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S6E4 - The Fact of the Crucifixion

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode, we take a look at one of the most certain facts in history - the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. What evidence do we have to support this claim? Dr. Licona explains.

[0:00] Intro

[1:53] The Data for the Crucifixion of Jesus

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Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Michael Licona. Dr. Licona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University and he is President of Risen Jesus of 501c3 Non-profit Organization. My name is Kurt Jares, your host.

On today's episode we talk about one of the most certain facts of history. In fact, Dr. Bart Ehrman writes, "One of the most certain facts of history is that Jesus was crucified on orders of the Roman Prefect of Judea Pontius Pilate." So this is the subject of Jesus's Crucifixion is one in which the vast majority of New Testament scholars will say is the best attested fact of history, something to that liking. And yet there still are some people that do take issue with it.

But to guide us through these waters is our guide. Dr. Michael Licona, "Mike, great to see you again this week. How have you been?" Good, good.

That would be fun talking about this topic today. Yes, this is, you know, when we think of even the bedrock facts, this one seems to be, if you had to put a priority number on them, if you had to do that, this is number one. Jesus died by crucifixion.

Yeah, it's kind of a no-brainer. The evidence is really strong for this. So guide us through the data that we have for this non-Christian sources, Christian sources, the scholarship, and if there were objections, what sort of objections are there and why should they be frankly, quickly dismissed? Yeah, well, let's look first of all at the data and to see what data is there that would suggest that Jesus actually did die by crucifixion in the first century.

And so we look at a number of different sources. So for example, you have, well, you've got the Gospels, right? All four Gospels report that Jesus was crucified and died as a result. Now, I know there've been a few occasions like, I remember debating my friend Shabir Ali and even several Muslims will call into question whether Jesus died because they'll say, "Pilot was surprised that Jesus had died so soon." And therefore, the Gospels

themselves even suggest that Jesus survived crucifixion.

Well, the Gospels don't. All you have to do is continue reading on in Mark where it makes that statement that "pilot was surprised that Jesus had died so soon." And it says that "pilot asked the centurion to verify and the centurion verified that Jesus had breathed his last." So it's pretty clear in the text that it says that Jesus died. So number one, you've got all four Gospels that testify to his crucifixion and his death.

But even before that, you've got Paul and Paul on several occasions throughout his letters talks about Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus' death. You know, if you're, and of course he mentions the resurrection, Jesus being raised from the dead. So that implies that you're dead.

If you're going to be raised from the dead, you've got to be dead. You've got the oral tradition that we spoke of in the previous season. The oral tradition in 1 Corinthians 15 verses 3 through 7 that talks about Jesus died, was buried, was raised, and he appeared.

So he died. So you have these early Christian sources, Paul, then the Gospels. You have it throughout other literature in the New Testament Hebrews.

The letter of Hebrews says that Jesus died. You name it. Virtually all the New Testament literature talks about the death of Jesus.

So that's another. You've got non-Christian sources like Josephus. And Josephus mentions Jesus' crucifixion on the orders of Pontius Pilate at the instigation of the Jewish leadership.

And yeah, there are going to be some who question Josephus there, whether that was a Christian interpolation. But by far the majority of specialists with Josephus do think that Josephus mentions Jesus' execution by crucifixion on the orders of Pontius Pilate at the instigation of the Jewish leadership. In fact, the late Louis Feldman, who was the leading Josephus scholar at the time, he wasn't a Christian.

He was a Jewish scholar. And I asked him once. I think it was back in 2000 or 2001 where he thought Josephus specialists were on whether Josephus mentioned Jesus in that disputed text.

And he wrote in the book 18, section 63, because he had written a book earlier. I think it was where Josephus scholars are on various topics. And it was between, I think, 1937 and 1989, something like that.

So he was saying by far that Josephus scholars do think Josephus mentions Jesus there. And I think it was a traveling itinerant preacher who got Jews and Gentiles to follow him, that he was a worker of astonishing deeds that at the instigation of the Jewish leadership Pilate crucified him and that his disciples continue to follow him, even to this very day.

They're called Christians.

So I asked him and he said, well, Josephus specialists would say that Josephus actually mentions these items. At least three to one in favor of Josephus saying these things, mentioning Jesus here. And he said, I wouldn't be surprised if it was as high as five to one.

So most Josephus scholars do think that Josephus mentions Jesus here. And his death would be certainly one of the biggest things that he would mention. So you also got Tacitus, one of the greatest Roman historians who writes in the beginning of the second century.

He doesn't mention crucifixion specifically, but he said that Jesus suffered the extreme penalty. So that would certainly be execution, if not crucifixion itself. The extreme penalty by one of our procurators.

