symbol. Though most of us do not hold Licona's proposal, we are in firm agreement that it is compatible with biblical inerrancy, despite objections to the contrary. We are encouraged to see the confluence of biblical scholars, historians, and philosophers in this question.

W. David Beck, Ph.D.

Craig Blomberg, Ph.D.

James Chancellor, Ph.D.

William Lane Craig, D.Theol., Ph.D.

Jeremy A. Evans, Ph.D.

Gary R. Habermas, Ph.D.

Craig S. Keener, Ph.D.

Douglas J. Moo, Ph.D.

J. P. Moreland, Ph.D.

Heath A. Thomas, Ph.D.

Daniel B. Wallace, Ph.D.

William Warren, Ph.D.

Edwin M. Yamauchi, Ph.D.

A Response to Mike Licona's Open Letter

Norman Geisler (Sept 8, 2011)

On July 3, 2011 I wrote Mike Licona expressing my deep concern about his denial of the historicity of the saints in Matthew 27. I waited in vain for a whole month for a response to my questions about this denial of the full inerrancy of Scripture.

On August 3, 2011, I wrote again, saying, "Mike: I wrote you a month ago. I am very disappointed that I have not heard back from you yet—even a brief response. This is a serious issue. It is the same thing Gundry was asked to resign from ETS over. Please respond. In all fairness, I wanted to give you an opportunity to respond. I did not want to go public with my critique of this until I heard from you. I hope you will change your view. I like you and respect you, but you owe me a quicker response than this. Sincerely, Norm."

On August 4, 2011 Licona replied that he did not have time to respond, saying that when He "revisit[ed] the passage" he would consider my points. And he indicated that it might still be a longer time before he responded, saying, "my investigation will be a lengthy process." I responded that in the meantime, since his view was in print, that it was open to scholarly critique, and he agreed in writing that this was so. Only then did I release my "Open Letter to Mike Licona."

Finally, two full months after my first letter (of July 3) on September 8, 2011 I received "An Open Response to Norman Geisler" (dated "August 31, 2011). His response is disappointing for several reasons:

First, Licona has not recanted his denial of the historicity of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27. At best, he is no longer as certain of the view as he once was. Further, whatever his final thoughts, he is convinced that this published view is compatible with inerrancy. Yet this kind of "dehistoricizing" of the Gospels is the same reason that Robert Gundry was asked by an overwhelming majority to resign from the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS), of which Licona is a member.

Second, even in his belated "Open Letter" to me Licona has not yet responded to any of the arguments I gave for the historicity of Matthew 27 resurrection saints. Nor has he responded to any of the reasons I gave as to why his view is incompatible with the ETS and ICBI view on inerrancy. In short, after two months, I still have a mere reply but not a real response to the issues I raised. And this reply is something that could easily have been written two months ago. Apparently, the pressure from Southern Baptist sources that preceded his resignation from his position at their North American Mission Board helped convinced him to resign and reconsider writing a reply.

Third, Licona claims, "I still hold to biblical inerrancy," yet his "dehistoricizing" this part of the Gospel of Matthew is exactly the issue that prompted ETS to ask Gundry to resign over, namely, because it was inconsistent with the ETS inerrancy statement. But Licona is also a member of ETS. Why is his view any less inconsistent with the ETS

view of inerrancy? Just saying a view is consistent with the historic view on inerrancy does not make it so.

Fourth, in 2003 ETS adopted the ICBI (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy) view on inerrancy as their guide in understanding what inerrancy means for ETS. Yet, as I showed in my “Open Letter,” the ICBI framers clearly denied that views like Licona’s are compatible with inerrancy.

Fifth, Licona has not yet *recanted* his published view denying the historicity of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 but, rather, he has attempted to *restate* it, saying, “one could have articulated a matter more appropriately.” Furthermore, presenting other possible options, as he does in his “Open Letter,” is not a denial of what he said in his book, namely, the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 is not historical.

