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S4E7 - Historians and Miracles: James D G Dunn and A J M Wedderburn

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode of the Risen Jesus Podcast, Dr. Licona and Kurt discuss the contentions of New Testament scholars James DG Dunn and AJM Wedderburn that historians cannot investigate miracle claims. Dr. Licona discusses why he thinks Dunn and Wedderburn are mistaken.

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#historiansandmiracles #jamesdgdunn #ajmwedderburn #mikelicona

Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike Licona. Dr. Licona is associate professor in theology at Houston Baptist University and he's a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, conferences 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 Jares, your host. On today's episode we look at our last historians, in this season on the historian and miracles. We're looking at a set of two historians in their particular view and Mike here, we're looking at A J M Wedderburn and James D G Dunn.

Some New Testament folks will certainly be familiar with Dunn. I haven't heard of Wedderburn and this is the position that I've been the least familiar with in my studies on the subject matter, but which I think is still nevertheless important to be aware of, especially as post-modernity gains or continues to have traction for some people and some circles on the subject matter. I do want to remind people the reason why we're going through this content, this material, it may seem a bit more dry, but setting up the methodologies and recognizing the concerns with the methodological approaches is foundational material to what's coming about the good sources that we have in what we're going to get to next season and further on.

So we need to recognize the philosophical assumptions that can be imported by historians into their historical work because as we've talked about consistently, everybody has biases. The question is, are those good biases or bad biases? Are they warranted or unwarranted? That's something that we all need to be aware of and we should be willing to call out not just with others, but even with ourselves. Maybe we're importing some ideas that are foreign to a text, foreign to a context, foreign to how we are doing harmonetics in the text.

It can apply, this sort of self-reflection can apply in a number of different areas in our studies, in our scholarship, our ministry work, even how we talk to people. So this work that we're talking about has all sorts of applications, and that's why it's so important for people to be thinking about and challenging themselves. But if for our listener, if you're someone who thinks, "Oh, maybe this is dragging on too much, this is our last episode dealing with historians in particular, and next week we have our concluding episode of the season." So let's get into Wetterburn and Dun here, Mike.

So let me read from a passage from Wetterburn who writes, "What the first witnesses experienced was not the resurrection event itself, but an encounter with Jesus, an encounter which they then interpreted as meaning that Jesus was risen had previously been raised so as to be in a position to encounter them." So what exactly are we dealing with here with that statement? Well, I mean, he's absolutely correct there. No one was around, at least we know, when Jesus rose from the dead to actually witness that event in person. So they did see Jesus afterward and concluded they interpreted that when

they saw him alive as that he rose from the dead.

So they saw him die, then they saw him rise from the dead, or they saw him alive again, and they interpreted that as his being resurrected. I don't see that as a problem in concluding that Jesus rose from the dead. If, let's say, this episode they see my hair the way it is, and let's say in the next episode they see my hair is significantly shorter.

Well, they weren't there at the barbershop, but viewers would know that I had gotten a haircut, right? They would interpret the difference there as a haircut without ever witnessing it, and they would be correct. Okay, and this is perhaps concerning because what Wetterburn, and we'll get to done momentarily here, our suggestion is that there is a gap between the experiences of the disciples. And due to that gap and the interpretation of that, Wetterburn says, "This is a no-go.

Is that the position here?" As far as being able to determine that Jesus rose from the dead, historically, yes, that would be a no-go for him. Okay, and so this is where you do get the problem of post-modernity like we discussed last season, because the historical fact of the matter is unknowable, ultimately unknowable for this position. Okay, let me ask you about Dun, so Dun is a, I think if I'm correct, a much more well-known name in New Jersey.

Wetterburn is a pretty big scholar, but I'd say Dun is a better known, more widely known. More widely known, sure, yeah. Okay, now I think some Christians, I've interacted with some Christians who think Dun is an evangelical.

I have come across some things here and there, which I'm not sure about. I haven't read all that much have done, admittedly. But he seems, you're saying here that this is his position as well, that historically it's just unknowable what happened.

Yeah, that's correct. He would come to the conclusion that we could say that we can know that Jesus' disciples had an experience they believed was of the risen Jesus appearing to them, but the historian, as historian, could not conclude that Jesus had actually risen from the dead. Dun is not a, he's not an evangelical, not even close.

I wouldn't even call him a conservative scholar. I'd say he's a moderate. You know, he's a moderate, he's a moderate, theological, moderate.

So would he line up with Myers position here that we can't say that the miracle happened historically, but theologically? I mean, is he open to that or is he even more agnostic on that issue? That's hard to say. I'm not sure. He just has a different approach to it.

I mean, he would do this. He would say, all right, we've got the event itself, event X, like the resurrection. You've got the resurrection.

