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S5E10 - Season Finale

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Welcome to the Finale of Season 5. In this episode, Mike recaps this season and specifically the heart behind his investigative method. He has a word for apologists who plan to appeal to the Gospels and also discusses what is next on his professional schedule.

Mike Licona is associate professor of theology at Houston Baptist University. HBU offers a fully accredited Master of Arts degree in Christian Apologetics that can be completed entirely online or on the HBU campus in Houston. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/2Wlej6Z>.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Licona. Dr. Licona is associate professor of theology at Houston Baptist University and he is a frequent

speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the president of Risen Jesus, a non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's program we'll be reviewing this season as we've been looking at the historical sources pertaining to the fate of Jesus. Specifically, we've been considering his death and resurrection in a number of sources with Dr. Licona.

But before we continue on any further, be sure to subscribe to this podcast, whether you're listening through the Apple Podcasts app or an app to the Google Play Store, or if you're watching us on YouTube, be sure to subscribe to Dr. Licona's channel. While Mike has been a fascinating season as we have gone through a lot of sources. Boy, sources I hadn't even heard of before.

I've learned a lot myself and I'm sure our viewers and listeners have as well. And I just wanted to take this episode as we recap a lot of these sources, including one section we sort of missed that we'll touch on a little later. But there's been a lot of material here that we've had to analyze.

And I want to first maybe start as we quickly recap literature in the New Testament canon. When we think about the Gospels, we think about how this is primary literature about the life and ministry of Jesus. And while it's of course extremely valuable for the purposes of your project, you and I know you said this a while back, you wanted to be a bit more conservative in how you evaluated things.

And you had a special purpose in mind. Why don't you talk more about that? Well, when I was doing this project, about a year into it, it took me five and a half years of focus time. Of course, there was about another, actually more than four years that went into it probably had seen four or five years that went into studying this stuff even before I began my doctoral research.

And then a little bit afterward. But when I got into this, my objective was simply to prove that Jesus rose from the dead from another perspective, a new angle. It was entirely, I was motivated entirely for apologetic purposes.

I had a reason for doing this. That was my objective to be able to present an even stronger argument for the resurrection of Jesus, but doing it from the angle of a professional historian. But about a year into it, after reading a lot on the philosophy of history and historical method, maybe even two years into it, I recognized that there's no such thing as an unbiased historian.

And I mean, this is said in the literature, there are no unbiased historians. We all have biases. And these biases are objectives pose a serious threat to the integrity of our

investigation.

In fact, you can just see it at work in a times like, for example, James Tabor, a New Testament scholar, he says about the virgin birth, he says, Hey, we know that virgins never give birth. And so Jesus couldn't have been born of a virgin. I mean, it's that kind of blunt that he says it or Garrett Ludeman when he talks about the ascension and he says, we know since we know there's no heaven to which Jesus could have ascended, we don't have to we shouldn't believe the ascension story in the book of Acts.

So this is weighing in with your worldview rather than evidence. Okay. And this is something Christians are just as guilty as non Christians and skeptics for for doing this.

And as one who over the years has been a perpetual second guesser, and a second guess even just little things and even then important things. But you know, if I'm going to second guess even just little things, of course, I'm going to worry over whether I've chosen the right worldview because if I get it wrong, it could cost me eternity. That's not a pleasant thought.

So I wanted to manage my bias on this. And I realized that I had biases. And so I took what a lot of philosophers of history and historians were saying, especially Bihan Makala, who is more who's clearer on this than just about anyone else.

And I used some of his method, adopted his method. And one of the things that I wanted to do is I wanted to bracket my desired outcome while my investigation proceeded. And I recognized that I really had nothing to fear with the truth.

If Christianity was a false religion, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, Christianity is a false religion. And if that were the case, as disappointed as I would be, I wanted to know that that was it. Because if I'm devoting my life to Christ, I mean, that requires sacrifice.

It requires, you know, you're living in such a way and having certain views that are going to be at odds going upstream against the secular culture. And within our increasingly secular society here in the West, you know, Paul himself said, if Christ has not been raised, our faith is worthless. And so I wanted to know the truth.

And so what I wanted to do here was just I understood that as a Christian, as a conservative Christian, I wanted to bracket my desired outcome as much as possible. I know I wanted the Gospels to be historically reliable. I wanted something like First Clement and Polly Carp's letter to the church at Philippi to reflect some apostolic beliefs and tradition here.