Sixth, listing some scholars who agree with him misses the point. First, as he admits, most of them do not agree with his unrecanted in-print view. Further, the fact that they say they are “in firm agreement that it is compatible with biblical inerrancy” misses the point entirely. For it does not answer the question of with whose view of inerrancy it is in agreement? As we all know, the term “inerrancy” can be twisted to mean many things to many people. In my “Open Letter” I affirmed only that Licona’s view was not in agreement with the ETS (of which Licona is a member) view of inerrancy as expressed in the Gundry case. Of course, one can always find a number of people with whose views on inerrancy it is in agreement. But that is not the point.

Nor is Licona’s view in accord with the ICBI view on inerrancy (which ETS has adopted as a guideline in understanding the topic), as I showed in my “Open Letter.” In fact, as one of the framers of the ICBI statement, I can testify to the fact that it was Gundry’s view (and others like it) which we were specifically condemning when we spoke against “dehistoricizing” the Gospel record as Licona has done.

Seventh, this is not, as Licona asserts, merely a hermeneutical issue on which any one can take his own views. As was pointed out in our debate with Gundry (in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*), one’s hermeneutics or methodology cannot be totally separated from his view on inerrancy. If it were, then people like Karl Barth could be said to be consistent with inerrancy, even if they believed the Bible was not without error in certain facts of history or science. Indeed, as Gundry was forced to admit, even Mary Baker Eddy could consistently sign an inerrancy statement (on Licona’s argument), while she was allegorizing away, not just the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 but also allegorizing away all the stories in the Bible, including the resurrection of Christ!

Indeed, contrary to Licona’s claim that this Matthew 27 issue “was outside the primary thesis of the book,” for the resurrection of these saints was directly connected to the resurrection of Christ and listed as a result of it (see Matthew 27:50-53). So, the two events are interwoven. Hence, to deny the literal historical nature of the saints who were

resurrected as a result of Christ's resurrection, is also to deny the literal historical nature of the cause of their resurrection, namely, Christ's resurrection itself.

Eighth, Licona reveals the basis of his own problem when he admits that his view on Matthew 27 "is based upon my [his] analysis of the *genre* of the text" and that this was based on a comparison with "similar phenomena in the Greco-Roman literature in general." But this is clearly **not** the way to interpret a biblical text which should be understood by the "historical-grammatical" method (as ICBI held) of (a) looking at a text in its context and (b) by comparing other biblical texts, affirming that "Scripture is to interpret Scripture" (as ICBI mandated). The proper meaning is certainly **not** found by superimposing some external pagan idea on the text in order to determine what the text means. By this same kind of fallacious hermeneutic one can also conclude that other biblical stories, like the Virgin Birth and Resurrection of Christ, are just legends too, along with the creation record in Genesis 1-2.

So, it matters not how many scholars one can line up in support of the consistency of their personal view on inerrancy (and many more than this can be lined up on the other side). What matters is whether Licona's view is consistent with the view of full inerrancy held down through the ages (see John Hannah, *Inerrancy and the Church*) and as expressed by the ETS and ICBI framers and as expressed and confirmed in the official ICBI commentaries on the matter. For once we begin to neglect the "authorial intent" (to use a phrase from Licona's "Open Letter") of the ETS and ICBI statements, and replace it with what we think it should mean, then "inerrancy" is a wax nose that can be formed into almost anything we want it to mean. Sadly, many names on Licona's list of scholars are members of ETS (some of whom are on the faculties of evangelical seminaries that require their faculty to sign the ICBI view of inerrancy). What is more, their approval of Licona's view reveals they are not signing the doctrinal statement in good conscience according to intention expressed by the framers. **The ETS and ICBI framers have drawn a line in the sand, and Licona has clearly stepped over it. Only a clear recantation will reverse the matter and, unfortunately, Licona has not done this.**

Let's pray that he does.
Sincerely disappointed,
Norman Geisler

Michael Licona's Response to Al Mohler and Norman Geisler

Because I am leaving the country today and must attend to last minute preparations, brevity is required. I am grateful to Dr. Mohler for his kind remarks pertaining to both me and my book, which has recently raised quite a bit of controversy in certain evangelical circles. Although I disagree with much of what he has asserted pertaining to my treatment of the raised saints in Matthew 27:52-53, one should not doubt my respect for him and gratitude for the contributions he has made for the cause of Christ and to the Southern Baptist Convention.

