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Historian Mike Licona Investigates the Resurrection

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Knight & Rose Show - Wintery Knight and Desert Rose

Just in time for Easter, Wintery Knight and Desert Rose interview Dr. Michael Licona about how historians can investigate miracle claims, such as the resurrection of Jesus. Can historians control for their biases and presuppositions? What are the most reliable sources for the life of Jesus? Can Christians make a compelling case for the resurrection to non-Christians? How do naturalists explain the evidence for the resurrection?

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Transcript

Welcome to the Knight & Rose Show, where we discuss practical ways of living out an authentic Christian worldview. I'm Wintery Knight. And I'm Desert Rose.

So today on the show we have a guest, Dr. Michael Licona, a world-class scholar on the topic of the resurrection of Jesus. Mike has a Ph.D. in New Testament with distinction at the University of Pretoria. He has spoken on many university campuses and frequently

engages in formal academic debates.

Mike is Professor of New Testament Studies at Houston Christian University and President of Risen Jesus. His most recent books are *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography*, published with Oxford University Press in 2017. And before that, he wrote *The Resurrection of Jesus, a New Historiographical Approach* with IVP Academic.

And Mike has a new forthcoming book called *Jesus Contradicted, Why the Gospels Tell the Same Story Differently*, published with Zondervan Academic. Welcome to the Knight & Rose Show. Thanks.

Thanks for inviting me. Well, we knew you had a new book coming out and we haven't got our hands on it, but we're going to talk about your old book, *The Resurrection of Jesus, a New Historiographical Approach* today. But feel free to tell us a little bit about the new one.

Well, the new one, I'll just mention it's scheduled to come out May 28. So the other one that was published by Oxford, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?* That was a groundbreaking book. And Oxford right after or right before that came out, they were really excited about it.

And they said, this is a monograph. It's kind of heavy reading. Would you be interested in doing a more popular level version? And at that point, I was kind of looking at the book of reliability of the gospels and doing research in that area.

But then I came back to it later and Oxford said, after all, no, they weren't really interested at that point in popular level type writings, which I understand because they're usually an academic publisher. That's right. So, but Zondervan Academic was.

What this one does is it just brings the cookies down and puts them on the lower shelf. It gives fewer examples, but it gets into things with some things that scholars are already familiar with, like the synoptic problem. But that is very relevant to my approach to gospel differences.

And then I bring a few new gospel differences in and look at them using this approach. And then I address some matters that have come up since the book was published by Oxford in 2017. How does all this work with the doctrines of the divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture? And so that's been something that I've been wrestling with, working on for several years now.

And so I devote a chapter to the inspiration of Scripture and another chapter to the inerrancy of Scripture and how this all works together. That's excellent. I love that you're doing work on these topics and with regard to the differences in the gospels.

That's such a critical topic. When I was in college, I was not a Christian. And I decided to take a course in the New Testament just to find out what was in the New Testament, because I figured anybody who prided themselves on being a young Western intellectual ought to know what the New Testament is.

And I had no idea. And I took a course in the Divinity School of my university. The professor was not a Christian.

And he shared upfront the beginning of the semester that one of his primary objectives was to demonstrate that the New Testament, and particularly the gospels, were just a hot mess of contradictions, that it could not be trusted as any sort of guide for your life, but that it was in fact interesting for understanding prescientific thinking. So at the time, that was fine with me. I wasn't a Christian.

So I got my A and moved on. And then the Lord ended up using that reading of the New Testament to work in my life. And then I made my way to seminary and to reading and studying with Craig Blomberg, who was able to shed some light on some of those problems.

So I really appreciate your work over the last couple of decades in that. Well, I appreciate that. I appreciate that, Rose.

You know, it's interesting. A lot of the folks, the skeptics out there that are appealing to differences in the gospels as a means to say that they're just not reliable, don't seem to be familiar with other ancient literature, the other historical literature like Greco-Roman biography and other histories like by Polybius or Tacitus and Suetonius and Plutarch. Because when you start to read them, you find when you read the same stories reported by these different authors, you find that the same kinds of differences are popping up between their accounts as we find between the gospels accounts.

So if you're going to say the gospels are historically unreliable because of these differences, then you've got to say the same thing about all of ancient history. And they're not going to be willing to do that. Exactly.

And in fact, I've realized since studying this topic that I would have to consider a whole lot of what I say to be unreliable because I frequently leave out details, you know, for the sake of getting to the point, or I'll just mention one person who was at an event because they, you know, that's where things center with regard to the point that I'm making or things like that. And so I frequently think, Oh, if I had just said this and it was accompanied by a miracle, I would have all sorts of attacks for being dishonest when really, I'm just not telling you the other three, four hours of the story because I want you to hear my point. Exactly.