And the book of Acts, same thing with the sermon summaries. So I was just trying to be painfully deliberately cautious to recognize that I had these biases and to do what I could to manage them, to bracket them, to harness them. And so if anything, I want to decide on, err on the side of caution, and even rate some things lower than I thought they

should be, just because I understood my own tendency to look at them with a little more favored than others would and perhaps more than they deserved.

So this had an interesting effect toward the end though, it's like as I'm assessing these and then going into the final chapter of my dissertation where I apply historical method to various hypotheses. Then I go to something like what was given by offered by John Dominic Crosson, where he appeals to the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, the hypothetical cross gospel, the odes of Solomon, and a fresca from a church, an Egyptian church in either the fourth or fifth century, and appeals to these kinds of things in order to get his view. And I thought these things have so much less going for them than what the Gospels, the sermon, summaries and acts, first Clement and Papias as fragments and polykarp's letter to the church at Philippi.

The latter has so much more gone for them than these sources to which Crosson appeals. And I figure, okay, if I'm being this careful not to, if I'm being this careful not to overrate these other sources, I'm certainly, now that I look at some of these others like the cross gospel, the Gospel of Thomas and so forth, I'm not going to give them preference. I mean, these things are worse sources than the ones that I'm not rating as highly as I'd want.

So, you know, it's just to put these things in perspective when I was trying to manage my bias. It was just kind of eye opening. And because you decided to move forward with that methodology, like you said, not to overstate value from people, you wanted to err on the side of not embracing, you know, especially Christian material, that almost left you though going forward with that method that left you with a fewer number of sources than maybe people want.

I know especially a number of Christian apologists will talk about the plethora of sources that talk about Jesus, which is great when you're looking at the historical, you know, finding evidence for the existence of Jesus, but maybe it's not so great when you're trying to look for the fate specifically of Jesus. And so that's sort of maybe, Well, it's probably okay. You know, it is okay to appeal to the gospels and some things like that.

And some of these other sources have mentioned, you're just going to have to argue for them, you know, and you better be prepared. If you're going to use the gospels, be prepared to argue for their reliability, be prepared to answer objections such as the fact that all four gospels are anonymous and some of the counter arguments to the traditional authorship of the gospel, be prepared to answer the claim that there's no eyewitness testimony that that's involved. And you got to be able to address these kinds of things.

And that's fine. It's just like when it came to the gospels, as I said in a previous episode, such a conversation would take me far off track of what we were dealing with. So rather than, you know, going off on prolonged sidebar with the gospels, I just preferred to just

say possible and move on.

Yeah. Yeah. But and if I dealt with the gospels, a book would have been a whole lot longer than 700 and some pages.

Yeah, it would have been 1400 or 2000 pages. It kind of lopsided in that sense, you know. So yeah, I don't think I would change that.

I probably would just state my position on the reason why I was doing it that way. Yeah. Yeah.

But you know, that was 10 years ago and that the book came out. So nearly 11 years ago that I submitted it. And you know, you go back and you read it or things like this and your thoughts, you polish those things, they become more fine-tuned and nuanced over the years as you grow and you're understanding and knowledge.

Yeah. So while for this project, you sort of put aside for the time being the gospels as providing, you know, good quality material for your purposes, the purposes of your project, when it came to Paul's letters, on the other hand, you found this is a great resource, highly probable. Yeah.

Talk briefly about that. Paul's an apostle. He was a jag or he was an and he was in the opposition, a negative source, a opposing source when he had this experience that he interpreted as a reason Jesus appearing to him and one that radically transformed his life now that he was an apostle who's endured many persecutions, beatings imprisonment, finally execution or his testimony that he had seen the risen Jesus and that he knew that Christianity was true.

And through Paul's writings, we can get back somewhat to the Jerusalem apostles, those who had followed Jesus, those who were close to him, we can verify that Paul was preaching the essentially same gospel message as were the Jerusalem apostles. We can do this with more certainty than we can. We can have more greater confidence that we can get that through Paul than we can any of the gospels.

So yeah, Paul is just a great source and the oral traditions that are embedded in much of Paul's letters and even some of the gospels are likewise fantastic sources because some of them at least could be said to go back to the Jerusalem apostles. And of course, they're earlier than the literature in which they're written and in the case of Paul's letters, that's some of the earliest in our New Testament. We have that pre-Paul line sources.

That was another episode that we did, two episodes actually, just devoted to that. It's finding those hidden gems or as you referred to 1 Corinthians 15 as that gold where this material existed years before Paul even began writing. And so this is the stuff that historians dream of.