All right. No one was there really to see it. And so the apostles had some sort of experiences of Jesus afterward that they, and that those experiences, those experiences were trying to get to.

Okay, not even necessarily the resurrection, but those experiences. Did they actually see the risen Jesus? And they thought they did. They interpreted that experience, the data of their perceptions, their senses.

They interpreted that as Jesus have been raised from the dead. That was their interpretation. And then what we are doing is we are reading their interpretation and trying to interpret their interpretation.

So what done would say is all we have today is our interpretation of their interpretation of data emerging from an event, which is now irrecoverable. And so we can only come to a first order fact. That would be the disciples said that the disciples believed Jesus had been raised from the dead and had appeared to them.

But to say Jesus rose from the dead would be a second order fact. And as historians, we can't say something about those second order facts. We are mainly concerned with first order facts.

And I would disagree with that. I agree that you have an event which is no longer recoverable. We can't get into a time machine, go back and relive that event.

And there is data that emerges from that, which the eyewitnesses are going to put their own interpretation on it. And then we are looking at their interpretation. That's true.

But let's do something very similar. Let's go back to the American Civil War, the Battle of Gettysburg. So we have union and Confederate soldiers who fought in that war.

So you have the battle itself. And then you have the eyewitness testimony of soldiers on both sides who were there. Documents they may have written, whether it's official document or letters home describing what happened.

Then you have got people who knew those soldiers who are able to say what they heard those soldiers testifying about the battle. So we have got the battle. You have got eyewitness and other documents that describe their perceptions of who won that battle.

They are saying that they had the perceptions, the impressions that the Union Army won that battle. That's their interpretation. And then we are reading their interpretation.

Well, can you imagine someone getting up in front of a group of American Civil War historians at a conference and saying, "This is all we have." So we only can come to the first order fact that these veterans who fought this battle somehow got the impression that the Union Army won that battle. But to say that the Union Army won the battle of

Gettysburg would be a second order fact and would be beyond what we can really say. I mean, that person would just be laughed out of the conference and probably not invited to return.

So, yeah, I mean, we can look at this and understand these kinds of things, but historians have to, you know, draw what they think is to be the best explanation. And that is where strictly controlled historical method comes into play using the criteria of inference to the best explanation. Okay, there are a few things here.

So first I want to say, so done is different than Meyer because Meyer would say we can get to that first order, but whether the miracle occurred is something in the realm of theology, whereas done says we just don't have access to the second order. Or even the first, let's see, the first order to be the experience. Yeah, he would say the first order is that the disciples had experiences interpreted as being of the risen Jesus.

So he would say, yes, we could get to that, but he'd say we couldn't go beyond that. So, no, you can, you just have to use historical method at this point, which done may not be aware of because typically New Testament scholars do not learn how to do history in their education. In fact, when I did my doctoral research back in, well, it ended in 2008.

I had done some research looked at the websites, the course catalogs of all the Ivy League schools. And when you look at the departments of religion, biblical studies theology, philosophy, and you look for undergrad graduate and doctoral level programs and you say, okay, well, how many courses are offered on historical method. And you take all those and there's only one, and it's a doctoral level seminar at Princeton.

Now, of course, this was, you know, 12, 13 years ago, but I don't know if things have changed, but, you know, that's at Ivy League schools and, you know, there are a lot of other schools, you're just not going to find it. In fact, I was teaching a graduate level course on this, the philosophy of history several years ago, and there was a history major. He had a bachelor's degree in history, and then he went on to get a master's degree in history education.

And he said he learned more in my course on how to do history with historical method than he did in his entire undergrad and graduate level courses at the secular universities. Wow. So, yeah, there's not a whole lot of attention that's given to historical method, especially in biblical studies.

So you have a lot of these historians of Jesus who are talking about history, but they haven't had any training in it. So they're just assuming their own methods in the course of their research. Yeah, and they rarely will they interact with general historians, you know, those outside the community of biblical scholars.

So, I mean, they do think obviously done and what are burned, and Meyer and an

ermine, and, you know, they're thinking along these lines of historical method in the philosophy of history. Right. But they're not really interacting with general historians and philosophers of history, like Bihan McCullough.

Right. And so they're just what which is a shame because there's a lot that we as New Testament scholars can learn from general historians and philosophers of history, especially the philosophers of history who are really working through this stuff. How do we come to know the past? So they're not doing it.

So it's like they're just cutting new ways through all the brush and the thickets and it's like they come to a camp where the brush has been cleared, and there's been a campfire there, but the fire has long been put out. The ashes are there, but they've been scattered and, you know, that's the camp of general or philosophers of history, and they've long gone. And we've been thinking we've been cutting new ground, plowing new ground, but no, you know, we just arrived at the camp and the party's over.

