

# OpenTheo

## S5E5 - Oral Formulas

November 23, 2020



### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

We continue our dive into the oral formulas of the early Church that have been preserved in scripture.

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>.

WEBSITE: <https://www.risenjesus.com>

FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/michael.r.li...>

TWITTER: <https://twitter.com/michaellicona>

Buy "The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus": <https://amzn.to/38vTfNU>

Buy "The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach":  
<https://amzn.to/2NOOZkT>

Buy "Paul Meets Muhammad": <https://amzn.to/2RdEFoB>

Buy "Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?": <https://amzn.to/36dzc5C>

DONATE: If you enjoy the RJ Podcast and want to keep the content coming, please join our team of supporters at <http://bit.ly/SupportRisenJesus>. You may also become a patron by going to <https://www.patreon.com/risenjesus>.

## Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Michael Kona. Dr. Lacona is associate professor of theology at Houston Baptist University, and he's 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 nonprofit

organization.

My name is Kurt Jairus, your host. On today's program, we continue looking at the pre-pallined material available to us in the New Testament. And specifically, we're looking at oral formulas that we can find in the New Testament.

Before we continue, though, be sure to subscribe to our YouTube channel. We'd love to have you following these podcast episodes. And of course, if you're listening on other platforms, be sure to subscribe so you can get regular updates about when new episodes are released.

Well, Mike, in last week's episode, we talked about the Q-source, the pre-market tradition. That didn't really offer us much. Speeches and acts, that provides some possible material for us, but kind of just possible.

Yeah, I might have said possible in my book, but personally, I think it's probable, but I'd said possible because that's, you know, there's so much academic debate over that. Sure, sure. Yeah, not a problem.

It's sort of like with the gospels, it's-- Exactly. A debate to be had on another day. But we now come to oral formulas, and this is a fascinating subject matter that we can find in the New Testament.

There are sort of these credal statements that we can see, that the church memorized, that Paul passed along to people. And of course, if Paul passed these along, that meant that the material, the content existed before Paul even wrote, and you could be looking at years before he wrote, maybe even decades, and we're going to get into that. So why don't we start first with Romans 1? So tell us Romans 1, 3 to 4, what's that credal statement about? Yeah.

Well, let me say something about this oral tradition here too. It seems like when we read the Old Testament that-- and even in Jesus' day, it was Pious Jews thought that Israel was to have one law, and that law was to proceed from Jerusalem. And it seems that the early Christians followed this sort of thinking.

And Paul was a Pharisee, and of course, tradition would have been very important to him and keeping and passing along tradition in its integrity. So even in Paul's writings, you see that he was very committed to the tradition that he would tell the churches, like in 1 Corinthians and 2 Thessalonians, take heed to the tradition that I've passed to you, along to you, follow it. If someone did not live in accordance with the tradition, you weren't even to eat with such a person.

So this tradition wasn't some haphazard kind of stuff passed along, like in the game of telephone. There's no question that stories about Jesus, some of them got corrupted over time. It's an entirely different matter, though, whether some of this made it into the New

Testament.

But with this tradition, we can see that a lot of this is preserved in these oral formulas or creeds. So for example, in Romans chapter 1 verses 3 and 4, he talks about how Jesus had been born of the seed of David and declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. And most scholars who are studying this identify that there is oral tradition, an oral formula here.

And the way they see this is there are two relative clauses here that appear in a parallel manner. So you have born of the seed of David, declared the Son of God with power. These are in a parallel manner.

And not only are they parallel in this sense as relative clauses, but there are parallel verbs that are aarist participles. So you have aarist tense. It's kind of like our past tense.

And these participles would begin these relative clauses, which so you can see the parallelism that is taking place there. There's also an atypical Pauline term, horizo. He just doesn't use that elsewhere or rarely elsewhere.

I think if he does use it elsewhere, it's in another creedal formula. And then you've got the term spirit of holiness here. According, declared the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness.

And this is a semitism. And it's in a letter written to Gentiles in Rome. So all of these go to suggesting that what we have here is an oral formula, a creed that Paul knows of, that the church probably even knows of in Rome.

