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S3E4 - The Uncertainty of Historical Knowledge

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

How much certainty is required to believe a fact? What is a fact? Can we have absolute certainty? Dr. Licona explains how to navigate the spectrum of certainty and how it applies to history.

The Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Licona equips people to have a deeper understanding of the Gospel, history, and New Testament studies. The program is hosted by Kurt Jaros and produced in partnership with Defenders Media.

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Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he's a frequent speaker at University campuses, churches, conferences, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's episode, we're going to begin looking at certainty and fact, and looking at arguments and how historians come to evaluate what they think we can know. And so, Mike, I first wanted to ask you this question.

When looking at history, we've already talked about how we have an incomplete picture. And so we only have just a little bit of what actually happened. But given that there's that incompleteness, some people might be worried that they're not getting the full picture, that we can't really know what really happened.

There's a sort of Cartesian anxiety from the lack of certainty that people have when

doing history. Is that right? Yeah, for sure. And the Cartesian anxiety, I mean, let's kind of define that.

That's came from Renee Descartes, right? And basically, he was just, "What can I know?" And finally, it was, what did he say? "You're the philosopher." I think, therefore, I am. I think, therefore, I am. And that's one thing he could know, because he thinks.

So then he knows that he, at least he exists, right? So, Cartesian anxiety is we're always seeking for more and more certainty, 100% certainty. But that eludes us, especially when we come to history. But even with foundational things.

So, for example, how do we know that we are really the age that we are? Well, you say, "Well, our parents told us we're that old." Well, yeah, but maybe their memories are bad, right? Maybe someone marked the birth certificate incorrectly. How do we know that we aren't, we all just weren't created five minutes ago, by God, with food in our stomachs that we never really ate, and memories in our minds of events we never experienced? Well, we can't know that with 100% certainty, right? Or the other example that's given by philosophers is how do you know that we're not just brains and vats somewhere, being stimulated by a mad scientist to have the external perceptions, and that this isn't really happening. We're not actually here.

So we can't, even with such foundational things, have 100% certainty. There are great challenges to knowing the past. And so we're never going to be able to have 100% certainty on virtually anything we can have on.

Yeah. I think maybe like mathematics and axioms of sorts, but when you compare those to all these sorts of other things that we know about, that we really know about, you know, those are such a small category of truths. Sometimes when I teach a philosophy of history class at Houston Baptist University, sometimes I will open the class this way.

I'll take a photograph of a piece of rail from a railroad track that I actually own. Sometimes if it's a local place, like I taught a course at Southern Evangelical Seminary years ago, and I brought this -- oh, and I did it down at Luther Ice Seminary, bring this rail, and I pop it down, pull it out of the bag and pop it down for everyone in the class to see. And I say, "No, this, what is this?" "No, that's a rail from a railroad track." Okay? So let me describe to you how I got this.

I like trains. My grandfather is a railroad engineer. His dad worked on the railroad.

I've always liked trains. So I grew up in Baltimore, and we have the B&O Railroad Museum there. It's a really cool place.

A roundhouse and old, old trains and really neat. So before my mom died, she and I went down to visit there, and I said to the manager of the museum, I said, "Do you guys ever sell rail? That B&O trains, Baltimore and Ohio trains during their glory passenger days,

that they actually ran over the track. She said, "We've done that one time before.

I suppose we could do that again." So I said, "I would like that." So she says, "Okay, we'll do it. I gave her my address. I think I got charged \$120 for it." But it's like, "This is B&O rail.

I wanted it." So it comes, UPS, to my door. There it is. And then a day later, I got this envelope from the B&O Train Museum.

And there it is, stamped from the U.S. Post Office, an official stamp. Open the letter, it's on the B&O Railroad Museum letterhead. And it describes this piece of rail that I received, that it was laid down somewhere between 1923 and 1929, along the place where the first one and a half miles of commercial rail was ever laid in the U.S. Pretty cool stuff.

And she describes it as a 100 pound rail, which means it's 100 pounds per every 3 feet, which means this rail was 33 pounds. And something. This is pretty cool.

So how do we know that this rail is what I've actually described? Well, you've got an eyewitness here who says, "I purchased it right." We've got a manuscript from the company, from the manager of the company, on official stamp from the U.S. Post Office. I've got the postmark and all this. But can we know with 100% certainty that this rail is what we're claiming? Well, no.