An accurate interpretation of a particular biblical text is assisted by an accurate understanding of the cultural milieu in which it was written. It is unfortunate that this does not appear to be a practice of my detractors Drs. Mohler and Geisler. Their judgment that an incompatibility exists between the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and interpreting Matthew's raised saints at Jesus' -death as apocalyptic symbols—or even to consider this interpretation as a viable way of understanding what Matthew was communicating (which is my present position)—without engaging in a thorough and sophisticated discussion of the milieu in which Matthew wrote is quite premature.

*Dr. Mohler asks, "What could one possibly find in the Greco-Roman literature that would either validate or invalidate the status of this report as historical fact?" This is the wrong question. For it presupposes that Matthew intends the report of the raised saints to be understood as a historical event. So, the first question one should ask is how Matthew intended for his readers to understand this text. If he intended for us to regard the raised saints as apocalyptic symbols, then Drs. Mohler and Geisler are mistaken when regarding them as "historical fact." It is only **IF** one can determine after an exhaustive study that Matthew intended for us to regard the raised saints as an event that occurred in space-time that Dr. Mohler could legitimately claim that the Greco-Roman literature offers nothing to assist us toward a correct interpretation of the text. Instead, Drs. Mohler and Geisler have pre-determined what the text means. But it is Scripture that is inerrant. Thus, we must be careful not to canonize our interpretation of Scripture so that we come to believe that it, too, is inerrant.*

Article XX of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics states,

*“We affirm that since God is the author of all truth, all truths, biblical and extrabiblical, are consistent and cohere, and that the Bible speaks truth when it touches on matters pertaining to nature, history, or anything else. **WE FURTHER AFFIRM THAT IN SOME CASES EXTRABIBLICAL DATA HAVE VALUE FOR CLARIFYING WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES, AND FOR PROMPTING CORRECTION OF FAULTY INTERPRETATIONS** [emphasis mine]. We deny that extrabiblical views ever disprove the teaching of Scripture or hold priority over it.”*

Thus, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics asserts that extrabiblical data can assist us in clarifying what Matthew is teaching and correct faulty interpretations.

We find a similar statement in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy:

*“We affirm that canonical Scripture should always be interpreted on the basis that it is infallible and inerrant. However, in determining what the God-taught writer is asserting in each passage, we must pay the most careful attention to its claims and character as a human production. In inspiration, **GOD UTILIZED THE CULTURE AND CONVENTIONS OF HIS PENMAN’S MILIEU, A MILIEU THAT GOD CONTROLS IN HIS SOVERIGN PROVIDENCE; IT IS MISINTERPRETATION TO IMAGINE OTHERWISE** [emphasis mine].*

*“So history must be treated as history, poetry as poetry, hyperbole and metaphor as hyperbole and metaphor, generalization and approximation as what they are, and so forth. **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LITERARY CONVENTIONS IN BIBLE TIMES AND IN OURS MUST ALSO BE OBSERVED**” [emphasis mine].*

Thus, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy asserts that an inattention to the culture and literary conventions in Bible times could lead to a misinterpretation of the biblical text.

Examples in the extrabiblical literature of phenomena similar to the raised saints in Matthew 27 may provide insights pertaining to how Matthew intended for us to interpret his raised saints. When we study the literary conventions in Bible times, we identify specific language in the Greco-Roman (Virgil, Dio Cassius, Plutarch), Jewish (Josephus) and biblical (Matthew 24, Acts 2) literature that may be employed to accent an event believed to have cosmic or even divine significance. Thus, when I noticed what might be similar language in Matthew 27:52-53, the interpretive possibility I proposed in my book emerged. Couldn't the same be said

2,000 years from now pertaining to a proper interpretation of a text in which it was asserted that “the events of 9/11 were earth-shaking” while others may wrongly interpret the statement “Hell will freeze over before Ahmadinejad converts to Christianity” as a prophecy of two events rather than as a statement of enormous improbability?

The charge that I have “dehistoricized” the text is also problematic, since it likewise presupposes that Matthew intended the raised saints to be understood as historical. But what if he intended for them to be understood as apocalyptic symbols? It would then be misguided to “historicize” them. This would be little different than regarding as historical the seven-headed great red dragon in Revelation 12:3-4 whose tail sweeps up a third of the stars and casts them to earth. I regard this description as entirely symbolic and that to regard it as a real space monster would be to “historicize” the text.