So we can learn a lot from the philosophers of history, but most New Testament scholars aren't interacting with them. Okay. Let me ask you, getting back to the Wetter-Burn-Donne model here, the concern.

So what if there are cases where we just have that first-order fact and we can't or struggle to make? So, for example, when we were talking about the synoptic problem, we are unsure about, we have a modest view of certainty about who was written first, but we can't know with a high degree of certainty. That impacts how we evaluate and judge the second author. So if Mark was first, how Matthew, what he did with Mark's material, for example.

So we have to make the claim modestly in the first-order sense that it's almost unknowable what exactly happened. Is that a fair point to make alongside the concerns that Wetter-Burn and Dunn are proposing here? You know, I don't know. I think there's a little more certainty that we can assign to Mark in priority.

Maybe less certainty to whether there was a Q source. You know, there are a number of really good scholars who question whether Q existed. So we talked about the synoptic problem in a previous, I think what was at season two of our podcast, which I think is really interesting.

And, you know, I lean toward the two document, the two source hypothesis that Mark was first and then there's also Q and that Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q as their primary sources. But it could very well be the case. I might be wrong on the Q thing and could very well be the case that other scholars, some really good ones.

Nick Perrin, Mark Goodacre, Richard Bauckham, you know, they would think that either Luke used Matthew as most holding that rejecting Q would think, or as Bauckham thinks,

Matthew used Luke as the source. And yeah, you're right. That is going to determine certain things about what we think is going on in some of the Gospels and who did what, you know, in terms of redaction.

Yeah. So in principle, you're not opposed to what our burn does approach. It just depends.

It depends on what it applies to. If we have historical data, there are claims where we can't, there are situations and contexts where we can make good inferences. And the rest of it would you say, for example, probably the virgin birth, right? You know, this is going to be something for which we don't have the kind of evidence for it as we would have for Jesus's death, or even his resurrection.

So there are some things that we can believe if we want as Christians. I mean, I believe Jesus was born of a virgin, but I can't prove it historically. And I just have to acknowledge that.

I just say, there's not enough evidence there for me to, you know, show with a good deal of confidence that Jesus was born of a virgin. That doesn't mean I shouldn't believe it. It just means I, you know, I just don't have enough to make that historical conclusion.

But that's not what done and what our burn are saying. I mean, you're right in bringing that up that there could be plenty of cases in which the historian just has to say, we have this first order fact that we can know and we can't go any further. Like, for example, we can know that Charlemagne died, right? But we can't know if Charlemagne had him killed.

We can know that King Ludwig died by drowning, but we don't know whether it was murder. All right. There are lots of things like that.

But when it comes to this, the evidence that they're talking about where we can't go further with, let's say, a miracle, like Jesus' resurrection with the reasons that done and what our burn give here, I don't think they fly. They don't work. I think we can get past that was strictly controlled historical method.

And like I say, if we applied that to other things such as the Battle of Gettysburg, you know, you're going to run into a lot of problems. Right. Right.

Right. So in your case, then you would just say, well, it depends on the situation about these first or second order facts. And certainly with the case of the resurrection, we've got great evidence.

We can make great inferences based on those facts, whereas done in others would say, hold it. And we say, no, we can't go further. We can't get there.

Yeah. Your example with the synoptic problem, a first order fact would be we can detect

with a great deal of confidence that there's some sort of literary dependence going on. The second order fact, what might be something like, you know, whether you buy into the two source hypothesis, the fairer hypothesis or greaseback.

Yeah. Yeah. Or some other form.

Good. Okay. Let's take.

We've got time for two questions from our followers here. This question comes from Dinesh. Why didn't the resurrected Jesus appear to pilot or the high priest? Well, we should ask Jesus someday.

No, I mean, really, we just don't know. There's it be it. It'd be neat to know why he didn't, but we don't know why.

What we do know is that it may not have made any difference. It may not have. If Matthew's story is correct about the guard at the tomb, they saw some pretty cool stuff.

They went back and said they saw angels and Jesus had been raised, but they accepted bribes to lie about it. Right? You have Jesus in the parable of the rich man Lazarus in Luke 16, where Lazarus, I'm sorry, the rich man is in hell. Lazarus is with Abraham in Abraham's bosom.

Abraham's up in heaven and the rich man in hell says, well, hey, can you send me or can you send Lazarus to talk to my brothers? And Abraham said, look, if they won't believe Moses in the prophets, law in the prophets, they're not going to believe even if someone returned from the dead. And you say, well, let's maybe you think that's kind of crazy that, of course, they would if they saw someone risen from the dead. Well, it was about a year and a half ago that on Facebook in the Bible and beer consortium, some Christian asked the skeptics who are members on that page.

If you knew for sure that Christianity is true, if you could know it beyond all doubt, would you become a Christian? And there were a number of atheists. Matt Dilla honey was one of them. I debated Dilla honey.