Well, why not? Well, maybe I'm lying. Maybe the manager lied to me. Maybe the person that she contracted the welder to go out and cut this rail.

Maybe he lied to her. Maybe he thought he was on the right track, but he wasn't, she didn't double check. Maybe the postman decided he wanted to keep the rail from himself and gave you a fake one.

That's another one? You can never know with 100% certainty. However, we can know there's enough evidence to conclude with reasonable certainty that this rail is what is described. And so even with something like that, with so much evidence in modern day, we look for reasonable certainty, not absolute certainty.

Okay, what about people who say that because this is such an important matter, say about whether God exists, they don't just want even reasonable certainty, like they might have with the railroad, you know, track the rail. Yeah. They say because it's about my eternal destiny, I have to have a greater level of certainty, so much stronger than just what's reasonable.

Yeah, well, I mean they can. They can say that. And I mean we can want more evidence.

I think we have sufficient evidence for the resurrection as we'll get into at the

appropriate time. We can ask for more, but at the end of the day, it's not what we want, it's what we have. As the historian of Jesus John Meyer at Notre Dame once said, it's like playing cards.

We always wish we had more cards. We wish the cards we had were better, but you got to play the hand you've been dealt. And historians, no matter what we're studying, whether it's Caesar crossing the Rubicon or who presented Caesar's proposal before the Senate in December 50.

Was it Anthony or the other guy who eludes me right now, who it was. And what day was it on? Was it on December 9th or 8th or 10th? What happened here? And one of the certain things said was it in December 50 or January of 49, we may not be able to know these things with certainty. And we can wish we knew more.

These are the different cards we have. We wish our cards were better, but we got to play with the hands we've been dealt. Alright, so when we're talking about how there's sort of a range of certainty, right? There's sort of absolute certainty on one end and then, you know, absolute uncertainty on the other.

There's a spectrum here and historians have had different ways of categorizing sort of the levels of certainty. What are some of those levels? Well, I have the spectrum in the book and I have all these things, but I don't remember them all. But it's more or less in the middle, it's indeterminate.

So we just don't know one way or the other, it's 50/50, you know. And on the far end over here, it is we can be certain it didn't occur. On the far end over here, we can be certain that it did occur.

And then there's all these things in between. You know, we're mostly certain that it didn't occur. We're pretty certain it didn't occur.

Well, we are somewhat certain. It's less certain than not that it occurred. It's indeterminate.

It's more probable than not. You know, it's most probable or something like that. Almost certain.

I know in listening to debates by William Lane Craig, he talks about how for deductive arguments, in order for us to be willing to affirm that the premise is true, all it has to be is more probable than not. So that's, you know, you don't have to be very certain even to follow, to get to the conclusion of an argument. But let me ask you this so if I can just pick your brain.

And by the way, historians, whether they're historians of Jesus or whoever, they differ on where you have to be on that spectrum before you can say this, you know, this probably

happened. Yeah. Like James D. G. Donne, a New Testament scholar says, "It's just more probable than not.

One step above indeterminate, as long as you're beating all the other explanations, it's just more probable than not, and you can say it occurred." And I think it should be a little higher than that. Oh, okay, interesting. Yeah.

So let me ask you this. Let's talk with something broader, like the existence of God. Okay.

Where would you be on that spectrum of certainty? Oh, that's a good question. I don't know. You know, I used to tell my dad, and he used to get angry with me for saying this, but I'd say, you know, about, I'm probably 80% certain that Christianity is true.

For Christianity? Yeah. And he said, "What? What do you mean? You should be 100% certain." And I said, "I'm not 100% certain about anything." Well, you know, if you're really saved, if God has saved you, if you're one of the alike, he was a strong Calvinist, you would just know it. And so, you know, he didn't like that.

So, but I don't know. You know, as I was going through this, I was probably more certain that God exists than that Jesus rose from the dead. Sure.

Where am I today on it? I don't know. I haven't given that any thought. I might be more confident that God exists, or supernatural being who's responsible for the universe in life.

I might be more confident in that than I am the resurrection. I don't know. I don't know.

