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## S4E4 - Mike discusses John P. Meier on Miracles

March 12, 2020



### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Can we say that miracles happened theologically but not know it historically? In this episode Dr. Licona looks at John P. Meier's claims about miracles and 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 Dr. 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 in Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he is 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 501c3 non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt J. Harris, your host. On today's episode, we continue our series on the Historian and Miracles. Two weeks ago, we looked at a Scottish philosopher by the name of David Hume, and last week, we looked at C. B. McCullough and his Justifying Historical Descriptions, where we really got a taste for the idea that philosophical concepts can inform and lead to one's view of how we use the historical methods.

On today's episode, we're going to be looking at a historian named John Meyer. Mike, maybe you could tell me a little bit about John P. Meyer, and does he have any relation to the Paul Meyer that maybe many Christian apologists are familiar with? No, he has no relation to Paul Meyer. Paul Meyer is a great guy.

I love Paul. He retired a couple of years ago from Western Michigan University, either classics department. He is a historian of antiquity.

That's where he's focused. He's focused on Jesus in a number of journal articles and some small books. Great guy.

John Meyer, also a great guy. Not trying to take away from him. Paul Meyer's Lutheran, too.

John Meyer is Catholic and teaches at Notre Dame. John Meyer is known as a historian of Jesus. He's written a number of volumes called "A Marginal Jew." He's written.

He's one of the more prominent historians of Jesus in this third quest that's been going on since the 1990s. Yes. John Meyer holds an intriguing position in your spectrum of the historians that you're analyzing here in your chapter on the historian and miracles in your book, "The Resurrection of Jesus, a New Historiographical Approach" by University Press.

We've been working through this. The interesting position that he presents here is that you can believe that miracles happened, but he says that we can't use the historical method to come to that conclusion. Is that a fair assessment of his position? Yes, it is.

That's exactly right. He gives a number of reasons for that. Meyer has been one that has relied heavily on what New Testament scholars refer to as the criteria of authenticity.

Is it attested in multiple independent sources, embarrassing sources that are embarrassing to the cause? Early sources, eyewitness sources, things like this. He looks at a number of things about Jesus as we can verify that this happened. Here's things we cannot verify or this probably did not happen, he would say, with a number of things about Jesus.

When it comes to miracles, he says we cannot verify, as historians, we cannot verify that a miracle occurred. What are some of the concerns that you have with Meyer's approach here? Does it have two hard and fast lines between that which we can know from

theology and that which we can know from history? One of his objections is that to say that God raised Jesus is to make a theological claim, not a historical one. He is correct to a certain extent, but he says historians can't verify that God raised Jesus from the dead.

I would agree with that. However, I do think that doesn't say that historian couldn't say that Jesus rose from the dead. Let me unpack that a little bit.

As we get into this, there's just so much when we talk about historical investigation and whether historians can verify a miracle claim. We all have different ideas. You present your ideas out there to the academy and then you get response from scholars.

A lot of times those responses can fine-tune what you think in different ways. It can show flaws. This is the importance of the critical review method process.

I think that Meyer comes up with some neat ideas here, but when they're reviewed at least on this basis on whether historians can investigate miracle claims, to have external eyes looking at this critically, I think we can show some flaws in this. For example, he says again, to say that God raised Jesus is to make a theological claim. The historian has no tools by which they can access God.

There's no way a historian has any kind of criteria or tools at their disposal, but they can verify that God did something. A scientist has nothing like this either. I think we may have talked a little about this last week, maybe.

Here's how I'd answer that. It's say, "Yeah, we might not be able to say God did it, but that wouldn't mean that we couldn't say the event did not occur." I'll give the example of a comet that scientists have been viewing, keeping track on a comet for the past decade. Now they've determined that on a certain day at a certain time within the next month, that comet is going to slam into the moon's surface.

When that day comes, you've got planetariums scattered across the earth that are focused in, zoomed in on the moon's surface. Same thing with the Hubble Space Telescope. That's been positioned to watch the event.

All of us are just so many of us. Millions around the world. Billions are watching this on television.