It's like, that's typical. That's the way we, that's the way we are today. Some people like

to tell, get right to the point, just give bullet points, just get to the bottom line.

And we're, we're willing to manipulate some of the things, the details in order to get to that bottom line and the key points quicker and more clearly. Others though, like you're saying, you got to have to go into all these details and it's going to take forever to tell the story and it can be frustrating. So it's not one way is not better than the other.

It's just different ways of telling the story. These things that we do today to abbreviate or change stories to make the point is this a lot of the ancients did the same things, but they did some more things than we would accept today. Not too many more, but they did a few additional things that we wouldn't do today.

So, but it's like you say, once you start to see these kind of rhetorical or compositional devices that I describe in my Oxford book on gospel differences, and you see how the ancients used them, you start to recognize that we use many of these still today in our communications, ordinary, everyday communications. Right. Exactly.

Today, what we wanted to talk about was your book, *The Resurrection of Jesus, a New Historiographical Approach*. So I want to ask you what distinguishes your historiographical approach from, say, other approaches. Well, the bookcase for *The Resurrection of Jesus* that I co-authored with Gary, you know, we got to the end and we had submitted or ready to submit it to the publisher.

And I remember asking Gary, you know, he had at that point, he had a bibliography of about 2,200 sources that had been had written on the resurrection since 1975. Now that's over 5,500, I believe. But yeah, about 2,200 back then.

And I said, all these people that have written on the resurrection, why is it that they are looking at the same data, but arriving at radically different conclusions? And who are these people, these scholars? And he said, well, almost all of them are New Testament scholars. And you have a few philosophers and only a few, very, very few, not even a handful of professional historians. And the most comprehensive was a book written by Paul Meyer in *The Fullness of Time*, who's a professional historian of antiquity.

It was a short book, maybe 200 pages, and only half of it voted to the resurrection of Jesus. And it was a small book, too. So there wasn't a whole lot of content there.

So I thought, well, you know, this is a historical question. So our New Testament scholars and philosophers, how many of them who are commenting on this are even qualified to do so? That in other words, how many of them really know what they're doing when it comes to historical investigation? And so I figured, you know what, I want to look at and become a historian. I want to study how historians do their work.

And then I want to apply the methods of historians, the approaches of historians to this question of whether Jesus rose from the dead. And I got involved in it because I just

wanted to come at the resurrection of Jesus from a fresh angle as an apologetic. But as I got into my research, maybe a year into it, I'm reading all this stuff on the philosophy of history and historical method.

I'm finding that historians, general historians, let's call them, are saying that there is no such thing as an unbiased historian. All of us have our own biases and worldviews, and they threaten the integrity of our historical investigation. And in fact, as Chris Lorenz, a philosopher of history says, it's the disparity of our worldviews that results in pluralism being a basic characteristic of history as a discipline.

And so at that, I recognized that applies to me. It applies to every historian, and it applies to me studying the resurrection of Jesus. I want the resurrection to be proven.

I got into this with the objective of making a historical case for the resurrection of Jesus using historical method. And so my objective threatened to compromise the integrity of my investigation. And so just from reading what other historians were saying, I was able to articulate and come up with six different steps one could take in order to manage one's bias.

So I applied that and boy, it was like a five and a half year investigation of just really bearing down and working hard at this thing. And I was willing to give up my faith during that time. In fact, I was having severe doubts about my faith during my research because I was trying to look at it through the eyes of a historian as objectively as possible and follow truth wherever it led me.

Yeah, excellent. So in your book, you addressed the issue of bias and historical inquiry. How do you navigate potential biases when examining the resurrection narratives? Well, those six steps that I mentioned, I don't know that I can remember all of them this moment, but it's things like, number one, recognize that you have these biases.

And it's funny, you know, as you read a number of the other historians who are doing stuff on Jesus, you find they're not even, they don't even recognize they have biases. So for example, you had Garrett Luteman, who was an atheist New Testament scholar in his, I believe his 2004 book, *The Resurrection of Christ*. He says, now that we know that there is no heaven, we can know that Jesus did not ascend to heaven because there's no heaven to where he could ascend.

And then you have James Tabor who teaches, I don't know if he's retired now, he teaches at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, and he made a statement, Jesus' virgin birth could not have happened because we know that virgin births are impossible. And it's like, okay, so you rule out God, you rule out the miraculous, and then that's how you're doing history. And of course, the major problem with that is that bad philosophy corrupts good history.

So what Luteman and Tabor were doing was allowing their worldviews to umpire the historical investigation, rather than allow the data to challenge their worldviews. When you're debating this, I saw that you like, make two claims now. And the first claim is to challenge naturalism, to kind of attack that presupposition of naturalism.