He was one of them and several others. They just said no. They wouldn't.

So you can see that no amount of evidence is going to be sufficient to get some if they don't want to believe to come to believe. And I think that's important for us to recognize. Right.

And that's not to say that there isn't sufficient evidence, but that for some people, there will not be a sufficient amount. Yeah. And what's sufficient? I mean, that has to do with burden approved for each individual.

Yeah. All right. Let's take another question here from Jonathan who asks if you had read

the blog post by Bart Ehrman on his revelatory moment or his God experience.

I looked it up here and here's this segment from Bart that may be interesting to you, Mike. Bart writes, my revelatory moment has softened my view. I guess I'm still an agnostic and an atheist, but I think it makes much, much better sense to stress the I simply don't know part and stop implying that I firmly believe one thing or another.

Here's why. Bart writes, I have a meditation practice and in it over the past year or so, I spent a lot of time meditating on consciousness, especially the marvel that I am a self conscious being. Consciousness is one of the most mysterious and imponderable aspects of the multiverse period.

Philosophers, neuroscience, psychologists, theologians, and all sorts of very, very smart people have written extremely erudite books about it. Most of them disagree with one another. How does something made out of matter have the ability, not only to think, reason, decide, achieve its own will and so on, but be aware of doing so? So here's an interesting development from Bart Ehrman going outside New Testament scholarship, but here he is thinking about consciousness.

So what do you think about this year? Is this sort of the apologetics relevance of the argument from consciousness? Yeah, well, first in terms of Bart loosening up a little and saying he's going to remain an agnostic or an atheist, but he's not so firmly in that camp anymore. I think that's perhaps the most intellectually honest position or tenable position that a skeptic can take, actually. Sometimes people ask me, "What do you think the strongest argument is against the resurrection?" I'll say, "Well, I think the strongest argument would be there's just not enough evidence." So that would be the only position I think that would be intellectually tenable.

The rest of the naturalistic hypotheses are quite easily refuted. I think Bart's taken a position which is probably the most rational if you're going to be a skeptic. Now, in terms of the problem of human consciousness or of consciousness, yeah, this is a real major one.

I remember my freshman year, I took an Intro to Philosophy course, or maybe it was my sophomore year, it was an Intro to Philosophy course, and I was introduced to the problem of consciousness at that point. Like you said in your summary there, or in Erman's words, how is it that if we are all here by naturalistic, unguided naturalistic processes and no God exists? How is it that inanimate objects, living cells, and how is it that some living cells, without any consciousness, like a tree or plant of any sort, how is it that they can come to have consciousness? They know that they exist, they can rationalize and things like this. How is it that that can happen? And that's a huge problem, how that can happen in unguided naturalistic evolutionary processes or in an atheistic, godless reality.

Several years ago, Tim McGrew introduced me to Colin McGinn, not in person, but a book that he had written called "The Problem of Consciousness". Now McGinn is an atheist philosopher who has specialized in the philosophy of mind. He's taught at Oxford.

And McGinn says that the problem of consciousness is a huge one that even today there are no plausible explanations for how human consciousness came about. And he says the problem is insoluble. So from an atheistic worldview, I think Erman is onto something here to say, you know, you just, the problem of human consciousness is huge.

How do you have consciousness? We're conscious of our own existence. We can rationalize how do you get that from a naturalistic evolutionary processes that comes out of unconscious living things. And that's huge.

And I think it certainly points to an intelligent designer of the universe. And not using that as a god of the gaps here, I'm saying by naturalistic processes, it would appear to be impossible for that to have occurred. And given the evidence outside that we have of God's existence, I think that this is another card in the hand of the theist in favor of God's existence.

Yeah, great. Hey, you know, one of the things I appreciate about you and your ministry is that while you are an expert in New Testament scholarship, you're a field of study, you have this expansive field where you are competent in other subjects as well. And that's one of the things I admire about you because you've got both of those things going for you.

Sometimes you get people that are just experts in the one thing and that's only the only thing that they can really address or are comfortable addressing. But I mean, your knowledge on the intelligent design stuff or other worldviews, it's I think quite impressive. But well, I appreciate that Kurt, Dr. Jarrus, but I wouldn't call myself an expert in those fields.

I just have a little knowledge there. That's right. Yeah.

You know, I would be, you know, when it comes to New Testament or the philosophy of history, I might somewhat would consider me an expert. But no, I know some of these other things outside because I used to look more at the arguments for God's existence. And I think the problem of consciousness, as you mentioned, as you raised, it's a huge one.

It's a stumbling stone for atheists, for sure. Yeah. Good.

All right. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work in ministry of Dr. Michael Acona, please visit RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. It's very that you can find articles, e-books, videos, debates, all sorts of resources to be beneficial

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