Now that's what the position was later called, but actually at the time of Jesus that was called prefect. We would call it a governor, the prefect of Judea, but he said one of our procurators, punches pilot during the reign of Tiberius Caesar. So you have that.

You've got Marr Bar-Sarapi and he's either writing in the latter part of the first century or sometime in the second century. It's hard. It's hard to narrow it down more than that, even though it's kind of broad.

That mentions the death of Jesus. So you've got these, the Talmud mentions it, but the Talmud's late and the Talmud's not known to be an accurate attempting to report things accurately. So you've got a fair number of even non-Christian sources that mention Jesus's execution by the Romans.

So yeah, it's multiple attested. Yeah, let me ask you this. So this might be something that could be raised.

That maybe these non-Christian sources used the Christian sources to denote that Jesus died or died by crucifixion. And doesn't that sort of take away from the value that non-Christian sources have for attesting to the historical affair? Yeah, if they made use of the Christian sources, it certainly would take away from their value. But then we'd have to say, well, why were they using Christian sources? Especially Tacitus, he's kind of hostile toward the Christians.

He refers to the Christian story narrative as an evil and mischievous superstition. So, you know, he's not biased toward Christians. He's biased against them.

And it's doubtful that he's going to be referring to Christian writings using them as sources for his own Roman histories, his annals of Rome. Josephus, he wasn't a Christian, but he doesn't seem sympathetic to the Christian view, but he doesn't seem up here

hostile toward it either. So, you know, he's growing up in Jerusalem at the very time that the apostles were out proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus in the story about Jesus.

So he's there geographically and chronologically when he would have heard the message. So, yeah, he could have heard it from the disciples, but remember his dad is a popular priest in Jerusalem. He probably would have been there at the time that Jesus was actually crucified and could have verified it.

Certainly, Josephus as a Pharisee and a priest, a priest within Judaism, he would have heard the stories from his own colleagues about the Jewish rabbi, false Messiah, false prophet Jesus in their eyes. And what had happened to him, that they had turned him over to Pilate who had had him crucified. So, I don't think there's really any reason to think that Josephus and Tacitus at least are using the Christian.

Oh, here's another one, Lucian, Greek satirist and a historian who's right in the middle of the second century. And in his book, *The Passing of Peregrine*, as he mentions Jesus' crucifixion in Palestine. And he was biased against Christians, he mocked Christianity.

So, it's not like he's going to be reading the Gospels or Paul and getting his information from them. So, although we can't rule it out, it does seem implausible. Okay, so the first line of evidence here is that we have Christian and also non-Christian sources for the death of Jesus.

What are some other lines of evidence that we can consider? Well, some of these sources are quite early. So, you've got, you know, Mark the first Gospel, 20 to 40 years after Jesus' death, relatively early. You've got Paul, who's writing early.

You know, he mentions Jesus' death in his letters. Certainly, you know, he's got it in 1 Corinthians 15. And so, I'm trying to think if it's in 1 Thessalonians, I don't know right off of it, because that's probably his earliest letter, which would be in the 40s.

Galatians may be in the 40s, it's either in the late 40s or mid 50s. But 1 Corinthians, for sure, it's quite clear that it's in there and he's writing that around the mid 50s. So, that's within 20, 25 years of Jesus' crucifixion.

And then there's the oral tradition. So, you've got the creed, the oral formula in 1 Corinthians 15. It says, "I delivered to you what I also received.

That Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture." So, it mentions his death there. You have Philippians chapter 2 with the kenosis hymn in Philippians 2 verses 6 through 11, where it says, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." So, there you have a pre-Paul line hymn. It's probably pre-Paul line.

Scholars do debate whether Paul came up with it or whether he's just quoting someone else. Certainly the creed in 1 Corinthians 15 is pre-Paul line. But I'd say most scholars do

think that the hymn in Philippians 2, 6 through 11 is pre-Paul line.

And if that's a case, well, that's even earlier than when Philippians was written. So, you've got early sources, multiple independent sources, the fact that Josephus and Tacitus mention it, you have unsympathetic, even hostile sources that mention it. When we think about these early sources, sometimes we cite the Gospels and we know the Gospels are authoritative and reliable, but these early sources, they're predating the Gospels themselves by decades.

And so, in many ways, while we value the Gospels, since they provide the teachings of Jesus, for this particular instance, we more highly value. We give greater weight to Paul's letters because it doesn't have the theological flair of miracle claims that people may be concerned about. It's not as...it's easier for skeptics to just put off Paul as wrong or something like that.

There's no impact for their life. So, it seems, at least to me, they're more willing to accept. Hey, Paul wrote this.

Yeah, this is early Christian letters being sent to this church or these churches, depending upon what it was. And so, in that then, you've got that high value because it means it's earlier. And that's really interesting.