So I guess that's your response to, you know, this naturalistic bias in your opponent. Yeah, I mean, they definitely, many of them have that naturalistic bias. And my point is, a historian, if you're going to operate with integrity, you can't let your worldview on something like this, you can't let your worldview get in a way if you're actually trying to find truth.

If you're seeking truth, then you have to allow the data to challenge your view. And I allowed that when I was doing this, like, okay, well, does the evidence really point to the resurrection? And one of the things most historians today who are commenting on it says that a historian is not within their professional rights to investigate a miracle claim. And I've challenged that, you know, they'll make things like, well, you know, the historian, you know, has no access to God.

If a resurrect something like a miracle or resurrection occurred, well, it's probably God that did it. And we have no access to God through the tools of historians. And so a historian could never conclude that Jesus rose from the dead.

I'm saying, you know, that's that's bunk. What a historian can do is, you know, an example I'll give is, let's say a comet slams into the moon's surface. And as the lunar dust settles, that leaves the message, Jesus is Lord in Hebrew and in Greek.

What a scientist is going to look at that a good scientist is going to say, wow, that's an extraordinary event. I have no plausible natural explanations for how that occurred. It would seem to require God.

But as a scientist, I have no, we can only investigate natural things. I have no tools for detecting God as the cause of this event. So I'm just going to have to affirm the event, of course.

But I'm going to have to leave the cause of the event undetermined. Now, that's what a responsible scientist would do. And what an irresponsible scientist would do is say, well, that's an extraordinary event.

I have no plausible natural explanations for it. It would seem to require God. But as a scientist, I can only investigate natural things.

And I have no tools for detecting God. So I can't even affirm the existence of this event. He said, well, that's crazy.

But that's exactly the approach that many historians of Jesus are taking today when it

comes to miracles. They'll say, yeah, regardless of any data that we have, historians can't detect God. We don't have the tools for it.

So we can't even affirm that the event itself occurred. For me, I would just say, look, let's approach this thing matter of the resurrection as historians. And if the resurrection hypothesis is the best explanation, then let's affirm the occurrence of the event and leave the cause of the event undetermined.

Now, take your tweed coat off with the patches in the elbows, you know, and stop acting as a historian. And on your off hours, then if you want, you could say, yeah, God is probably the best cause. But yeah, that's my approach to this.

I just don't find their arguments against miracles to be persuasive in the least. Yeah. And along those lines, I appreciate that you responded extensively to David Hume's philosophical arguments against miracles as well.

So I'd encourage people to read that in the book. Well, I appreciate it. Just to add a couple more things.

So you got to recognize you have your bias. Then, you know, what you want to do is you want to lay out your method. So one thing I do in the book, as you know, is I lay out my method, my approach.

I give specifics on how I'm going to do this. So everything is public there and a historian or a critic can look at this and say, all right, I agree or disagree with this method. Most of the critics have not disagreed or challenged the method.

They may challenge the way I'm applying it, but they haven't challenged the method. So but everything is there publicly. And then you submit it, of course, to unsympathetic experts to see how they may criticize what what you're saying and your argument here.

And of course, they've got their biases, too. But a lot of times a critic may have some constructive criticisms to offer. So it's like in the peer review process, when you're submitting a journal article to an academic journal for publication, the readers, independent, anonymous readers, they'll make criticisms and say, hey, maybe you should look at this, or I don't think this argument works for this, for this reason.

And you can look at that. And many times, not always, but many times, those criticisms they're offer are very good. And you can make your argument better.

They're finding weaknesses in the argument on many occasions. So I think it's good to do that. So those are just a few things that one can do to minimize their biases.

And then I would also add that when you're really trying, at least what I found for myself personally, I'm trying to minimize my bias and proceed with an open mind. And

sometimes I found that unless I'm making a sustained effort to do this, I just can't get to a point where I'm just almost neutral. I've got to, and then say, okay, well, I've done it, and you're there for the rest of the time.

No, you got to make a sustained effort to remain there. What I did was I found myself going back to my default Christian position of preferring the resurrection. You know what I'm saying? So if you're really trying to do this with integrity and be honest, it takes a lot of work.

Right. And yet really valuable and worth it. So would you discuss, what are some of the key pieces of historical evidence that support the resurrection of Jesus? Well, I'd say number one is Jesus's death by crucifixion.

This is something you mentioned, the minimal facts. Minimal facts is a term that Gary Habermas coined. Historical bedrock is a different term, but it's pretty much the same thing.

It's something that Paula Fredrickson, a Jewish New Testament scholar, does not believe Jesus rose from the dead, but she talks about historical bedrock, facts are strongly supported by the data that they are beyond doubt. So pretty much like Gary Habermas' minimal facts. Jesus' death by crucifixion would be a minimal fact or historical bedrock.