The comet just slams into the moon's surface. As the lunar dust settles, there's a message written on the moon's surface. It says, "Jesus is Lord." It's written in Hebrew and in Greek.

Now scientists would look at that and say, "Have no idea how that happened. What was the cause of that? What carved out that message? We have no natural explanation for it." They might even say, "God seems to be the best explanation for it, but they have no tools to determine that God was the one using that comet to make that message on the

lunar surface." If we're going to take the principle here that says it's a theological explanation, therefore, to say it's a miracle beyond the purview of historians, we wouldn't say that the scientists couldn't say the event itself didn't occur because obviously it had. We had evidence for that.

You would just say that the scientists couldn't say that God did it. This would be a form of methodological naturalism. He goes on to say that not with the resurrection, but the scientists could say that, not the scientists, the historian could say that an event occurred.

It just couldn't attribute the event to God. I think he's right with that. Now that brings us to a point of methodological naturalism.

That is to be distinguished from metaphysical naturalism. Metaphysical naturalism is the worldview that says that God does not exist, that everything has a natural cause. Methodological naturalism is one of its metaphysical naturalisms, relatives, but says that God may do things.

He may have created the universe in life, but that's outside of the purview of scientists. A scientist can only look for natural explanations, can only look. Similarly, methodological naturalism in historical method would say that since God is outside the purview of historians, the historian can only look for natural causes.

That may be. Some would go so far as to say, you couldn't say something like the resurrection of Jesus occurred, like Bartirman. We'll get to him next week.

Some would say, you couldn't even say the event occurred because it would require God as the cause. Whereas let's say, no, we could say that using Myers' form of methodological naturalism, you could say that the event occurred, if the evidence was sufficient to establish that, you just couldn't say that God was the cause. So for you, the chief dispute you may have with Meyer is the combination of the tools of the historian plus philosophy and philosophical assumptions about, say, even the religious context of a community that observes some event.

That's really the crux. It's the combination of the historical method plus philosophical assumptions here. Is that right? Yeah.

So, yeah, Meyer would go on to say, as soon as you say, God did it, that takes it out of the hands of the historian and now places it in the hands of the theologian or the philosopher. And see, I think he would have been better off just to believe it as it is and to say, look, you could determine that the event occurred. You just couldn't say that God did it.

You just leave the cause of the event undetermined. But he does go a little further and he says, well, what about, you know, that would be when you say God did it, now you

place it in the hands of the theologian or the philosopher. Well, now that what about someone like Gary Habermas, who is fluent in both of those? He's a philosopher, you know, he studied theology, but he's got his PhD in the philosophy of religion.

And yet for years, he has worked on historical research pertaining to Jesus. So by all means, you know, he is a professional historian. So what do you do? Let's say that John Meyer, you know, this never happened, but let's just say that John Meyer and Gary Habermas were in a conversation.

And Meyer says to Gary, look, Gary, you say that, you know, you can verify miracle. I'd say no, because that means God. And now, you know, the historian can't do that.

The historian has to punt to the philosopher or the theologian. And Gary says, okay, well, I'm fine with that. I'm trained in both.

You know, I am by profession, a philosopher and a historian. And so why don't you just leave this kind of investigation to me. And henceforth, you biblical scholars, you historical Jesus scholars just, you know, confine yourself to other matters while us big boys at the adult table do the difficult work.

You know, that wouldn't fly, of course. So yeah. So right.

So in this case, you say, no, the historian can come to this conclusion using other tools that are available, even if they're from another toolbox. So we, I think that is one way to approach it, you know, you could. I mean, why not? You've got if a historian of Jesus says Jesus died by crucifixion.

And here's how we know this. We look at the medical implications that have been published in peer reviewed medical journals and the things about the pathological effects of scourging and crucifixion. Well, they're not physicians, right? I mean, the historian of Jesus isn't a physician.

So at least most of them wouldn't be. So what do you do with that? Are they acting in their capacity as a physician? Are they now barred from saying that Jesus died by crucifixion? So I think you have to be careful there. I guess we could go a step further.