The text in Matthew 27:52-53 has puzzled many New Testament scholars for years and will continue to do so. I remain puzzled but continue to seek a better understanding of what Matthew intended to communicate here. The calls of Drs. Geisler and Mohler for me to retract my opinion that it is possible Matthew intended for his readers to understand the raised saints in Matthew 27:52-53 as apocalyptic symbols is not helpful. Instead, such premature calls stifle scholarship and authentic quests for truth. I will be happy to retract my opinion once I am convinced that Matthew’s authorial intent was to communicate that the raised saints are to be understood as an event that occurred in space-time. So far, I have found the arguments offered by Drs. Geisler and Mohler to be unpersuasive and misguided.

I am grateful to the Southeastern Theological Review for their invitation to participate in a roundtable discussion on the meaning of this text and whether the solution I proposed in my recent book is compatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. It is their desire to publish that discussion within the next 60 days. I will reserve my defense and further criticisms for that discussion and want to express my gratitude to the many who have sent words of support and to those who have written in my defense on the web. It is sad—and perhaps telling—that they have been ignored by Drs. Mohler and Geisler, since some of their arguments are quite good.

A Response to Mike Licona's Defense of Dehistoricizing the Resurrection of the Saints in Matthew 27

Norman L. Geisler

I wish to express my appreciation to Mike Licona for his belated response to some of the issues I raised about his view over two months ago. While this response was no doubt prompted by the superb treatment of the matter by Dr. Al Mohler that was just placed on his web site, Licona's response is better late than never. Before addressing Licona's defense of this view, it is noteworthy that he acknowledges that it is a denial of the historicity of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27 and says clearly "which is my position." Indeed, he has still not retracted his in-print view that this event is a "legend." As for Licona's defense of his view, he offers several arguments. Let me address them briefly.

First, he claims that his view is in accord with the doctrine of inerrancy. However, the Evangelical Theological Society, which is the largest group of scholars in the world based on inerrancy, pronounced the same kind of dehistoricizing of the Gospel record as incompatible with its view on inerrancy. Indeed, they requested that Robert Gundry resign (by an overwhelming vote) for holding a similar view which dehistoricized sections of the Gospel of Matthew. Licona makes no mention of this crucial fact, but insists on redefining inerrancy to fit his errant view. However, in the light of the Gundry decision, Licona has no grounds on which to stand to claim his view is consistent with the historic view of inerrancy which was embraced by the founders of ETS.

Second, Licona appeals to the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) statements on inerrancy to support his view of "dehistoricizing" Matthew's account. However, the ICBI statements on this matter specifically refer to this process as being contrary to inerrancy. Indeed, as one of the framers of the ICBI statements, I can verify that we explicitly had Gundry's views in mind when we condemned dehistoricizing the Gospel record. An official ICBI statement declared: **"all the claims of the Bible must correspond with reality, whether that reality is historical, factual or spiritual"** (Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy* (EI), 43-44). Also, "We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by **grammatico-historical exegesis**...and that **Scripture is to interpret Scripture,**" not extra-biblical texts used to determine the meaning of the biblical text. Further, the ICBI framers said: "We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, **dehistoricizing**, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship" (Article XVIII). Also, "Though the Bible is indeed *redemptive* history, **it is also redemptive history**, and this means that the acts of salvation wrought by **God actually occurred in the space-time world**" (Sproul, EI, 37). Again, "When the quest for sources produces a **dehistoricizing** of the Bible, a rejection of its teaching or a rejection of the Bible's own claims of authorship [then] it has trespassed beyond its proper limits (Sproul, EI, 55). Also, **"We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightly be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual"** (*Explaining Hermeneutics* (EH), XIII). **"We deny that any event, discourse or saying reported in Scripture was invented by the biblical writers or by the traditions they incorporated"** (EH XIV bold added in all above citations). Clearly, Licona's views are not exonerated, but condemned, by the

framers and commentaries of the ICBI statements.