You also have that subsequent to Jesus' death, very shortly thereafter, a number of his followers had experiences. They were convinced were appearances of the risen Jesus to them. Right.

Virtually 100% of scholars will grant those. And then a very large majority, perhaps, I don't know, 80% somewhere around there, grant that these experiences also occurred in group settings. And then there was a skeptic who was persecuting the church.

We know him as Paul of Tarsus. And he then had an experience that he was persuaded. He interpreted as an appearance of the risen Jesus to him.

And that experience radically transformed his life from being a persecutor of the church to one of its most able defenders. So these would be the facts that are granted by virtually all. Now, Gary Habermas challenged me on something.

You've got the appearance to James. I did not include this among my facts in my book. He thought that I should have.

And the reason being is most scholars who comment on it will agree that James was a non-believer up through the time of Jesus' death. And then shortly after Jesus' death, we find him saying his brother is the Lord. And he becomes one of the leaders in the Jerusalem church.

And that was because he believed the risen Jesus appeared to him. By far, most scholars who comment on this 90% or so say that they agree with this. The problem, the reason I did not include it was because there were only about 30 scholars who even commented on it.

So you don't have the hundreds who comment on it like you do with these other facts. And so I thought, well, you know, I'm just trying to be as careful here as possible, trying to put a check on my own biases. So I may have been over cautious there.

Gary said, hey, look, the fact that only 30 comment on it, that's not our problem. That's theirs. You know, if they don't want to comment, who knows why they don't comment on it.

But, you know, anyway, those are the key pieces, you'd say, of the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. All right. Yeah, I really like that one because it's got that criterion of embarrassment going for it.

You know, James, the brother of Jesus is doubting Jesus. And then outside the Bible, you find out that he's completely flipped his position. I think that's pretty good.

But let me ask you this, though. So you mentioned that sometimes people have naturalistic biases when they look at the data and they do come up with some kind of explanation for the the minimal historical facts. So what would you say the best naturalistic explanation is that you've seen, you know, in debates or in scholarly writings? You know, I don't think there are any strong natural explanations.

One of the most popular would be the hallucination. And on first look, that would seem to be quite plausible. But when you look at the defeaters of it, it's one of the weakest naturalistic explanations to describe the facts that are accepted by virtually all.

I would say, if I were a skeptic, I would go with there just isn't enough evidence to convince me. Very interesting. That'd be the one I use because the others, they just they're all weak.

They do not pass when you subject them to strictly controlled historical method. So then you arrive at what my co-worker said was, you know, something happened. Something happened.

Yeah. Yeah. You'd have to admit something happened.

And I think you could even say, you know, if you're a skeptic and you're being honest, you could say, yep, something happened. Boy, it sure seems like it would have been Jesus' resurrection. That seems to be the best explanation.

But, you know, my philosophical or theological biases would be that resurrections don't

happen or that Jesus didn't rise. In other words, the evidence isn't strong enough to compel you to change your worldview. That's not really a naturalistic explanation, though, right? But I think that's probably the most reasonable excuse for not accepting the resurrection.

Yeah. So what are some of the other common criticisms or alternative theories that are put forth by people who challenge the historical validity of the resurrection accounts? And how would you respond to them? Well, there's the hallucination I mentioned. That's probably one of the most popular, perhaps the most popular amongst those who offer it, that Jesus, his disciples experienced hallucinations, or sometimes they're referred to as visions, but they're actually saying hallucinations by that.

And what they're saying, visions, I said, well, let's just be clear. Are these subjective or objective visions? Objective vision means they really saw something because Jesus or an angel or someone actually appeared to them, but did so out of space time. Or is it a subjective vision? Meaning it was just all going on in their head.

It was a hallucination. And they'll say, well, it's hallucination, you know, subjective vision. So the way I would answer that, if I'm answering it quickly, I'd say, well, number one, the percentage of recipients is too high.

So multiple studies over more than a century have revealed that only about 7% of those grieving the loss of a loved one, and that's the group most likely to experience hallucination, only about 7% experience a visual hallucination of that person. With the disciples, you've got 100% of them, not 7%, but an unthinkable 100%. Second, that group hallucinations are extremely rare and probably impossible.

So hallucinations are false sensory perceptions. You believe you're perceiving something that isn't really there. It's just going on in your head.

It has no external reality. So in that sense, they're like dreams. And just like I couldn't wake up my wife in the middle of the night and say, honey, I'm having a dream.

I'm in Maui. Go back to sleep. Join me in my dream.

Let's have a free vacation. She couldn't do that. Well, you can't have a group hallucination in that sense.

And then third, you've got the appearance to Paul. Now, Paul believed Jesus was a failed Messiah and a false prophet. So Jesus would have been the last person in the universe that Paul would have expected to see or wanted to see.