And that's where you're really getting the valuable material for your project on the fate of Jesus. Yeah, even Garrett Ludeman, an atheist New Testament scholar said that the work that has been done over the years on this oral formula, this creed in 1 Corinthians 15, 3 through 7, is one of the finest and interesting discoveries within New Testament scholarship. So even an atheist New Testament scholar who rejects the resurrection of Jesus finds this oral tradition in 1 Corinthians 15 quite interesting and valuable.

Yeah. Now, when it comes to looking outside the canon, looking at non-Christian sources like Josephus, Suetonius, other historians, I may struggle to pronounce their names correctly. Now you got Suetonius, correct? And I know that it's pronounced, I use to pronounce it Suetonius, but my friend John Ramsey, who lives up there in the Chicago area of Meredith's professor of Greek in the classics at the University of Illinois in Chicago, he's become a dear friend.

You know, he pronounces it Suetonius. He said that's the way it is in Latin. So I'm going to follow him on it.

Yeah, sure, sure. When we encounter these non-Christian sources, you know, some of them may mention Jesus and they may mention things about Jesus that he did, a miracle worker, maybe they use the term miracles, but did signs and wonders or something like that. When we survey all those other sources, unfortunately, you know, for your project, there wasn't all that much information there was there.

No, you get a little bit from Josephus, a little bit from Tacitus would be our two best sources of non-Christian sources, a little bit maybe from Lucian and Marbar-Sarapian, but certainly some nice stuff from Josephus and Tacitus related to Jesus' death, and possibly even that the disciples were claiming that Jesus rose from the dead from Josephus, but certainly his death by the Romans in both of those cases. Yeah, yeah. We find some other valuable content in the apostolic fathers, and there's that connection with the church leadership as we discussed back in that episode a few weeks ago where if Peter was in charge at Rome, surely there was this, as Jay Warner Wallace says, this chain of custody.

And so whether, for example, Clement was right after Peter or two degrees later, you know, there's still that passing along of the apostolic teaching, and so that creates some good material, trustworthy material there in the apostolic fathers. Although sometimes you get material that we can't quite decipher if it's valuable for your thesis. Yeah, it's like he was the third to occupy the bishopric in, to be a bishop in the Church of Rome, but the tradition is that he knew he conversed with, he was associated with the apostle Peter.

He knew Peter personally had interactions with them. So yeah, it's, if that's true as a number of ancient sources say, and we really don't have good reason to, I mean, we could call it into question, but we don't have really good reason to reject that. And wow, I

mean, we've got something here that contains some tradition that may very well go back to Peter and the apostles.

It's pretty cool. Yeah, yeah. Now, looking at the non canonical Christian literature, as before I mentioned the quotes, we would have maybe looked at a little differently, but that's just, you know, my style and method.

And you've got from the way the angle you're looking at things. What you found was that a number of these sources that we've gone through really didn't, you know, it was very unlikely or not useful material there. That's right.

You know, a number of it like, yeah, these other sources, like the Gnostic sources and some of the others, even those that aren't Gnostic sources. But yeah, they, as Bart Erman would say, these tell us more about what some Christians in the second and third centuries were saying. But even Erman will say, if you want to know about the real Jesus, there's only one place to go.

That's the New Testament Gospels. And he says, and I almost quote him here, this is not for theological reasons. It is for historical reasons pure and simple.

So even Erman would recognize a lot of what we've been saying here. He would agree with probably most of what I've said. Yeah.

Now, there is a one section, non Christian sources, a group of the rabbinic tradition, rabbinic literature that we were unable to get to in the previous episode there. Okay. And we should maybe spend a moment and talk about them.

So what is the rabbinic tradition or the rabbinic literature all about? Well, it's mainly, you know, the Mishna, a lot of it, which is preserved in the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. Jerusalem Talmud comes a little earlier than the Babylonian Talmud, but the Babylonian Talmud is usually what is appealed to more often. And you have a few possible references to Jesus in the Talmud, only one of which seems probable.

And it comes from the Babylonian Talmud, fifth century, but it contains some material that could go back to the third century. And it mentions Jesus. In fact, I can, maybe I can find it.

It's an interesting text here. All right. Here we go.

This is from B. Sanhedrin 43A. It says, it was taught on the day before the Passover, they hanged Jesus. A herald went before him for 40 days proclaiming, he will be stoned because he practiced magic and enticed Israel to go astray.

