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S3E1 - What is History?

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In the season 3 premiere, Dr. Mike Licona addresses the concepts of History from his book, "The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach". What is History exactly? Who do we trust? Why should we care about history when it comes to the Christian faith? Tune in!

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 PLAYING] Hello, and welcome to the "Rising Jesus" podcast with Dr. Mike Macona. Dr. Lacona is associate professor of 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 "Rising Jesus," a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Jears, your host. On today's episode, we are ushering in season three of the podcast where we will spend the time talking about this big, thick book, the Resurrection of Jesus, a new historiographical approach.

But even still, we won't be covering all of the material this season, just some of it. And we are glad that you are here with us today. Mike, I first want to get us started by asking a very preliminary question of sorts.

What is history? Well, that's a good question. It's a good question. We think that that

would be just something that would be very easily answered, right? Yes.

But when I was doing my study on it, I found that this is what is called an essentially contested concept, which is a term that came out, I believe it was in 1956, which means it's a term for which there is no consensus agreement. All right. So when we talk about what is history, there's like a couple dozen different.

It's not as easy as thinking that, oh, it's just about what people write about the past. Exactly. It could be just what people write about the past, or is it the past? Are we writing about the past? Is it representing the past? Is it one's reconstruction of the past and has nothing to do with the truth of that reconstruction? It's really difficult.

In fact, Richard Rorty, a postmodernist, said, history is what we can convince our peers about. I remember reading John Dominic Crosson's description, where he at the very end talks about how history is what's done through public discourse even, so that doing it privately wouldn't even constitute as history. You've got to be done in public with others.

It's sort of like a peer review format of history. So, yes, it's a contested issue, which is surprising. But roughly speaking, it's what we can try to compose of the known facts.

You take artifacts and all that. I think it's what Stephen Davis, Obvious, or Tucker-- I like to just think of it as we look at the data and we determine to our best abilities what happened in the past. Yeah.

And now, of course, how we determine that is probably a future episode of ours looking at method and whatnot. But OK, so that gives us a gist of what history is about. Why should Christians care about history? Well, because the Christian faith, the Christian story, claims to be rooted in history, much like Mormonism, much like Islam, although Islam to a lesser degree.

But if you could show-- I mean, Islam claims that Muhammad receives this visitation from the angel Gabriel, interestingly, the same angel who visited Mary, right? And declared Muhammad to be a prophet and all these things. Well, if we could show that Muhammad never existed, historically, that would discredit Islam. Or since Muhammad is claiming to get all this via dictation through the angel Gabriel, if we can show that historically that he borrowed some of these things from other literature of the period, then it would suggest that he did not get at least all of it.

He at least got some of it from outside the dictation of this angel and gave it to him. So with Mormonism, you've got Joseph Smith who claims in the Book of Mormon. He says the Book of Mormon is about a family that came over from Jerusalem around the year 600 BC.

And it's a history of the civilization, of the Semites who came over to either North

America, some say Central America, and that they grew to a civilization that was perhaps millions of people and that they spoke and wrote in Hebrew and Reformed Egyptian. So if we can show that no such civilization actually existed, then that would discredit Mormonism, which shows it's a false religion. The narrative that it propagates is a false narrative if we can show historically that what they're claiming about the history of it is false.

Same thing with Christianity. It claims that Jesus came. It makes some claims.

He's the uniquely divine son of God who was God's chosen agent to usher in his kingdom, that he rose from the dead. But Christianity provides a test. Jesus says his resurrection would be evidence of what his claims about himself and why he came that those things were true.

So if we can show that Jesus did not rise from the dead, that would be a defeat or for Christianity, because the resurrection is a major event, the event by which Paul and Jesus says the truth of Christianity hinges. It is the test. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul talks about this.

If Christ is not raised from the dead, then we're still in our sins. Our faith is in vain and I'm paraphrasing here, but we call God a liar. And so certainly for Paul, the Christian faith was falsifiable.

It's where I provide the bones of Jesus, and that's that. Yeah, again, it's over. It's over.

You better find something else other than Christianity, because like you said, Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 15, your faith is worthless. You're still in your sins. Those who have died as believers are forever lost.

Eat and drink for tomorrow we died. Yeah. Yeah.

Now the subtitle of your big book there is a new historiographical approach, and that's a big word historiographical. What does that word mean? Oh, well that is another essentially contested concept. So it can mean a couple of different things.

When we talk about historiography, one historian, a philosopher of history, defines it as any kind of writing or representation of the past. So therefore, Plutarch's life of Cicero would be historiography. Tacitus was of Rome would be historiography, historical writings.

Stephen Spielberg's Schindler's List would have been historiography. But there are others who define historiography as discussions related to the philosophy of history. In other words, how we come to know the past and historical method.