So it doesn't explain that. In fact, the hallucination hypothesis, it just doesn't explain really any of the facts. You could say, well, maybe an appearance to Peter, right? That's reported in both first Corinthians and Luke and in Luke's gospel, an appearance to Peter

as individual parents.

Maybe he was feeling guilt and sorrow over, you know, it could, but, but the responsibility of the story, you got to account for all of the facts, not just one of them. Another naturalistic explanation that is, I don't know how common it is, but you've got people like John Dominic Crossan, George Nickelsburg, some others that are just saying, well, resurrection was just language used by them as a metaphor to either honor them or to say God had exalted them in heaven. Right.

So this, this person who, you know, had convinced them to leave everything and follow him and then disappointed them, died, devastated their hopes. They wanted to honor him with metaphorical language. That doesn't seem to make a lot of sense.

And that's going to convince Paul. Paul, right. Exactly.

In the book you, you engage with both biblical and extra biblical sources. So how do these sources contribute to understanding of the resurrection? What criteria do you use to evaluate their reliability? Yeah. So I think that's chapter three in the book and I go through a number of them.

So, you know, you've got the gospels, you've got Paul, you know, Paul, everybody's willing to grant Paul as someone who believed he was an eyewitness and someone who knew the eyewitnesses. So he, we know from Galatians one and two, as well as the book of Acts, as well as what Paul says in first Corinthians and elsewhere, that he knew the Jerusalem apostles had spoken with them, had run the gospel message past them. And they had affirmed that he was on message with what they were preaching.

Right. So we can get back to the apostolic message, what the original apostles were preaching, those who had walked with Jesus, we can get back to them through Paul. That's pretty remarkable.

And the fact that we have with Paul, someone who claims to be an eyewitness of the risen Jesus, who was not a disciple before, but was precisely the opposite. Right. That's really quite amazing to have that.

And he converts the Christianity from being a persecutor of the church to now, you know, it's its most aggressive apologists. So you've got that and the gospels. I mean, we could talk about those.

I don't talk a lot about those in the book because there's so many disagreement about them amongst New Testament scholars who wrote them. When were they when were they written, how much eyewitness testimony they actual retain in their things like that. So I didn't want to get taken off track, distracted by that.

So in retrospect, I probably should have given a little more attention to the gospels. I

have done that since. But then I go on to the apostolic fathers and the most promising ones would be Clement of Rome and Polycarp and Papias.

And Papias probably wrote the very beginning of the second century. He probably had a new one of either one of Jesus disciples or one of their associates, and he received information from them probably at the toward the end of the first century. So he's pretty cool source, but he doesn't say anything in the fragments that have been preserved about the resurrection.

So he doesn't really give us anything there that helps us. And then you have Clement of Rome, who writes first Clement, you know, the testimony we have, I think it makes it just slightly more probable than not that that Clement knew the apostle Peter. So it's like when we're reading about Jesus' death and resurrection in first Clement, it's like, well, this could go back to Peter, Polycarp, maybe even a little bit more positive that that he knew the apostle John, the son of Zebedee.

And so when he mentions things about resurrection and Jesus' death, that probably goes back to John. But it's not that their connection is not as strong as what we have with some of the authors of the gospels to the disciples. So anyway, I am just trying to manage and minimize the impact of my Christian biases and thinking, well, I want Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to be written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

I want Clement of Rome and Polycarp to have known the disciples, but I'm trying to be just super careful here. Well, when you have to go and do these debates against critical scholars, you won't be able to get away with this. So you've got to be on solid ground all the way through.

It's probably better, like, you know, because of exactly what you're saying there, Wintery, to be more cautious. I'd rather be overly cautious than not cautious enough, precisely because I've had 37 debates now. And when you're debating someone like Bart Ehrman, who's really knowledgeable in these things, he's going to call you out if you're wrong on something.

If he perceives a weakness, he's going to go after that. And now he could perceive a weakness, and I might be able to respond to that. So I really have to know my stuff there.

So where I found this really helped, though, is you'll have some of your rather skeptical scholars then appeal to things like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter, and they come up with these fanciful explanations. But then when you look at the pedigree of these non-canonical gospels, you find that it's really poor, so poor that even Bart Ehrman will say that if you want to know about the real Jesus, you can't go to these others. That talks about what some people thought about Jesus in the second and third centuries.

But if you want to know about the real Jesus, the only place to go are the canonical gospels. And he says this is not for theological reasons, it's for historical reasons. So what I was able to do in Chapter 5 when I'm assessing all the major alternative hypotheses to the resurrection, and you have someone like a John Dominic Crossin, who is appealing to a Gospel of Peter.