And he's passing this along to them. And this talks about he's declared the Son of God with power according to spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead. So here you have a pre-Pauline oral formula, pre-Pauline meaning existing before this letter was written.

And it's mentioning the resurrection of Jesus. Yeah, that's some great stuff. And it's sort of exciting.

It's kind of like going on a treasure hunt, at least for me, when reading the New Testament, you're trying to find that material that is early as possible. And historians love the material that is as early as possible. Not that that's always a surefire way of getting at the most reliable material, but generally speaking, highly likely the earliest is the best.

Of course, correct me if I'm wrong. You're the historian. No, no, you're right.

We like early sources. The earlier, the better. If you can get an eyewitness that's early, and you got that with Paul, he claims to be an eyewitness.

If you get that and it's early, that's really good. And if you got an unsympathetic or even hostile eyewitness, who's early. And that's exactly what we have with Paul.

And through him, we got some of these oral traditions, some of which go back and inform us what Jesus' apostles were preaching, the ones who had walked with him. It's just amazing stuff. Yeah.

OK, so here, the next one's an interesting one. It doesn't come from any of Paul's written works. It comes from Luke, Luke 24, 33 to 34.

Tell me about that one. Yeah, so what we have here is this comes right on the heels of the story of Jesus appearing to the Emmaus disciples. These two disciples are walking along the road.

Jesus is walking along the road. He joins them and is having a conversation with them. And Luke says that the eyes of those disciples were kept from recognizing him.

And Luke gives the name of one of the disciples is Cleopas, the other is left anonymous. And so he talks to them and then they invite him to sit down and eat dinner with them. And because night time's coming and just stay with them.

And so Jesus explains to them how the Messiah had to die and rise from the dead and talks to them from expounds of scriptures to them. And then when they broke the bread, he brought Jesus, blessed the bread, he broke it. They recognize him and he vanishes before their eyes.

So they get up and they rush off to Jerusalem to meet with the other apostles. This is still Sunday morning, Easter morning. And so that's just under a seven mile walk.

They get to Jerusalem and they're telling the disciples what happened, how they met Jesus. And they respond and they say, yes, it's true. The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon.

And many scholars look at that statement, the Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon as oral tradition. And, you know, I looked at that at first and I thought, ah, I'm not so sure about that. That just looks like part of the narrative.

But when you look at the reasons why they say that, it becomes more compelling. So for one, it seems such a statement seems foreign to Luke's narrative because Luke doesn't narrate an appearance of Jesus, the risen Jesus, the Simon. It's like, what happened? He narrates this appearance to the Emmaus disciples and he narrates an appearance to the 11, which comes right after this credo or oral formula that's here.

But he doesn't, he just mentions this appearance to Peter, but he doesn't narrate it. So that's interesting. The second thing is this appearance to Peter is mentioned in our most

important oral formula, which we'll look at and that's 1 Corinthians 15 verses 3 through 7. So, and it seems like it may be implied in Mark's gospel at the very end when the women are at the tomb, they discover it empty and the angel tells them the Lord has risen and he says, "Now go tell his disciples and Peter, and Peter that he has gone ahead of you to Galilee and there you will see him as he said," and referring to chapter 14 verse 28.

So that might be some sort of an allusion to the appearance to Peter, but even if it's not, you still have the narration of the appearance to Peter in 1 Corinthians 15. So this isn't something that was unknown. There's an appearance to Peter that is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15 and here in Luke's narrative.

Yeah, interesting. I hadn't given much consideration to this example from Luke as an oral formula. Yeah, I have to think about that more.

My first thoughts are kind of maybe the way you had initially approached it. Like, oh, maybe it's just part of the narrative. So nothing really to make all that much out of.

Sure. And some of these are just going to be stronger than others, but many scholars look at that and they think they see an oral formula there. Yeah.

All right, let's talk about, as you talk about how some will be stronger than others. Let's talk about what I think is a really strong one and it's one that you frequently reference and so does Gary Habermas. First Corinthians 15.