I need to collect my thoughts here. Oh, so I remember Bill Demmsky. I forgot if I read it somewhere, I heard him say it in a lecture or a debate.

But he talked about a scale, okay, kind of balance scale. And he said, let's suppose on one side of the scale, there is a 10 pound weight and it's up in the air. And on the other side, it's down, but there's a curtain that's covering that so we don't know what it is.

Well, we may not know what it is, but one thing we do know it weighs more than 10 pounds, right? So you can infer certain things, even though you may not be able to get

to it. And scientists do these things all the time. Scientists have never seen theoretical entities like black holes, quarks, strings, gluons.

These are theoretical entities never been observed. Well, why do we believe without any doubt that these things exist? Why do scientists say this? Well, because they observe certain effects in our universe and they posit these theoretical entities to explain the effects. And it does a really good job of doing it.

That's why scientists believe these theoretical entities such as black holes and subatomic particles exist. Well, in the same way, I think a historian could go ahead and just like the scientist could posit a theoretical entity. God, for example, right? And say, all right, the evidence strongly suggests that this miracle occurred, that this event occurred, resurrection, whatever it may be, for which we would have evidence, the evidence strongly suggests that it occurred.

Well, we know from all the data we have, and knowledge we've learned over here, our background knowledge would suggest that natural explanation is impossible. And so we can infer there's a supernatural explanation. And since Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, he claimed to be on a mission from God, we can posit a theoretical entity being God.

That's the theoretical entity behind the curtain. And that is the best explanation of the data. So, you know, here, you're not making a, to get into some philosophical language, you're not making a deductive argument, but an inductive or abductive argument to the best explanation.

So when we're, you know, positing this as a possibility, we're not just creating it out of thin air either. We're really assessing the data and seeing how these purely naturalistic hypotheses ultimately fail. And there has to be some other explanation.

There's something else going on behind the curtain to continue on with the scale analogy there. And that's our, that's what we think is the best explanation. So, yeah, so I see that there are, there are two options here.

You can do that. You can say, I look at the evidence. I see that the evidence strongly suggests Jesus's resurrection or whatever miracle we're going to look at.

Okay. Now, what was the cause of that event? So one thing you could do is the methodological naturalism approach posited by John Meyer and say, well, we don't have the tools of the, our tools as historians do not allow us to adjudicate. It seems like there is no natural explanation that can plausible natural explanation that can explain how, you know, Jesus rose from the dead.

So we're just going to leave the cause undetermined because we don't have the tools for that. I do think we could go further and say it's a supernatural event. This is where, you

know, our ability to identify a miracle comes in.

It's extremely unlikely by natural causes. And it occurs in a context that's charged with religious significance. In other words, a context in which we would expect a God to act.

And in that case, I think we could say that it is a miracle at that point. So what I would do is offer that to John Meyer to say, all right, here's something that, you know, in interacting with your argument, I think you've got some good things to offer here. But I think we could improve it by, you know, looking at the criteria for identifying a miracle.

But even if you reject that, you could still say that the event occurred and just leave the cause undetermined. And the other way would be to say, all right, we, I am going to take a stab at the cause here and positive theoretical entity God because it does seem likely, most likely that it would have been God who would have done it. Certainly, we'd have to say that God is probably the best candidate for something like the resurrection of Jesus.

Yeah, yeah, great. All right, let's take a question from one of your followers. This question comes from Nizam.

He asks, and now going a bit broader outside of today's subject here, where do you see the future of biblical studies? So maybe that's some of the work here on your big resurrection book. Maybe it's on, you know, gospel differences or some other field historical reliability. So just go ahead and more broadly, where do you see the future of biblical studies? So yeah, he's not asking about what I'm working on.

He's just asking biblical studies. And so first of all, say hi to Nizam, we've had some interactions on, on, I think on Facebook in the past, he's a Muslim, seems like a good guy. I like him.

So in terms of the field of biblical studies, boy, there's a lot involved there. You know, now I only deal with New Testament. And so but there'd be other stuff that would be going on in Old Testament.