He's appealing to a hypothetical cross gospel. He's appealing to the Gospel of Thomas and things like this. Well, I'm able to call him on that because I'm saying, look, if you don't like the canonical gospels, you should not like these others because the pedigree of these others, the evidence we have for the integrity of these others, or that they are earlier than the other gospels is very poor.

And so, yeah, being cautious can help with that. I think when it comes to the non-Christian sources, Josephus, we can be confident that he tells us about Jesus being known as the Messiah, that Jesus died, was crucified by Pontius Pilate, that he performed astonishing deeds, things like that. Tacitus, we can know that Jesus was executed by Pontius Pilate, while Tiberius Caesar was the emperor.

Lucian of Samosata tells us he's a hostile source. He tells us that Jesus was crucified in Palestine. You've got Maribar Serapi in a prisoner, and he mentions the execution of Jesus.

Suetonius, some appeal to him. I'm not confident Suetonius mentions Jesus there. If he does, he really places Jesus a couple of decades after his death.

Okay, so those are some of the extra-biblical sources. In your book, you talk about the concept of historical plausibility. I've heard Bill Craig mention plausibility as well in his debates.

Could you explain how you assess the plausibility of the resurrection within a historical framework? Yeah, well, plausibility is the degree to which a hypothesis is compatible with our background knowledge. When someone says they saw an alien, I'm not going to believe that they actually saw an alien. Maybe they had an experience, but I don't believe it's going to be an alien.

Why? Because I think the plausibility of an alien visiting Earth is extremely small. Why do I believe that? Well, years ago, I had a conversation with the astrophysicist Hugh Ross, and he told me that the closest planet that we know of that's capable of sustaining life is 23,000 light years away. So even if you had an advanced civilization, advanced people there, far more advanced than us, if some of our physicists today are correct that we could never travel, it's impossible to travel at the speed of light, well, then that would mean that it would take more than 23,000 years, even if you could go at the speed of light, it would take 23,000 years to get here.

That was like 24 generations of Methuselah's, right? And so no one could live long enough to make that trip. And then you couldn't go the speed of light anyway, because of space debris that if it hit the spaceship, it would destroy it and plenty of space debris. And then you've got the problem of the special kind of radiation that you can't sustain on the body for too long for an extended period.

So there's just no way that it could make it here. Now maybe we're wrong on that. And plausibility is based on our background knowledge.

So in order for that background knowledge to change, I need data for that. So if there were a bunch of aliens showing up all over the world, and we turned on our television and every channel had these and the BBC over in London, having these sightings and they were popping up spaceships, flying saucers all over the world and these weird aliens coming out, well, then I've got to change my background knowledge. And now the existence of aliens becomes plausible.

It's something similar is going with the resurrection here. If God does not exist, then the resurrection becomes extremely implausible. If God does exist, then given the historical evidence that we have, the resurrection becomes extremely plausible.

So some of the plausibility is going to depend on where you are with your worldview. So since it relies on the worldview so heavily and we should let the evidence speak for itself rather than our worldviews, I would prefer to just say, let's leave the plausibility factor as inscrutable. I mean, I could go ahead and argue for God's existence and provide arguments for God's existence and that he intervenes in the world and that would make the resurrection plausible.

But I'm trying to eliminate and just bracket this to just a historical investigation in the book. And so that's how I approach plausibility. Were there any surprising discoveries or insights that emerged during your research for this book, like particularly regarding the historical context of Jesus' life and ministry? I'm not sure.

I would say I thought that more scholars would comment on the appearance of the James. I was disappointed that they did not. I have no idea why they did not.

I don't know that that says anything about the historical context of Jesus' life and ministry. I was at the end, I was trying to not think about comparing hypotheses until I got to that point. And honestly, I was surprised by how superior the resurrection hypothesis is to all the other competing hypotheses.

I didn't think that it would out distance them by such a significant margin. I had the feeling along that the resurrection hypothesis would probably be the best, but it really surprised me by how much it is the best over the others. Interesting.

Yeah, that's great. So we're all interested in being able to discuss the resurrection

intelligently with skeptics. What implications does your historiographical approach to the resurrection have for people who are just ordinary Christians, \$1 apologists, doing Christian apologetics and I'm not sure about theology, but for apologetics, gosh, I think that the resurrection is like the silver bullet for apologetics.

Because if Jesus rose from the dead, it's game set match. Christianity is true, period. And so, you know, you could raise things like, well, what about the genocide text in the Old Testament? Or what about the similarities in the flood accounts with, you know, some pagan accounts and all that.

And it's like, none of that really matters if Jesus actually rose from the dead. I mean, it matters, but it's not a defeater for Christianity in any sense, because at the very worst, you could conclude that some of the stuff in the Old Testament are just religio-political propaganda meant to justify the acts of a brutal Israelite king in terms of the genocide text. Or you could even say, well, the Genesis, they copied off of some some pagan accounts for the flood.