Let me ask you this. Sometimes people might be making their evaluations about, "Oh, I think it's more probable than not, or it's likely." At what point, though, there's sort of a practical aspect here. Yes, there's this intellectual game.

But there comes a certain point when we need to make that decision and have it reflect in our lives. Where does that come from, people? Yeah, I guess it's different for everyone. There's a guy named Lessing, Lessing, right? What was it? You're the philosopher.

I think he was kind of along his lines. He was a couple hundred years ago, but they called it Lessing's ditch. Basically, evidence only takes us so far.

Here's where we want to go, and there's this ditch in between. We need to make a leap. It's faith from there.

But he'd go on to say, "Well, but the ditch is full." I don't know if he said this or someone later on, but the ditch is full of warm water and we can swim easily across it to the other side because the evidence really is good and the leap of faith isn't that much. Yeah. So it

might be different for everyone.

I mean, let's face it. If you're a Muslim, you're brought up in a Muslim family and you know if you convert to Christian, like I was with someone at Nabil's funeral, okay? And this girl had lived in Saudi Arabia and she said she can never go back. She converted to Christian.

If she went back, they would kill her. Her family would. So, but let's just say you're a Muslim.

You're from such a family and you're here in the gospel. You know, you're here in the Jesus' Rose from the dead. It's probably going to take a little bit more to convince that person because they have more to lose.

Where someone who's maybe just a happy agnostic who's like, "I'm really open to truth and following it wherever it leads. There's no consequences. Negative consequences if I do become a Christian, that person may require less." Yeah.

And maybe if the agnostic is living a comfortable lifestyle, maybe they might think that they require more because they have to change their lifestyle. Well, what did Jesus tell the rich man, right? "So all you have to give to the poor come follow me." Couldn't do it. Yeah, he couldn't.

So it's not that the agnostic or the atheist would have to do that but they might have to change their lifestyle, especially if how they're making money for that comfortable lifestyle is something against the teachings of Jesus. Yeah, right. One of your popular arguments for methodologically leading people to accept the truth of the resurrection is the minimal facts argument.

So when you talk about the minimal facts, you're talking about facts. So what do historians mean when they use that term "fact"? Good question. That is another essentially contested concept, right? A term for which there is no consensus.

So the average person is going to think, "Fact, okay, this is something that we can know." But when historians talk about facts, it's disputed on what a fact is. And the reason is they dispute about what is a fact. Like for example, when we come to the resurrection, you've got probably a majority of scholars who study and write on the subject are going to grant that Jesus' tomb was empty.

But a lot of others won't grant that Jesus' tomb was empty. They will just grant that there were reports about an empty tomb. So you have data and then they will say, "How do you interpret that data?" And facts are data interpreted.

Okay. You could put it this way. Like a detective arrives on a murder scene, and the detective looks for little clues.

I don't know what a detective would call it. Clues around the world. Little things.

Is there a casing? It looks on the floor and there's a casing from a 9mm. It's an empty casing. In fact, there's three of them.

And the person's dead and they've got three gunshots in them. Well, those probably resulted from the gun that shot the person, right? But that's data. Those empty casings are data.

You've got the person on the floor. That's data. You've got all these other things, data.

And the fingerprints on the casings might be data. But it's when that data is interpreted within a hypothesis or a theory that this person was killed by an intruder, then it becomes evidence for that theory, for that hypothesis. So in a similar way, or something that isn't related, like maybe there's a toy on the floor that the dog plays with.

That's data, but it's not necessarily evidence given that theory. Got it. Now, if the theory was given that the casings had the deceased's fingerprints on it, and the deceased is holding the gun, and the detective says, "Well, it looks to me that maybe the person slipped on the dog toy was holding the gun and shot himself." Three times.

Yeah, three times. But in that case, the toy would become evidence. So a fact would be data that could be interpreted within a particular hypothesis.

It becomes fact. It becomes like evidence. Now, that's one way of looking at it.

Sure. Another thing, like a minimal facts approach would be, "Alright, this is data that when you put it together, you arrive at a fact." But it's so strongly evidenced, it is convinced, a large majority, virtually unanimous acceptance among a heterogenous consensus of scholars of this thing. That's what Habermas refers to as a minimal fact, and that is what some historians refer to, and as I have in my big book, as historical bedrock.