It's true. And Paul's letters don't seem to have the same kind of objections leveled against them as the Gospels do. Like, scholars question who wrote the Gospels, whether the traditional authorship Matthew Mark Luke John is correct.

Well, they do that to some of Paul's letters as well. Out of the 13 letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament, they questioned six of them. But if we're quoting from those seven, like 1 Corinthians Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians Romans, they're all undisputed letters of Paul, but he accepts them as being from Paul.

And then when you look at the early oral tradition, like 1 Corinthians 15, most scholars will say, you know, that's...that's...because Paul says he delivered that to them what he had received and he delivered it to him when he set up the church in Corinth in the year 51. He received it before that. And then we look at what Paul's emphasis and his value on tradition was.

I mean, as a Pharisee, he placed in his pre-Christian days, he placed a high value on tradition. We know that, that this is what the Pharisees did, a high value on tradition. And when we come to the New Testament, we find Paul doing the same thing.

For example, he tells in his letters that they, you know, he used tradition to resolve problems, both practical and theological in the church. He told the recipients of the letters that he wrote that they are to follow the tradition they had received from him. Indeed, if someone in the church did not obey the tradition, he passed along to

them, that the other Christians weren't even to associate or even eat a meal with such a person.

So this tradition that he had received from the apostles and the Jerusalem leadership was really important. And, and it came from that Jerusalem leadership. That's where tradition came from.

You have that same thing. It's like the seat of Judaism was Jerusalem. The seat of the Christian church was Jerusalem.

That's where the Jerusalem leadership was. For several decades into the diaspora happened and the Jews were scattered throughout the empire. Jerusalem is the seat of the church.

That's where the apostolic leadership was. They came up with the tradition that was passed along, that Paul passed along to others. And so things like these, this hymn, things like the creed in 1 Corinthians 15, these would have been quite early in originating with the apostolic leadership in Jerusalem.

Very high probability of that. Now in your book here, you say that the passion narratives themselves also qualify, particularly for the death of Jesus. They qualify as reliable for that.

And why is that so? Well, I do happen to think with a whole lot of scholars, probably a majority that the gospel of John is entirely independent of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And if that's the case, then you have multiple independent reports, at least you've got Mark and John at the very minimum as multiple independent reports of the crucifixion narratives in the Gospels. Also, even if John is aware of Mark, that doesn't mean he's copying from Mark, and most critical scholars today do think that at minimum Mark and John are closely rooted in eyewitness testimony.

I previously met in a previous segment, I mentioned how I had a student, Joshua Pelletier, at Houston Baptist University, I supervised his master's thesis on some preliminary issues related to the gospel Mark. Another one of those issues had to do with the authorship of Mark, and what was Mark's primary source. And so Joshua surveyed over 200 critical scholars writing in English since 1965, who mentioned, who are talking about these things in the Gospel of Mark.

And the majority of them do embrace the traditional authorship of Mark, and that Mark's primary source was none other than the Apostle Peter. Now think about that for a moment. That's affirming the traditional authorship of the Gospels.

Most critical scholars today affirm the traditional authorship. So when you have some skeptical scholars out there saying, "We have no idea who wrote the Gospels." Well, that's false. And they embrace traditional authorship of Mark because there's good

reasons for doing so.

And none of the objections to the contrary are really that effective. The most common being that Mark is anonymous. All the Gospels are anonymous.

They don't have the title. Well, the same applies to virtually every other biography written in that period. The only one that's not anonymous in the in the Pro, or the title is Lucian's passing of Peregrinus.

And that's written in the middle of the second century. Other than that, the nearly 100 biographies written about anybody during that period, 150 years on each side of Jesus, they're all anonymous. And the next one you find that's got a name attributed to it is the life of Elias in the *Historia Augusta* written in the latter part of the 4th century.

That's half a century after Nicaea. So that's how late that is. So virtually all of them are anonymous, but they seem to know who the authorship was.

Bottom line is that with the Gospel of Mark, there's good reason for thinking that Mark's primary source was Peter. And the majority of scholars today, critical scholars writing on John in the authorship of John, according to Craig Keener in his massive commentary on John and well-informed one. He says the majority of critical scholars today, although they reject the traditional authorship of John as being John the Son of Zebedee, they do think that the author used the eyewitness testimony of one of Jesus's disciples, perhaps John the Son of Zebedee, perhaps a minor disciple of Jesus.

But it's carefully, closely rooted in the eyewitness testimony of one of Jesus' disciples. So it's not like we're just really, really removed from the eyewitnesses here. And so the Gospels there, I think, are closely rooted in eyewitness testimony.

I mean, we could talk about Luke and Matthew on another time, but we're saying Mark and John, which are fairly easy to argue for. And then you've got, as we mentioned in the previous session, you've got some embarrassing elements like Jesus's cry on the cross about, you know, God, why have you forsaken me? Why would you put that in there given, you know, why would you invent such a saying of Jesus? He's quoting from, I think it's Psalm 2 or 22, he's quoting from the Psalms there. So it's a fulfillment of prophecy.