You could acknowledge all that stuff. Not that you would, but but you could acknowledge all that stuff. And Christianity would still be true because it is not contingent on whether every story in the Old Testament is to be understood in a literal historical sense.

Sometimes you're debating with these people like Bart Ehrman and the feeling that I get from them is that they kind of had a very brittle upbringing so that if they focus on something like where there was a one angel or two angels at the empty tomb, that crashes everything for them. But, you know, they want to throw out the entire worldview. But if you kind of have like, say, the scientific arguments for theism at your core, like the origin of the universe, fine-tuning origin of life, you know, the sudden origin of body plans in the fossil record, habitability, whatever, then that, like you said, that makes the resurrection more plausible if you can say that.

And then when you see things like, oh, in the Old Testament, there's these stories that are really, you know, striking like the conquest of Canaan. Boy, that really offends my modern sensibilities. You can be flexible about that without losing the core of theism, particularly if you have the resurrection as the strongest point of your case.

You don't retreat beyond that line. And that is enough for a person to become a Christian and follow Jesus. I'm with you on that one.

Absolutely. Yeah. So in your view, what are some of the most significant challenges or unresolved questions facing scholars who study the resurrection of Jesus from historical perspective? I mean, there are a lot of these things that people are investigating.

I'd say today, one of the most more interesting things that people are looking at from a perspective of eyewitness testimony is memory and their approach and how much

memory is actually contained. How does memory work and how much of it is contained in the Gospels? More work is being done on that. I recently supervised the doctoral dissertation on that.

Australian New Testament scholar did a fine job of arguing that eyewitness memory is preserved in the New Testament. He broke new ground. Some really good stuff.

David Gregg, his name. He has a book coming out. End of this month is doctoral dissertation, but it's like \$160.

If you wait, I think 18 months, it's going to come out in a paperback for \$53. So that would be my book to buy that. But yeah, memory is something to look at.

But I'd say for the skeptics out there, if you don't look at the resurrection of Jesus, if you're a skeptical scholar and you don't think Jesus rose from the dead, you still, if you are a New Testament scholar, you need to account for what led the disciples to believe that their experiences were appearances of the risen Jesus to them. I think that that is a huge challenge that they're going to have to come up with and what they have just to say, well, X happened doesn't work well, you know, and certainly doesn't have a good explanatory power because you're not really defining what you believe. And to say, well, you know, maybe it wasn't a hallucination, but it was some psychological thing.

Well, what kind of psychological thing? There are only a limited number of things here. Right. So looking ahead, what areas of research do you believe hold the most promise for advancing our understanding of the historical evidence for the resurrection? I know you just mentioned the memory work.

Do you see anything else promising like that? I mean, that was the Baucom work was groundbreaking. And this memory work may be very helpful as well. Do you see anything else on the horizon? That's a good question.

That's something you may want to ask Gary Habermas about or Ben Shaw. Ben Shaw has been, he did his PhD on the resurrection under Gary, really knows his stuff well, real well, and has helped Gary with his magnum opus. These four volumes that have just begun to come out.

So you could ask them, I have kind of, I haven't been doing more research on the resurrection. My focus, and I've been laser focused on this for more than 10 years now, has been on the gospels, gospel differences, and the historical reliability of the gospels. So that's the kind of stuff I've been working on.

So yeah, it'd be hard for me to say that in reference to the resurrection since I kind of left that. Sure. Yeah.

So tell us again, the name of your new book, which is available for pre-order right now

and where people can find your work and follow you. So it's called *Jesus Contradicted, Why the Gospels Tell the Same Story Differently*, and it will be coming out May 28th. It's available for pre-order.

I know on Amazon, probably on Barnes and Noble and christianbook.com. It'll be coming out in hardcover, Kindle version, audio version, all simultaneously. And also in a 12 or 13 session video course that I, they flew me up to Grand Rapids last July to make that, and that will be coming out at the same time for those who would just rather watch it. Now, of course, you know, you don't get into as many details and things on the video courses as done in the book, but yeah, we're pretty excited about that.

Zondervan seems excited about it. In fact, in the spring academic catalog, Zondervan academic catalog, they talk about more than two dozen new books, but mine's featured more prominently than any of them throughout that catalog. So they must be pretty excited about it.

And that makes me pretty excited about it. Absolutely. Yeah.

Lots of your books are available as audio books, that small kind of introductory book that you wrote with Gary Habermas that's available as an audio book. The one that we're discussing today, that's available as an audio book. And now this new one is also going to be available.