It's facts passed doubting, pretty much. And the reason we call it bedrock is you want to build your hypothesis on these fairly indisputable facts. So to use the analogy.

This is concrete. So there's maybe a loose, fast and loose connection between data and facts, then. So a fact might be, there's a body on the floor.

That's a fact. There are three shell casings on the floor. Yeah, those would be facts.

Also facts. And so the data or facts come together to also form conclusions, which the conclusion might not be data, but could be a fact that would come from these other facts. Yeah.

Right. That's right. Yeah, so for the minimal facts arguments, we have these various

facts, empty tomb appearances, those sorts of minimal facts, and the conclusion is resurrection.

Right. And I would think of the resurrection as a fact. Yeah.

But some won't. Right. So this is where it gets kind of tricky, because even something like an empty tomb, or the group appearances, or the appearance to James, or what most scholars grant the appearance to James, or that James had an experience he was persuaded was an appearance of the risen Jesus.

But like, for example, I don't know where Richard Balkam is on this now, but when we had a discussion several years ago, he was siding with John Painter and James Taber to say that James was a Christian. He was a follower of Jesus before Jesus died, whereas most scholars say no, he converted afterward. Right.

So was it a fact that he was a believer before? Was it a fact that he was a non-believer up through the time until he saw and met the risen Jesus? What one historian accepts in his country club affects, others won't allow in that country club. Yeah. Interesting.

And again, something that would remind us to look at a horizons with the country clubs. So the country clubs have their own rules. You have to dress a certain way.

You have to believe a certain thing. Yeah. Like miracles don't occur.

Right. Miracles are possible. Yeah.

Alright, we've got to take a question from one of your listeners here. It comes from Tony Vance. Tony asks, "What aspect of the argument for the resurrection is the weakest in your opinion?" Oh, that's a good question.

The weakest. What aspect of the resurrection? Well, we haven't made the argument yet, right? Not yet, but so yeah, I mean, we'll get to it in the future. Well, it depends what argument or are we including everything? Are we doing a maximalist kind of approach? Are we doing more of a minimal facts approach? Let's just take a minimal facts.

I know sometimes there's a variety of minimal facts as well. Yeah. So if we're going a minimal facts approach, the whole thing about the minimal facts approach is you're eliminating the weaknesses, right? That's why you're not doing the maximalist approach because when you do that and you add these other facts that are not as strongly evidenced as the minimal facts or the historical bedrock, then you open yourself up to those weaknesses.

The strength of the minimal facts approach or using historical bedrock as Habermas and I do is you are only using those facts that are so strongly evidenced that there's a virtual heterogeneous consensus among scholars on them. So I don't see really much of a

weakness in these things. So when you talk about the weaknesses of sort of a maximal approach, to me it seems you could mean it in a couple ways.

One is you could mean what you think are the historical weaknesses. Right. Or another way could be the methodological weaknesses that because we don't share the same horizons as someone else, like in a debate, right? You're not going to say raise up some of those points because you know your debate opponent doesn't share the same horizons and so they're just going to try and blast you on that.

You're going to blast and what's going to end up happening, they're going to focus on those things and go off on a red herring and it's going to pull the attention away from the strongest stuff. So I think just for a person's, I mean there's a lot of data involved in this stuff. So just because we're limited in time because we're limited in time, people can't concentrate forever and you don't want to overload a person.

I think the minimal facts approach is just a great approach. I think Habermas is just brilliant for coming up with this and historians do follow something similar when they go with the historical bedrock and you build upon that and then if a hypothesis, if there are two of them that are kind of equal, well then you add secondary, second level facts that are still strong in the evidence but not quite as strong. And that helps to build the cumulative case or cumulative argument which we'll look at in our next episode together.

Alright, well if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can go to our website RisenJesus.com where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels. There you can check out various resources like ebooks, articles, videos, audio files and the like. If this podcast has been a blessing to you, will you consider becoming one of our monthly financial supporters? You can do so by visiting RisenJesus.com/donate. Please be sure to like us on Facebook, Twitter, subscribe on YouTube, and subscribe on iTunes and the Google Play Store as well.

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