Third, Licona begs the question by assuming that we should approach the Gospel record by not prejudging whether it is historical or not. However, it is not a bias to consider the Gospel records as historical for several reasons: (1) They present themselves to be giving history (cf. Matt 1:1, 18; 2:1). Luke, for example, claims explicitly that he is recording accurate history (Luke 1:1-4), and Matthew records the same basic historical events as Luke; (2) Luke also provides historical crosshairs with eight historical figures (Luke 3:1-2), all known to have lived at that time; (3) All the main events of Matthew are taken to be historical, even by Licona, including the birth, life, works, words, death and resurrection of Jesus. Why then should not the rest of the book be considered historical as well. Thus, the burden of proof rest on anyone who denies the historicity of a section of the Gospel. And to comb through contemporary extra-biblical sources, as Licona does, to find legendary material that seems similar to something in the Gospels and then use it as hermeneutical determinative of what the Gospel writer meant is a completely misdirected way of interpreting Scripture. What is more, the presumption of the historical nature of the Gospels is supported by the weight of nearly two thousand years of the Christian Church. Furthermore, as I mentioned in a previous Open Letter, there are crucial differences between this type of extra-biblical literature and the biblical text.

Fourth, Licona refers to using “authorial intent” to determine the meaning of a statement, but he refuses to take the “authorial intent” of the meaning of ETS and ICBI statements on inerrancy seriously. If authorial intent is definitive in the meaning of a text, then as an ICBI framer, I can verify that Licona’s Gundry-like views of dehistoricizing Matthew 27 are not compatible with the ICBI statements. In fact, it was the very thing we had in mind when we spoke against “dehistoricizing” the biblical narrative by that very name.

Fifth, what is more, Licona violates another standard hermeneutical principle by taking ICBI texts out of contexts. The ICBI statements only allow the use of extra-biblical data to “clarify” the meaning of words in the biblical text and “prompt” a reexamination of the biblical text itself which is the final authority. ICBI never allowed extra-biblical data to be hermeneutical determinative of the meaning, nor of the historicity of the text. As Dr. Mohler correctly noted, they cannot be used to “invalidate” the teaching of a biblical text. In fact, ICBI explicitly condemns this extra-biblical practice used by Licona and affirms that “Scripture is to interpret Scripture” and that by the “grammatico-historical” method alone. Nowhere did ICBI claim that extra-biblical writings were to be used to override the meaning of biblical writings as understood in their context and by other Scriptures. In fact, it stated just the opposite (see above).

Sixth, not only does Licona violate sound interpretive principles, but he draws a false analogy between using symbolic language and dehistoricizing a text. For example, simply because the Bible speaks of Satan under the figure of a “dragon” (an example Licona gives) does not mean there is no literal Satan, nor a literal fall of Satan and a third of the angels (Rev. 12). In fact, the book of Revelation even interprets these symbols as referring to literal persons and event (cf. Rev. 12:9). So, the use of symbolic language and figures of speech in the Bible in no way justifies taking the individuals and events as non-historical and legendary, as Licona does with the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27. The ICBI statements make this very clear. What is more, no such language is used in the simple unembellished accounts of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew

27 which Licona denies as historical.

Seventh, Licona ignores virtually all the arguments we presented for the historicity of the resurrection of these saints in Matthew 27 and then claims that we beg the question in favor of the historicity of the event in question. To state just a few of these arguments given in favor of historicity of the resurrection of the saints in Matthew 27: (1) It occurs in a book that present itself as historical (cf. Matt 1:1,18); (2) Numerous events in this book have been confirmed as historical (e.g., the birth, life, deeds, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ); (3) It is presented in the immediate context of other historical events, namely, the death and resurrection of Christ; (4) The resurrection of these saints is also presented as an event occurring as a result of the literal death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Matt. 27:52-53); (5) It has all the same essential earmarks of the literal resurrection of Christ, including: (a) empty tombs, (b) dead bodies coming to life, and (c) these resurrected bodies appearing to many witnesses. In view of all of this, there is simply no reasonable way one can dehistoricize the resurrection of these saints, particularly based on alleged similarities with extra-biblical stories and expressions. Indeed, to dehistoricize the resurrection of these saints, is to dehistoricize the resurrection of Christ which is said to be the cause of it.