Let anyone who knows anything in his favor come forward and plead for him. But nothing was found in his favor, and they hanged him on the day before the Passover. So what's

interesting about this, it is quite different than how we find the stories in the gospel, but it does talk about Jesus being hanged, which was language that could certainly refer to crucifixion, though not necessarily.

And it was the Eve before the Passover, which is, well, let's see, it's close to the Passovers, what all four gospels would say. You've got Matthew, Mark, and Luke saying Jesus was crucified on the day after the Passover meal, whereas John seems to have it just before the Passover meal. So, anyway, the, the rabbis weren't interested in accurate history and they allowed their, it's known that they allowed their creative writing to run freely.

So no one really assigns a whole lot of, of, you know, weight to these rabbinical sources in terms of something we should rely on for history. But it does tell us that sometime in the fifth century, perhaps the third century, that, you know, there was Jewish tradition going around that acknowledged that Jesus had been executed. So it doesn't really tell us much about the historical Jesus.

And so it's, it's really not useful for what we're doing. Sure. Right.

Right. And even going maybe a little bit broader, does, you know, mention that he did, what was the term magic or witchcraft or? Yeah. Which, yeah, that almost could refer to like miracles.

Right. And, and exorcisms. Right.

Which, which is not your, your project here in, in your book, but nevertheless for the purposes of apologetics helps to corroborate the story of Jesus as a wonder worker, you know, in a broad loose sense, of course, we would say a miracle worker. But it certainly caught the attention of non-Christians that Jesus was someone special in the society. And at least from their perspective warranted death.

So, Yeah. And if it's, if that tradition indeed goes back to the third century with, that's contained there, then the, the time span between that and when Jesus lived is about the same time span between now and when Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism lived. So it'd be like us writing something right now that said Joseph Smith was a charlatan.

You know, and we said some things about Joseph Smith that perhaps aren't found in the Mormon literature. Right. Right.

And then someone, you know, 1500 years from now looking back and reading this, that, you know, where did we get her from? Where did we get our information? Well, who knows? Yeah. Yeah. So we've looked at a lot of sources and evaluating whether they served your purposes.

And I'm very much looking forward to the forthcoming seasons as we go even deeper

looking at the historical bedrock that you, you call it. It'll be a lot of fun going even deeper. I continue to learn more and more in our conversations with you before we sign off here for this season though, Mike.

We did have a question from Victoria and she was asking if you were going to be working on a popular level book for why there are differences in the Gospels? Yes. In fact, I'm working on that right now. I wasn't planning on doing that, but when I was in Indonesia two years ago, they had me over and I probably spoke over the course of two weeks to about 2000 Christians and went through a lot of stuff on the Gospels and Gospel differences, the things that are in my Oxford University Press book, which is an academic book on the subject.

And a few months after that book came out, Oxford contacted me and asked if I'd write a popular level version because they said, you know, this academic version is kind of dense and they wanted something that could be more readily understood by people in the Pew. And I thought, no, no, I'm not interested in that. I'm just going to move on because I've already started my next research project, which is the historical reliability of the Gospels.

Looking at what do we mean by historically reliable as we're talking about ancient biography and history. And so I rejected it at that time, but then a few months after that, I was in Indonesia and they were saying, please come out with a popular level version. And I found that some of the questions they were asking me, you know, after my lectures are the same questions that are being asked over here.

And so I figured, okay, well, if people are asking these same questions and it's crossing cultures and continents, then it probably is a good thing to consider writing a popular level book that will, you know, break things down on a, put the cookies on a lower shelf and answer some of these questions. So that's what I'm working on. I hope to have that book finished by, well, my date that I'm shooting for is June 2021 next year.

And then the book should probably be out within a year after that. Don't know who I'm going to put it with, yeah, in terms of a publisher, but several publishers have already expressed interest. So hopefully I'll be out by sometime in 2022, maybe by the summer of 2022.

Great. Wonderful to hear looking forward to it for myself. Like you said, cookies on the bottom shelf.

I need that sort of stuff to help me. No, you know, you don't, but no, you've got your PhD, but, but I think this will, will serve a nice role for, for many people. And it will include some information that was not in the Oxford book.

Very nice. Good. Glad to hear it.

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule for us to, to do these episodes to work through this material and help people reach in new and different ways. Thank you, Mike. I appreciate it.

I'm so glad that we've had the chance to recap this season's work, our conversations that we've had. If you're interested, listen back through all these episodes. We'd love to have you engage with us.

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