So the actual practice of history. And that's how I want to define it. So historiography is

the study of the philosophy of history, how we come to know the past and yeah, and to the degree to which we can know the past, whether we can know the past, all these kinds of things.

That's what we come in chapter one and chapter two of the book. Yeah. I know you've frequently told the story of, I think it was, Lucian.

So he was an ancient writer. And so people had been thinking about how to write history and do history for a long time. And he wrote a book, what was that book called again? How to write history.

Yeah, so even the ancient started talked about, hey, what are the methods and ways in which people are to write about things of the past, events from the past. That's right. So that would be historiography.

Now, when we think of the past, it's important, I think, for people to realize that the vast, vast majority of events, of occurrences, states of affairs that have gone on are lost to us. What my great, great, great grandfather did, I have no idea, no clue. It's just lost.

And one of the only ways, especially prior to, say, video cameras being invented, one of the only ways that we would know of what's happened in the past is if people wrote it down. But even then, they didn't write down everything. That's right.

And so we get an incomplete picture of that past. And in fact, the scripture talks about this. And John 21, 25, John says, Jesus did many other things as well.

If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. So even in the scripture itself, it talks about what John is giving us, and of course, we need to realize what other authors give us is an incomplete picture. For some people, though, they might think, well, if it's incomplete, why should I believe it at all? But that's not the case, right? We should still think that someone could be reliable and giving us an incomplete picture, right? Of course.

And that's a really good point you make about John, what he says there. But I mean, we'll just take a recent biography, one written of Steve Jobs. Of course, is this going to be a complete and exhaustive accounting of his life? There's no way it could be.

Does that mean it's useless? Does that mean we can't know anything about Steve Jobs? Well, of course not. So just because something is not exhaustive, does it mean that it's unreliable? All right, so one common concern people have in their, say, pursuit of seeking truth is that if Jesus was such an important figure from history, why didn't more people write about him? Why is he little known to the Roman Empire? Yeah, well, the same could be said of Hannibal. Not much has been written about Hannibal, but he was a major figure.

So historians are select about what they write. They write about things that are of interest to them. So the Romans rarely mention Jesus.

I mean, you've got Suetonius who mentions him in passing. You've got Tacitus who mentions him in passing, a few others. But not much is written because they didn't really care about Jesus.

Likewise, the Christians didn't write much about the Romans. I mean, try to find much about Rome in the Gospels. You've got a little mention of-- Some figures, yeah.

Yeah, you've got Augustus. You've got Tiberius, Quibernius, Pilate-- of course, Pilate because he's a major figure in the death of Jesus. And their geographical region.

Exactly. But other than that, we don't find much at all interactions that talk about Rome. Now, Luke does talk about the expulsion of Jews from Rome.

That's an ax, yeah. Are there other writers that talk about that event? Yeah, well, one. Suetonius and his life of the Emperor Claudius, in chapter 25, he talks about how the instigation of Cressus Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome.

It's one statement. And other than that one, we wouldn't even know about it except for-- I think it's in Acts, chapter 18, and I think it's verse 2, where it says, "Aquila and Priscilla had recently come to Pontus because Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome." Now, why doesn't Josephus mention it? He's a Jewish historian writing about the history of the Jews during that very period, you would think, that Josephus would mention Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome, but he doesn't. He's just not something that he's interested in reporting, or for whatever reason, he just doesn't include it.

So if Luke was the only one to mention that in Acts, chapter 18, you'd have people accusing Luke of just inventing something. Well, something that big, we would expect other writers. Suetonius or Plutarch or Josephus to mention it, but they don't.

Therefore, it's really dubious if whether it occurred. Again, Suetonius is the only one and he only uses one sentence to mention it. So it is kind of-- that's why we have to be careful not to use arguments from silence.

Yeah, and it's not-- it seems-- in correct me if I'm wrong, but-- so to a certain degree, so for example, I think that if the fall of Jerusalem had happened prior to the writing of the book of Acts, you would think that Luke, given his strategy, would have mentioned that. We do, exactly. And I think that that's a pretty decent argument to suggest that Acts was written prior to the fall of Jerusalem and therefore you would date Luke even earlier and Mark even earlier than that.

However, the fact of what we just discussed about Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome would seem to suggest we've got to be really careful about using such an

argument. We can use that OK. But it's not-- It just has to be really strong.

Yeah, it's not-- that in and of itself, Sam Luke did not mention the fall of Jerusalem in '70, is not enough to place Luke, the book of Acts, prior to '70. OK, here's another question about, say, murkier details. It seems to be the case that sometimes historians will use people who claim to be eyewitnesses, but they weren't.