Yeah, it's sinful. Yeah. But are they really thinking that when they wrote the Gospels? Is that really what happened? And is Jesus thinking that when he's crucified the people around that putting two plus two together? I don't know, maybe they were.

But still that would have been embarrassing to the earliest Christians reading this because of all the Jewish martyrdom literature around and how that just has these people, the Jewish martyrs going very, very courageously, you know, not hesitating at all to be tortured in horrendous ways and executed. And to very end saying, God, I'm not forsaking your law, but Jesus turns around and accuses God of forsaking him. So I think

there are a number of reasons to regard the Gospels as being reliable depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Yeah, it doesn't lend to the notion of a triumphal death, like in the case with the Jewish martyrs. Yeah. All right, so we've got a few lines of evidence, but you know what? Maybe Jesus, so we've got evidence that suggests Jesus was crucified, but you know what? Maybe he didn't die.

Maybe he survived the crucifixion. That's again one of the common responses that Muslim apologists will raise and that due to some of what their texts say. But, I mean, what's the probability that someone could survive crucifixion? Well, it's not very good.

In fact, as I point out in the book, I point out that there's only one account of someone surviving crucifixion in antiquity. And that's an account by Josephus who saw three of his friends crucified during the Jewish war. And he went to his friend, the Roman commander Titus, and asked as a favor for mercy for his three friends.

And as a favor to Josephus, Titus had all three removed and provided the best medical care possible at that point. In spite of that, two of the three still died. So even if Jesus was removed prematurely and medically assisted, his chances of survival were quite low.

But there is no evidence whatsoever. No reports, nothing evidence that would suggest that Jesus was removed while alive. Or that he was provided any medical care whatsoever, much less Rome's best.

Now, if you're a blogger on the internet, you can propose anything you want, of course. And you'll probably get a fact check by Facebook and Twitter and get it passed, you know, as something credible. But, you know, historians look for data.

And, you know, without, given all the strong evidence we have for Jesus' crucifixion and his death that resulted without any good evidence to the contrary, the historian at least must conclude that Jesus was crucified and that the process killed him. So you've got evidence that Jesus died by crucifixion, nothing to the contrary. All you can do is wildly speculate.

Now, you do have one New Testament scholar who has engaged in such wild speculation. Her name is Barbara Tearing, way out there on the far left. And she proposes that Aloe and Aloe, and there was one other kind of herb that was used for Jesus once they put him in the tomb and it healed him.

After being scourged and crucified and that he later got married, came up, was healed and married Mary Magdalene, and they went to another country and bore children, you know. This is kind of stuff in the Da Vinci coat, but nothing that any real serious scholar accepts today. I think Tearing's the only one that really proposes that.

I don't know of any other scholar who thinks in a relevant field that would think that Jesus survived his crucifixion. I think in my studies I found two physicians that posted or published an article, a journal article, on a medical publication suggesting that Jesus survived his crucifixion. But in the next issue you had several physicians that just said they were out to lunch and refuted what they said on medical grounds.

And I noticed these guys, it was a husband and wife team that proposed that Jesus had survived crucifixion and it was just quickly refuted. Now I will say that when I read Dale Allison's recent book on the resurrection, he mentions an account by Herodotus of someone who was crucified and then removed intentionally before death and they were able to survive. That would make a second account, but there's no details.

I looked up that account. There's no details provided in that account. So we just can't say anything more about it.

But when the Romans crucified, the tortures, brutal tortures that preceded, it's very unlikely that someone would survive. And again, there's just simply no evidence, not even a scrap of evidence to suggest that Jesus survived his crucifixion. These survivors are few and far between and we only hold to that when there's evidence to suggest that they survived.

Otherwise, crucifixion was so common in the ancient world that, relatively speaking, we know that this was an absolute death sentence. That's right. Throw on a bunch of AI-Oon isn't going to fix it.

Yeah, if that worked, why aren't we using that kind of stuff in our hospitals today? So I didn't answer the thing about Muslims saying that they will say that Jesus survived his crucifixion because God caused him to. That's something we could get into, but I've answered that in some short videos. Anybody who's interested can go to some video.

Just type in Islamic Catch-22 on our YouTube channel and we've got some stuff on that there. Very good. Thanks, Mike, for helping guide us through the data on the historical bedrock for the death of Jesus.

It is the most certain fact of history according to many non-Christian scholars, so that's certainly something that they're willing to grant. If you'd like to learn more about the work in ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can go to his website RisenJesus.com and it's there you can find authentic answers to genuine questions on the reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. Loads of great resources there.

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