This is an uncontested letter of Paul's and I've listened to a debate between Bart Erman and Bob Price at the Milwaukee Mythicist Conference. Fascinating, you know, both non-believers. And here's Bart Erman reciting 1 Corinthians 15 from memory to demonstrate the existence of Jesus to prove that this is, you know, historically reliable material.

He's citing Bart Erman of all people is citing 1 Corinthians 15 from memory. Like if there's any benefit here, it's that this is so easy to remember, you know, that that's why it was written this way. So the early Christian church could easily remember the tenets here, the teachings.

So I'll let you run us through 1 Corinthians 15. Yeah, well, what you were saying there, that's correct and I mean, it's the oral tradition, oral formula, the creed that is the primary one and perhaps the earliest reference to Jesus's resurrection we have in the New Testament. It's Paul, he starts off 1 Corinthians 15 by saying, "I want to remind you of the gospel message I preached to you." Now this is really cool here because remember in a previous episode we talked about Galatians chapter 2 where Paul ran the gospel message past the Jerusalem apostles, the pillars of the church.

Peter, James and John, he actually sat down, met with them, ran the gospel message. He'd been preaching by them to ensure that he's on message and they certified that he

was preaching the same gospel message they're preaching. So if we get some sort of an idea of what Paul's gospel message is, then we'll, yeah, we're, likewise hearing the voice of the Jerusalem apostles and it's like, this is historical gold.

I mean, this is just awesome stuff. And so Paul says, "I want to remind you of the gospel message I preached to you by which you were saved and remain as believers." And he says, "For I delivered to you what I also received." And those two terms delivered and received are often used for the imparting of oral tradition were used for the rabbis in that sense. So Paul is imparting to them this tradition that was so important to the early church that's going to derive from the Jerusalem church.

And he's delivered it to them when he says, "I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you for I delivered past tense. I delivered to you past tense. When did he give it to them when he established the church in Corinth? Probably around the year 51, which if Jesus is crucified in either April 30 or April 31, or April of 33." So we're looking at what? 18, 19 years, 21 years, 18 to 21 years after Jesus was crucified, Paul is delivering this oral tradition to them.

And he's writing to them around 55, 56. So they know he's telling the truth because they know that he delivered it to them because he's writing to them. I delivered to you in 51 what I also had received.

So he's getting this oral tradition prior to 51. We don't know when he received it. You'll have people like Garrett Lutemann, Robert Funk.

I mean Lutemann's an atheist. I don't know what Funk was, but I would guess if he wasn't an atheist, he was an agnostic. And these guys say that we can be entirely confident that this tradition goes back to within one, two, three years after the crucifixion.

James D. G. Donne, who just died recently, he said we can be entirely confident within six months of the crucifixion. Now, honestly, I mean, I'd like to go with this. This is what even skeptical scholars like Funk and Lutemann would say.

And a moderate conservative like Donne would say, but I don't see it. I mean, they could have received it then. When did Paul receive this? We don't know.

He could have received it at the time shortly after his conversion. He might have received it when he went up to Jerusalem three years later. He might have received it 14 years later when he went back to Jerusalem.

He could have received it during some of his missionary journeys when he was with Barnabas or Silas. We just don't know when he received it. We know it was prior to 51 and he was confident that this is reflecting what the Jerusalem Apostles are preaching.

And you know what F.F. Bruce pointed out, he said, it's no mere coincidence that in this oral tradition that Paul specifically mentions by name Peter and James as those to whom Jesus had appeared. And remember in Galatians 1, he spent 15 days with Peter and he saw James, the brother of Jesus in Galatians 2. He met with Peter and James again. So this is probably where he's receiving this information.

And so then after that, he says, verse 11, whether I or he speaks about the death, burial, resurrection and appearances. And by the way, you got parallel parallelism here. It's a long short, long short.

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and that he appeared. So a long, short, long short that all I delivered to you what I also received. And then you get the long, short, long short.

And then he says, whether I or they, the other Apostles, this is what we preached and what you believed. And when he says the word preach, he is not using the same word. I want to remind you the gospel message that I preach to you, which he says in verse 1. The one in verse 1 is you on Galatsemi.