Yeah. Tell me more about that. Well, Lucian named some in his how to write history.

He wrote that in the middle of the second century. And he said, yeah, there was some that claim to be there and they weren't. So some historians lied.

I mean, that's just the way it is. And some lie today. But some historians lied in the past.

Lucian is the first talk about how some historians were just crummy historians. They didn't practice history with integrity. Plutarch wrote against Herodotus and criticized Herodotus.

It's considered one of the, perhaps, the first critical review of a historian. Yeah, that's fascinating. Now, so with that, though, we see-- I don't want to say it like a bias, but it makes us alert that maybe what the historian is claiming might not be the case, but there might be some truth to it as well.

So maybe the historian got that information from someone else and he was trying to take credit himself, right? So we shouldn't maybe discredit right off the bat. Everything else there. Just because a historian is not perfect, just because they even mislead at times doesn't mean that you throw out everything that they say.

I mean, Suetonius is considered the greatest Roman historian, but he's often indiscriminate in his use of sources. He uses a lot of unreliable anecdotes from-- or anecdotes from unreliable sources. Plutarch is much better in his use of sources, or his choice of sources than Suetonius.

But Suetonius relies on some really-- he's got some sources that are really good sources, like in his life of Augustus. He actually has access to some of the letters written by Augustus, and he was privy to that in his positions. Historians aren't perfect.

And you don't just accept everything that they say, but it doesn't mean you have to become skeptical about everything that they say. A good historian is going to look at the different sources and make decisions and judgments based on multiple sources. Yep.

I've heard this term, and I'm sure you have as well, that history is written by the winners. Is that always the case though? Well, of course not. Thucydides, Xenophon, some of our greatest historians from antiquity, and yet they were the losers.

History is about the World War II, and what the Nazis did to the Jews and others,

homosexuals, the handicapped and gypsies. Joe's witnesses, a lot of times you have German historians who are writing on these and exposing the atrocities. So the Germans were on the losing side, but they are writing these things so that these things are remembered.

Would we consider Josephus as part of a loser as well? Jewish background. Yeah, to an extent, absolutely. I mean, yeah, now he is writing for a Roman audience, and he's writing favorably of the Romans.

But yes, he would be on the losing side since he fought against the Romans and was defeated by them before joining them. All right, we've got some questions from listeners that have come in through last season's recordings, and we've requested some as well. So this question comes from TJ.

He asks, where do we draw the lines on literary inventions? So this is pertaining to some of your other research. Of course, related. Where do we draw the lines on literary inventions for the goal of presenting the truth of a matter to the audience and the gospels? Specifically, do you think it would be allowable in the birth narratives? Mm-hmm.

That's a good question. Yeah, that's a tough one. Yeah, and it's one I haven't really studied.

So I'm hesitant to comment on that. That's a specific one. Yeah, on the birth narratives.

I mean, certainly you have a-- Suetonius, he's repeating a story that he learned from Esclapeades of Mendez, whose writings are no longer extant, about a phenomenal birth account of Augustus. And it was Atia, Augustus' mother, was in the temple of Apollo. And she fell asleep around midnight, and Apollo entered her.

And impregnated her. He entered her as a snake, and impregnated her, and that gave birth to Augustus. So he's like the son of Apollo.

You have a similar story with Alexander the Great. So yeah, you do have some phenomenal birth accounts, divine paternity, Dionysus, also an antiquity, offspring of Zeus. And so we do have these things, OK? Whether the birth accounts have anything like that.

I mean, I haven't studied that. I think if we're going to be honest historians, you have to at least be open to the possibility that that's the case. When you go into the situation, of course, you could look at the evidence to say, no, we've got-- if Jesus actually rose from the dead, he was the son of God.

And so you have urgent birth as child's play. And then you'd look at some of the evidence and consider that in terms of the limits. That's why you have to look very

carefully and make these kinds of judgments, because we don't know what the limits are until you actually look at the same.

And identify them. Yeah, right. Good.

Well, I know it's a very tricky question. Great question, TJ, on that. And thanks for tuning into the podcast as well.

Mike, I'm so glad that we're jumping into your book here. It's going to be what I hope is many episodes. Yeah, this would be fun for us.

Big of a book. Let me ask you this. How long did it take you to write this? Well, my doctoral research took five and a half years.

And then I probably worked on it another six months or longer after that for this book. So that's like six years. And then I did four years of research before going into the doctoral studies for which I drew heavily upon with this.

So I mean, it's at least 10 years work, at least. Yeah, wow. That's great.

Well, again, looking forward to jumping more into what you've got here. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael Lacona, you can visit his website, RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels. You can check out free resources there, like ebooks, articles, videos, such as this now.

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