So if you're an audio book listener, like I am, then these are definitely great for preparing you to discuss these issues with someone who has had 37 debates. And I looked over some of the people that you did debates with, and these are some very prominent scholars like John Dominic Crossen and Bart Ehrman. Those are people that Bill Craig has also debated.

They're very high up in historical Jesus work. Yeah. Do you have any advice for people who are looking to get into debating? Yeah, I have a lecture on that.

Oh, wow. Reflecting on the debate wars. But yeah, some of us just have a personality where we kind of like debate.

It's fun. I enjoy it. I spend a lot of time preparing for them when I have one.

You learn a lot about your own view as well as the view of others. You learn a lot about critical thinking. If you're going to get involved in debate, make sure you have the time to prepare adequately.

Absolutely. Because if you don't, you'll get clobbered. And there probably will be people viewing it or listening to it who might have their faith shaken.

And I take Jesus's warning seriously about the millstone, right? Yeah, spend the time.

Spend lots of time preparing for the debate. Take it very seriously.

But it's fun. And I've seen a ton of fruit as a result of it. So, you know, people becoming Christians, people returning to the Christian faith.

I'm thinking of a guy right now who when I was on a panel discussion at a conference put on by Kurt Jarrus Defenders Conference up in Chicago. I think it was 2019. In the middle of it, this guy, during a break, a guy came up to me and he said, Dr. Lacona, I just want to thank you for your debate with Matt Dillahuney, which that debate now has right around 800,000 views on my YouTube channel.

He said, I was a real Dillahuney fan. I was one of those militant atheists who would get online and really attack Christians and had the goal of getting them to leave the Christian faith. But I watched your debate with Dillahuney and your arguments were just good and his were poor and I became a Christian.

And now I use the arguments you used in that debate to challenge the very skeptics that I used to be part of their group. Yeah, love it. That's awesome.

Is that the one that you would recommend like to our listeners or is there one that you really like that you think that our listeners should check out? Boy, there's a lot of them. I don't, you know, if you're one looking one about Islam, then I would say my debate with Yusuf Ismail in South Africa back in, oh, I don't know when that was probably 2011. I think it was 2011.

That was a real spirited debate and they'll really enjoy watching it. And Yusuf is a really good communicator. So it's a real engaging debate.

If you want to see me debate a Muslim. I debated Shabir Ali a couple of times. That's on my YouTube channel as well.

Shabir is far more informed. I mean, he's a scholar and he's far more informed than Yusuf Ismail was. And those were both fun debates.

So they're good. They just weren't spirited like the one with Yusuf. I've got a couple of debates with Dale Martin, who was a senior professor of New Testament at Yale.

I've got several debates with Bart Ehrman. They could enjoy those. I've got a couple with Larry Shapiro, like the first time.

And Larry is an atheist New Testament professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. And the first time I debated him was up there at Ohio State University. Pat Crow had a great time.

That guy got spirited, but that was a good debate. I don't know. There's a lot of them.

They're just they're funny. It's hard to pick, but yeah, the ones with Ehrman are good. They're always good.

They're spirited. Our listeners should definitely check out your YouTube channel and look at these. I mean, debates are if you're trying to decide what to do for fun one evening, listeners, my recommendation is go to YouTube and check out a free debate way better than just about anything you're going to find on Netflix.

Hey, invite some of your non-believing friends over and watch it. When we had what we called the dream team back in the early 2000s with David Koreshi. Yep.

We spent most of our time watching debates. And so we would sit there and we'd just pick a part of debate. We'd watch, say, let's say Bill Craig debate Shabir Ali.

And after Bill's opening statement, we'd put it on pause, we'd discuss his arguments, and then we'd play Shabir's opening statement and we'd put it on pause, discuss his arguments, discuss how he responded to Bill and who we thought was ahead at that point. And we do it after every rebuttal and then debrief after the debate. And by the time you got to the end, I mean, it was probably a three, four hour thing that we had done, but it was fun.

And we'd learned a lot. And again, we had a few non-believers, one of which at the time was Nabeel Koreshi. So we did that and we learned a lot.

And you can have fun. Why not debate in that way with a non-believer? Yeah, I know people these days, like the Christian leaders, pastors talk to me about, I want to equip the people in my church to have gospel conversations. And you look at that process of discipling Nabeel and what you got out of it.

This is what people like. We want to have frank conversations where there are people battling on both sides of the issue. I think men in particular really enjoy seeing these kinds of conflicts play out.

We like sports and debates are like sports, but they're also meaningful and significant. They change lives. And I wish that more pastors and Christian leaders believed in kind of upsetting the flock a little bit with some different views and kind of build people up by letting them know how far they can go.

And where the strong ground is, where they want to stay away from when they're trying to make their case for the Christian worldview. Absolutely. Well, I guess that's a good place for us to stop today.

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