And I just, I don't know, I don't interact with that. I have some friends who are in their Old Testament scholars and you know, I'll occasionally ask them some questions about Old Testament because it's just not my lane. So I can only speak with New Testament.

I don't know what the future of what things are going to look like 10, 20 years from now in New Testament studies. Of course, one of the hottest debates right now would be on the legitimacy of the criteria of the so-called criteria of authenticity, which have been around for some time. I think it was Reginald Fuller who came up with these as applied to Jesus.

That'd be things like the criterion of multiple independent sources, the criterion of early sources of eyewitness sources of embarrassing sources of dissimilarity, things like this of

unsympathetic sources. These are, I mean, these, I think these are legitimate criteria. They're common sense.

I think the problem that historians of Jesus come into is from the beginning, they looked at this as a hard science where it's almost like you could put things through a vending machine, push the button and the desired result comes out, or like this was going to be some kind of a mechanism whereby you subject a saying of Jesus or an act of Jesus to the criteria and just push a button in the criteria will determine whether Jesus said or did this or did not do this. Criteria aren't magic in that sense and they can't be used in an overly mechanical sense. But they are common senseical, of course.

If we're going to look at things, whether it's in court or in history, we're going to prefer eyewitnesses who are testifying early. If it's corroborated by an unsympathetic or even hostile source, that's going to be even better. If you have multiple independent sources, that's going to be probably the best we can look at better than if we have a late non-witness source reporting 300 years later, that event X occurred.

These are common sense criteria. If we have a more realistic approach about these criteria and say they add to the plausibility or the probability of an event being true rather than guaranteeing it, well then I think that you have more realistic expectations. That helps.

Plus I think that some of the critics of the criteria have offered some good points. Dale Allison has said we want to look for recurrent attestation. That would be like does the motif keep showing up between the reports? So for example, I do think that we have enough sayings of Jesus that are multiple tested in the gospels from like John and Mark or if there's a cue material to suggest that Jesus indeed predicted his eminent death and resurrection.

What Allison would say though is that since there are a lot of sayings of Jesus to that effect that are not multiple tested in two independent sources, we would look through the recurrent attestation. Like is Jesus, maybe he doesn't say elsewhere, destroyed this temple in three days I'll raise it as he says in John chapter two. But if he says something to that effect on other occasions in the synoptics, that is recurrent attestation.

And then you look at social memory and I think all this put together, you take a more holistic approach, you know, we'll get us to more assured results. So the criteria itself, I think this is the biggest debate that is going on in New Testament studies right now in terms of history. And so as we wrestle through this and come to grips with historical method more, I think that's where some of the advances are going to be made in coming years.

And it really sounds like the debates are getting into the nitty gritty of the historical method here. And it's there that we may even find people's philosophical assumptions



continuing to wade in or that I mean in some sense, as we talked about last season about our biases, we're going to see those coming in as well. I mean, people may want to have an end goal in mind so they may adapt their view of the methods to fit with that conclusion that they want to reach.

And that's something to be discerning about as as apologists to say, Hey, wait a second. Well, why would you think that, you know, and then what about these cases? So just like with our episode on David Hume, you said, well, well, if you hold that then but but we know about all these other circumstances where people, you know, say people in poorer countries that are good, you know, witnesses to some event. So we have to consider those.

So those are good counter examples or defeaters to criteria that may present itself in these debates. So yeah, I think we, we will all of us should keep up our radar to look for biases in the others to that impacts or affects their historical method. Because we do want to if we're truly after truth, if we really want to find truth, we've got to seek it with integrity, right? And we may have our biases and it's okay to have our biases.

We just want to make sure that we, you know, we put checks on them so that we can look at things as objectively as possible. So and historical method must be neutral as much as possible. It must be neutral if we're going to conduct our investigations with integrity.

Hmm. Great. Thanks, Mike.

Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael O'Kona, you can go to our website, [RisenJesus.com](http://RisenJesus.com), where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. There you can find articles, ebooks, videos, or even the podcast embedded on the website. And it's just a wonderful resource for those that are wanting to learn more about these topics.

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