It's translated, the gospel that I preach to you. That's the English translation, but it's one word in Greek, you and Galatsemi. I want to remind you, I want to, literally, I want to remind you of the good news, the good news message.

But then he says, whether I or they, this is what we preached, kerusil from kerigma, kerigma. This is the formal apostolic proclamation here. And this is what you believe.

This is just so cool to see this. Everything is there pointing to this oral tradition, death, burial, resurrection of Jesus, and appearances to three individuals, Peter, James, and Paul, he gives his own testimony in verse 8, and then three group appearances, to the 12 to more than 500, and to all the Apostles. This is really cool stuff.

Yeah, that's, that is great material. You know, the reason why he's mentioning these names as well is he's encouraging people, hey, you know, go check it out yourself. That's the, at least purpose that it serves, the function that it can for people is, you know, these people are still alive.

If you've got questions, go ask them. So it's, it's really, like you said, it's gold, and this material, you know, again, there's debate over when exactly received it, but the point is, is that it's the earliest, quite possibly the earliest existing material in the New Testament. Yeah, and we get right back, not only from an eyewitness, but he probably receives this information from others who claim to be eyewitnesses and who had verified that the gospel he was preaching was theirs as well.

It's just amazing. Yeah. Yeah, it's great to see the, the collaboration and I guess

historically the corroboration here in the text.

Yeah, it's not legend we're talking about. You could accuse them of hallucinating or lying. Of course, the group appearances seem to militate against hallucinations, even the appearance to Paul since he's not grieving over Jesus's death, you know, but so it's unlikely hallucinations.

It's unlikely legend that developed over time. The fact that later on we learned that these disciples were willing to suffer continuously and willing to die for their faith and many of them were martyred for their gospel proclamation, shows that they were sincere about what they were proclaiming. In other words, they were not only saying Jesus rose from the dead, they really believed that it happened and that he had appeared to them.

So I mean, we get a lot from this, a lot from this. Yeah, great. Mike, I've got a question from a listener, Chris.

Can we put to rest the dumb telephone objection, telephone game objection once and for all, like no holding back? Yeah, well look, so the telephone game or Chinese whispers that they call it over in Europe is, you know, something we play when we're in grade school where, you know, we're like kindergarten, five years old and the teacher whispers something in your ear and you pass it to the person next to you, whisper in their ear and by the time you get to the end of the class. It doesn't even resemble what was originally given. And if that can happen in a classroom of kids within five, ten minutes, then what happens to the oral tradition over all those years of the decades before they make their way into the gospels, you know, and that's kind of how it's presented at times and we just can't trust that this is what the original story was.

It may not even reflect it at all. And, you know, first of all that betrays, it doesn't take into account these oral formulas. And you know, when you're looking at Paul here, he's getting this from the Jerusalem Apostles and they certified it is, it is what they are preaching as well.

So there we go. Boom. Right there, you can't get any better than what we have there in this creed.

So did stories of Jesus get corrupted over time through the like the game of telephone be in past around carelessly? Absolutely. Do we have evidence for this? Not necessarily, but I mean it is so obvious that it would happen over time. The things would get amplified what he did in all this that we'd be shocked if it didn't happen.

But the question is, is that what we find in the gospels? And it seems to me that those who want to claim that the game of telephone is so largely involved in the discrediting the gospel stories about Jesus. It's like in order for that to happen, it's like the apostles



shortly after Jesus death would have had to go off on a permanent religious retreat and were never heard from again. But Paul's undisputed letters in the book of Acts discredit such a view because they inform us that the church was headquartered in Jerusalem.

That's where the apostles were and they were proclaiming Christ for at least the first two, two and a half decades after Jesus is death. And this brings us up to the very doorstep of when the first gospel mark was written. It also presupposes or assumes that the gospel authors lack the desire and the sense to sift through traditions about Jesus, filtering out those that were suspected of being poor or being incorrect and retaining those that were believed to be rooted in the eyewitness testimony.

And then I do think that we do have some good evidence for the traditional authorship of at least some of the gospels. I have a student at HBU, he finished his master's degree earlier, but I supervised his thesis and he did it on some pro-legomenon in relation to Mark, the gospel of Mark. His name is Josh Pelletier.