Eighth, Licona claims the extra-biblical literature containing phenomena similar to the raised saints in Matthew 27 may provide insights pertaining to how Matthew intended for us to interpret his raised saints. But in support Licona offers more false analogies such as the use of figures of speech of events today. But no one claims that the “earth-shaking” events of 9/11 were non-historical or poetic devices used to describe what every eye-witness knows to have taken place in the actual space-time continuum. We validate the historicity of this event by the eyewitnesses who experienced the event and who recorded it as actual history. If someone 2,000 years from now interprets the events from 9/11 as apocalyptic or legendary, then they will be in error.

Ninth, it is understandable that Licona would be “grateful to the Southeastern Theological Review for their invitation to participate in a round table discussion on the meaning of this text and the solution” that he proposed. However, we must be careful not to place too much weight on such a meeting, particularly because some of those involved have already placed approval on his view in a recent Open Letter released by Licona. So, it may be a case of the fox guarding the hen house. There are far bigger and better scholarly circles than this, such as, the nearly 300 international scholars who formed the ICBI statement on inerrancy and its statements which declare that views like Licona’s were incompatible with the view of full inerrancy which declared that the Bible is wholly and completely without error and denied all dehistoricizing of the Gospel record.

Tenth, Licona claims that to reject a view like his is to “stifle scholarship.” In response, we do not wish to stifle scholarship but only to reject *bad* scholarship. Further, as Evangelicals we must beware of desiring a seat at the table of contemporary scholarship which is riddled with presuppositions that are antagonistic to Evangelical Christianity. Indeed, when necessary, we must place Lordship over scholarship (2 Cor. 10:5). We do not oppose scholarship, but only scholarship whose presuppositions and methodological procedures are opposed to the Faith once for all committed to the saints.

Unfortunately, Mike Licona refers to Dr. Mohler and I as “detractors.” In response, I would like to repeat that I have both love for Mike as a brother in Christ and

respect for him as a scholar. However, I have a higher respect for the truth of God's inerrant Word and for my duty to defend it. And I am firmly convinced that the Gospel record is seriously undermined by this kind of Second-Temple, pro-legendary interpretation that denies the sufficiency of the historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture and flies in the face of nearly two millennia of Christian consensus on the historicity of the Gospel record. Hence, while I am not a detractor, I do believe that Dr. Licona needs to be a retractor of this serious challenge to the complete historicity and full inerrancy of the Bible. Since he has expressed some doubt about his own view in his previous Open Letter, I would hope that his doubt about his own hermeneutics would not decrease and that his certainty about the inerrancy of the whole Gospel record, including this text, would increase. I am praying to that end.

Ten Reasons for the Historicity of the Resurrection of the Saints in Matthew 27

Norman L. Geisler 2011

The text in question reads: “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many” (Matt 27:50-53).

In *The Resurrection of Jesus*, Mike Licona denies the historicity of what he calls this “strange little text” (548), claiming that it is not to be “taken literally” (527) but is “legend” (34) or a “poetical device” (553) in “eschatological Jewish” (552) language, providing “special effects” (552) for His death and the “impending judgment” (553).

However, there are many good reasons to reject this “dehistoricizing” of the text:

1. This passage is part of a historical narrative in a historical record—the Gospel of Matthew. Both the larger setting (the Gospel of Matthew) and the specific context (the crucifixion and resurrection narrative) demand the presumption of historicity, unless there is strong evidence to the contrary in the text, its context, or in other Scripture—which there is not.
2. This text manifests no literary signs of being poetic or legendary, such as those found in parables, poems, or symbolic presentations.* Hence, it should be taken in the sense in which it presents itself, namely, as factual history.
3. This passage gives no indication of being a legendary embellishment, but it is a short, simple, straight-forward account in the exact style one expects in a brief historical narrative.
4. This event occurs in the context of other important historical events—the death and resurrection of Christ—and there is no indication that it is an insertion foreign to the text. To the contrary, the repeated use of “and” shows its integral connection to the other historical events surrounding the report.
5. The resurrection of these saints is presented as the *result* of the physical historical resurrection of Christ. For these saints were resurrected only “after” Jesus was resurrected and as a result of it (Matt 27:53) since Jesus is the “firstfruits” of the dead (1Cor 15:20). It makes no sense to claim that a legend emerged as the immediate result of Jesus’ physical resurrection. Nor would it have been helpful to the cause of early Christians in defending the literal resurrection of Christ for them to incorporate legends, myths, or apocalyptic events alongside His actual resurrection in the inspired text of Scripture.
6. Early Fathers of the Christian Church, who were closer to this event, took it as historical, sometimes even including it as an apologetic argument for the resurrection of Christ (e.g., Irenaeus, *Fragments*, XXVIII; Origen, *Against Celsus*, Book II, Article XXXIII; Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, Chap. XIII).
7. The record has the same pattern as the historical records of Jesus’ physical and historical resurrection: (a) there were dead bodies; (b) they were buried in a tomb; (c) they were raised to life again; (d) they came out of the tomb and left it empty; (e) they appeared to many witnesses.
8. An overwhelming consensus of the great orthodox teachers of the Church for the past nearly two thousand years supports the view that this account should be read as a historical record, and, consequently, as reporting historical truth.
9. Modern objections to a straight-forward acceptance of this passage as a true historical narrative are based on a faulty hermeneutic, violating sound principles of interpretation. For example, they (a) make a

presumptive identification of its genre, based on extra-biblical sources, rather than analyzing the text for its style, grammar, and content in its context; or, (b) they use events reported outside of the Bible to pass judgment on whether or not the biblical event is historical.

10. The faulty hermeneutic principles used in point 9 could be used, without any further justification, to deny other events in the gospels as historical. Since there is no hermeneutical criterion of “magnitude,” the same principles could also be used to relegate events such as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection of Christ to the realm of legend.

Six Reasons Why Denying the Historicity of this Text is Contrary to the Doctrine of Inerrancy

1. The historic doctrine of Inerrancy affirms the complete truthfulness of all of Scripture “in all matters upon which it touches” including “the events of world history.” Thus, the Gospel narratives (of which Matthew 27:50-53 is one) should not be “dehistoricized” (see ICBI “Chicago Statement on Inerrancy,” Article XVIII and “A Short Statement” nos. 2 and 4).

2. Affirming the historical truth of this text in Matthew 27 has been the overwhelming consensus of the great orthodox teachers of the Christian Church for the past nearly 2000 years. So, any denial of its historicity has virtually the whole weight of Christian history against it.

3. The largest organization of scholars in the world who affirm inerrancy (The Evangelical Theological Society) declared that views like this that dehistoricize the Gospel record are incompatible with inerrancy, and, hence, they asked a member (Robert Gundry) to resign by an overwhelming vote (in 1983) because he had denied the historicity of sections in Matthew. The only real difference to Licona’s approach in Matthew 27 is one of the type of extra-biblical literature used— apocalyptic vs. midrash.

4. The official statements of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), the largest group of international scholars to formulate an extended statement on inerrancy, explicitly exclude views like this that “dehistoricize” Gospel narratives. As a member of the ICBI drafting committee, I know for certain that views like Robert Gundry’s were a specific target when it declared: “We deny the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching...” (“Chicago Statement on Inerrancy,” Article XVIII), and “We deny that generic categories which negate historicity may rightfully be imposed on biblical narratives which present themselves as factual” (*Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics*, XIII).

5. The ETS has adopted the ICBI understanding of inerrancy as their guide in determining its meaning. And the ETS excluded a member who dehistoricized sections of the Gospel like this. And it was because of instances like this, where members redefine doctrinal statements to suit their own beliefs, that the International Society of Christian Apologetics (www.isca--apologetics.org) added this sentence: “This doctrine is understood as the one expressed by the Framers of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in its ‘Chicago Statement’ and as interpreted by the official ICBI Commentary on it.”

6. Neither the Evangelical Theological Society nor ICBI, in their official statements and actions, have allowed divorcing hermeneutics from inerrancy by making the vacuous claim that one could hold to inerrancy regardless of the hermeneutical method he employed and the conclusions to which it leads, even if it dehistoricized the creation story, the death of Christ, or His resurrection. If they did, then they would no longer be an “Evangelical” theological society.

*One figure of speech, “asleep,” is used which means literal death (John 11:11, 14; 1 Thess. 4:15, 16).