You guys are Rachio Christie, chapter leader at some university in Carolina, Southern South Carolina University, something like that. And he found that the majority of critical scholars, he surveyed 207 of them, 207 critical scholars since 1965, who write on the subject of the date of composition, the authorship and of Mark and whether it contains petrine testimony. And he found that the majority of scholars, critical scholars since 1965, writing in English and who comment on it, think they agree with the traditional authorship of Mark's gospel and that Peter was his primary source.

So we're only one removed there, one removed from here and it from Peter. Or if you want to say Jesus, you want a letter from Jesus or something, then we're two removed because we're getting it from Peter who heard, you're getting it from someone who wrote what he remembered Peter saying. John's gospel, even though most critical scholars today reject the traditional authorship of John, they still think that whoever wrote John was largely reliant on an eyewitness testimony of one of Jesus's disciples.

And then we could go on and talk about Luke and Matthew, I just don't want to get too far off here. But you've got this stuff that, it's not all this stuff passed around for so long and that's what found it to weigh into the gospels. We can be pretty confident that we are hearing some stuff that has been preserved accurately.

It doesn't guarantee that everything we're reading in the gospels happen or that all of it's been preserved accurately. But it's very far. What we have is quite reliable and very far from the positing of careless transmission of all this stuff over all the years and that we can't trust what we have today.

Yeah. Now analogies are either weak or strong. In this case, the telephone game objection or concern is just really a weak analogy about what we have pertaining to the oral teaching of the church.

As Mike pointed out, we might be two people removed. We're not 20 to 30 people down the line and finally it's getting around to being written. That's just sort of a weak analogy.

So very good question though and that can be a common concern not just about oral tradition but also I know manuscript evidence. I think knowing this listener, he was wondering about the oral tradition here. So good question there.

All right, Mike. Well, thanks for guiding us through the oral formulas here. These are just three.

I know that there are others and others you addressed in your book as well. For the Romans 1, you rate it as possible plus. For Luke 24, you have possible but for 1 Corinthians 15, highly probable.

This is some of the best stuff. It's gold from a historian's standpoint. Great material for us.

When we think about the historical sources, the relevance and value of historical sources pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus. Let me just say something about the possible plus of the Romans 1, 3, and 4. I'm trying to be super, super careful and conservative in a sense of not going further than the evidence can bear. And whereas I would personally look at Romans 1, 3, and 4 as Credo material and rate that is probable.

I said possible plus, one step below probable because I just wanted to be careful that my biases were not unduly guiding my investigation. So I wanted to err on the side of caution and not overstating it. So I think I probably went too far further than I needed to, but I didn't want to be accused of too quickly granting these things.

And I was seeking truth. So I didn't want to do that. I figured if I'm being even too conservative, not theologically conservative, but too conservative, I'd rather do that than to be too accepted too quickly.

Right, right. Yeah. And for the purposes of your project, your target audience, etc.

Yeah. Whereas today you might say, oh, no, this is not just possible plus it's probable. This is good material.

So it's part of those ongoing conversations with people and going further with others that space perhaps didn't permit in this already large book. Good. All right.

Well, next week we're going to be moving away from Christian sources to non-Christian sources. And I'm looking forward to hearing Mike's thoughts on a number of those ancient historians and the value we can get about the resurrection of Jesus from there. If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can go to

RisenJesus.com where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the reliability of the Gospels, the resurrection of Jesus, world religions, cults, loads of great free resources at the website, eBooks, PDFs, video debates, all sorts of great content.

If this podcast has been a blessing to you, would you consider becoming one of our monthly partners? I really appreciate the support of listeners like yourself. To get started with your support today, go to [RisenJesus.com/donate](https://RisenJesus.com/donate). Be sure to like Dr. Lacona on Facebook, follow him on Twitter, and be sure to subscribe to this channel on YouTube if you don't already. And you can also follow this podcast at the Google Play Store or Apple Podcasts as well.

This has been the RisenJesus podcast, a ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona.