

# OpenTheo

## S3E3 - Transcending Horizons

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

While it's important for us to understand our horizons, the next step is learning how to detach from them. Dr. Licona walks through the methodology of doing history apart from our biases and what it means to reach "historical consensus".

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 Lacono. Dr. Lacono 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 Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jearus, your host. On today's episode, we continue our discussion about horizons in historical investigation. Mike, on last week's episode, we had finished talking about the historical bedrock of facts that someone should be aware of and anticipate in their research.

And so, I want to, before getting to the last point about how to transcend horizons, I want to ask you about historical consensus, because that's a bit pertaining to bedrock, these facts. It seems like consensus among historians is a very important thing, and maybe it's something that rarely appears as well on some issues. It depends.

Yeah, consensus is rare among historians. In fact, they can't even agree on what they're doing. That's why we have so many different definitions of history.

Then you have a split between what are called postmodernist historians who question how much we can really even know the past to vary in degrees. Some are really radical postmodernist historians that talk about the end of history. That everything is just historical fiction that we reconstruct.

And then you've got realist historians. That's where I would encamp myself. It says, "We can know the past, at least to an extent." Now, you won't find many historians today who will claim that we can know the past exactly as it happened.

All right, because as we've discussed in previous episodes, there are various challenges to knowing the past. The way that we learn about the past is through documents and artifacts. And those documents are written by people who have their own opinions, biases, worldviews.

And so we are learning about the past through their eyes. That's how we're viewing the past. So, then they've got their own selectivity.

So, we're only going to learn a fraction of certain things and the way they wanted us to see it. So, that's why it's important to get various different views and things like this. But, yeah, the horizons, it's a big deal here.

The historical bedrock, there's not going to be a lot of consensus on a lot of things because of the way we interpret things is different. If they can't even agree on how to define history, there's going to be a lot of different things, especially when the horizons of the historians are in full place when you're talking about things such as who was Jesus. Yeah.

I can think here. Sometimes it's often touted as the Jesus seminars, a consensus of New Testament scholars on what they can really know Jesus said or did. Yeah.

Well, the Jesus Seminar was a group that gained a whole lot of attention in the 1990s and the early 2000s. They don't get much attention today and rightly so. Because they're very much out of mainstream scholarship, even though they claim to be, you know, this is what scholars are thinking today.

I remember I debated Stephen Patterson of the Jesus Seminar back in, I think it was 2009 at Florida State University. We had dinner before our debate and I said, "Hey Steve, so, you know, when you guys voted on these various sayings and acts of Jesus that, you know, you give different colored beads, you know, red." Jesus definitely said this. "Pink Jesus said something like this." "Grey Jesus, you know, maybe the idea." "Black, he didn't say this at all or do this at all." You know, how many of you guys voted on this at the time? He said, "Ha, it was never more than 30 or 40." And it's like, "Okay, well, that

doesn't represent necessarily where scholars are today." And especially since, you know, we're talking about those, for the most part, are way out there on the theological left, on the fringe of the theological left, most of them are.

So that is no more a reflection on the consensus of scholars as taking a vote at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on whether Jesus actually said and did what's in the Gospels. Which, there are certainly more than 30 scholars at that meeting. Oh, a lot more.

There's a couple thousand, you know, so, um, yeah. Yeah. Alright, so I've got a question about the sixth way that you point us for overcoming our horizons.

And that's detachment from bias. What did you mean by that? Detachment from bias. Well, we have to do our best.

We have to recognize, first of all, that we have a bias. Okay. Okay.

All of us do. Even Bart Ehrman. Even Bart Ehrman.

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Even Bart Ehrman. Yes. And a lot of people will acknowledge, a lot of historians, a lot of scholars will acknowledge they have a bias, but then they don't do anything about it.

They think that's good enough. Yeah. Just to acknowledge that.

Well, I think that's the first step. And that's why I lay out these steps. You know, here's some things that you can do to help minimize the negative impact.

So detachment from bias. You know, you do some different things like one of the things I did. Because what motivated me for this, I wanted to deal with my doubts.

But I wanted to get the truth. And as I'm going through this, I'm praying. I'm saying, "God, I do believe that you exist." Okay.

I'm convinced by the evidence, philosophical scientific evidence that you exist. And I want to be convinced, again, that you are who I think you are, that you have manifested yourself in Jesus of Nazareth. And I said, "Look, if Christianity is false, I want to know it." Because my greatest fear is that my biases, my horizon, would prevent me from discovering truth, and it would cost me eternity.

That is what. Because I'm thinking, "That's what's going to happen with Muslims. That's going to happen with atheists.

That's what I'm thinking, right? If Christianity is true, that's what's going to happen with Muslims and atheists and people of non-Christian beliefs when they die. That their biases, the way they were raised in the horizons, will keep them from discovering the truth of the Christian faith and cost them eternity. So if Christianity is false, I don't want that to happen to me.

So that's what drove me. And I started to think about some things, okay? Well, what are some things that would motivate me to give up Christianity? And I think about those things and try to let those things motivate me to help me get the truth. And again, a big one is, I don't want to die and then face God only to find out Christianity was false.

Yeah, so the detachment from bias really is sort of the climax of looking at your horizons. It's a way of, like you said, it's that first step being aware, but that's not the end. You've got to look and analyze and be willing to feel uncomfortable through that journey of research.

And there have been times in your life like you've talked about where you've certainly been uncomfortable in that process. Yeah, like most recent book I wrote on Gospel Differences, as I looked at Gospel Differences, I mean this and the solutions form, I became very uncomfortable with the way some Christians were using harmonizations to resolve them, ridiculous. And then what I'm seeing, like the various compositional devices that would be used by historians by biographers in antiquity, you see them being used, in fact some of them were prescribed in the compositional textbooks by people like Theon and Hermogenes and Quintillion.

And you say, okay, well that would make sense that the Gospel authors would use these, especially if you're finest Greco-Roman historians, Plutarch, Tacitus, Salus, they're all using these things. We should be surprised if the Gospel authors weren't using them. And then when you're looking you say, okay, this looks like they are using them here, but wow, this leads me to some conclusions that I did not expect.

I'm going to have to read the Gospels a little bit differently than I have in the past that made me uncomfortable. Until I started getting used to it and saying, well, the highest view of Scripture is the correct view of Scripture. And if this is what divinely inspired Scripture looks like, then this is what it looks like, and I must embrace it as God has given it to me, rather than force it to conform to a mold of how I think He should have.

So all these kinds of things contribute to helping to overcome your horizon or to allow it to mature, I should say. When we've been talking about horizons, we have typically talked about the bad things that affect our thinking and our research. Even the books we choose to read versus others.

But in some ways, tell me how horizons can be good for us, that we can have good horizons. Yeah, well, for example, let's suppose we're talking about the resurrection of Jesus, okay? So, let's say Jesus did not rise from the dead. If I'm an atheist, I don't believe God exists, I don't believe there are supernatural events that happen in our world.

So my horizon actually helps me to get to the truth. Now, I might dismiss the evidence more quickly than I should on some things, but it's still going to help me get to the right conclusion that Jesus did not rise from the dead. I might embrace a hypothesis that is totally wrong, but the conclusion that Jesus didn't rise from the dead would still be true if I'm an atheist and atheism is true.

On the other hand, if I'm an atheist, but God does exist, then it's going to lead me to a false conclusion if I'm allowing my horizon to drive my investigation. If I'm a Christian and I believe God exists, and I think Christianity is true, my horizon is going to incline me to believe in the resurrection, and if I'm wanting to prove it, and if the resurrection actually occurred, if Christianity is true, well, then I'm going to get to it, despite my biases. I might even believe it for the wrong reasons.

I don't care about history. The Bible says that I believe it, and that settles it for me, but Christianity is true, and Jesus rose from the dead. I'm going to get to the right conclusion, even if I get there through non-historical means.

Our horizons can help us at times, but here's another thing. As I learn about gospel differences, even though I'm uncomfortable, so I fine-tune, I nuance my view of how to read the Scriptures. Of what divinely inspired Scriptures look like, so my horizon matures.

And that enables me to read the Gospels more as they were intended. So, yeah. Yeah, well, again, like I said, we're talking about the ways the horizons affect us adversely, but there are those good ways it can affect us.

So, it seems that sometimes we have to go from discussing about the method to discussing our presuppositions with folks. And for some people, they're going to be biased a certain way that it doesn't matter what you say, because they already think this. Yeah.

And so, from a methodological standpoint, how we evangelized people, how we discuss apologetics with them, especially non-believers, we need to be aware of that so we can move from having the discussion here to having the discussion here, because this is really what's leading people that direction instead of that direction. Now, I would agree with that. And I guess I could also add that for the average Christian, yeah, it is better to understand our horizons, of course, and also understand the horizon to others so that we can communicate with them more honestly, more authentically, and appreciate where

they're coming from.

For the average Christian, the kind of study we're talking about on the resurrection of Jesus, they don't have to work so hard to overcome their horizon, okay? Or I'm not overcoming, but to manage it, and to manage their biases and their world view, okay? But we're talking about historical investigation here. We're talking about approaching the resurrection as a historian, not as a theologian, not as a person sitting in a pew, but as a historian. If we're going to say that when we approach the question, did Jesus rise from the dead, which is a historical question, but if we're going to take this as a historical matter, as a historian, we'll then we have to talk about horizons and how to, you know, control them.

A theologian might come to it and say, "Hey, the Bible is divinely inspired. I believe the Bible. The Bible says Jesus rose from the dead, and so I believe it." And you might come at it from theological reasons, but as a historian, I don't have that luxury if I'm approaching it in that sense.

But then, yeah, so as an aspiring theologian, let me ask you this. So they're kind of contrasting it that way. There's some theologians who are aware of those horizons, and they appreciate the methodological approach and might look at the methods as well.

But yeah, certainly there are other theologians that just, you know... Yeah, I didn't mean to put down theologians in that sense. There are different kinds of theologians too, of course. It's like the different kinds of historians.

Exactly. And I know that you're an honest guy, and these kind of things matter to you. Yeah.

But, you know, someone just doing systematic theology, let's say. Yes. Without analyzing the horizons.

Exactly. Right. Yeah, yeah.

They're the ones who might just come with it with loaded presuppositions into analyzing or just dismissing, say, what you have to say. That leads us to our question here. I believe it's from Marge Hay.

Everybody is talking about which gospel is written first. Nobody seems to inquire if this is the wrong question. What if the gospels are written pretty parallel? Probably not knowing about each other, doing so.

I think that what Marge is saying or suggesting is about the independence view of the gospels that they were just written entirely independent of each other. Well, I don't know. There might be some scholar who holds that today in New Testament studies, but I don't know of any New Testament scholars who hold that.

And the reason being, look, I'll put it this way. If you and I were in a restaurant together, okay, and we saw something happen. A couple start arguing, and then they get really intense, and then she picks up a glass and slaps them across the face with it, okay? And big gash happens, and someone calls the police, and the police show up and the paramedics show up, and they're fixing his face, and they're hauling her off to jail.

And the officer comes over to us and says, "I want you, Kurt, and I want Mike to write down what just happened." Okay, and make it as closely as possible, describing it as closely as possible. He said, "Okay, we can do that." But what if they were speaking in Spanish? We both know Spanish, let's just assume. We don't mean whatever.

- Gift tongues. - Yeah, but we got to translate it into English. Now, if our translations were word for word, or virtually word for word, in English, and if we were describing the same event, virtually, we would have to translate it into English.

And if we were describing the same event, virtually word for word, they would know that there was some kind of collusion between us. - Right. - All right.

And we're not just giving independent events. We're colluding with one another, or a common source. That's the kind of stuff we find in the Gospels.

A lot of verbal similarities that shows us it's not independent sources. They're not all independent of one another. Writing parallel.

There is some sort of interdependence. There's a relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke going on. And that's what we talked about in the last season.

The synoptic problem, or the synoptic puzzle. What is that relationship? The analogy of the restaurant is a good one because scholars believe Jesus spoke Aramaic, and so, but the Gospels are written in Greek. And so there's the translation between Spanish and English.

And so if we have not even similar, but in some cases identical sentences in English, you would suspect we've colluded. - I mean up to 60-some words in some cases. - Yeah.

So there is that strong relationship between the Gospels. There's, in some cases, or many cases, copying that has occurred. And so you, like you said, last season we explored, so that these different areas in which they may have worked with one another on that.

Not in person, but using it. - And some would say, even if there's some that would say, well, there's oral tradition and that's what they were using. I mean certainly they were using some oral tradition.

But then you look, there's some, like, they follow the order in Mark, pretty much. And

when they differ, like, let's say if Matthew differs, you've got Luke that follows Mark, so order. Or if Luke differs, it's Matthew that's following Mark's order.

So it seems like Mark is what they call the middle source. It's the one that they're using as their primary source. So that's not oral tradition.

It's not just the words itself. It's the order. And you say, well, wait a minute.

You know, you're going to find certain orders when it comes to Jesus' death, right? Or his whole life. His birth is going to come before his death. And before his resurrection, of course.

But then there's a lot of things that are going on in his life that really have no chronological ties. But we still find them in the same order in these gospels in some cases. - So to recap here, sort of an independence view of the gospel is one that just seems strongly unlikely to have happened given the evidence we have within the gospels themselves.

And then you look at the external evidence too. I mean, even St. Augustine, as we mentioned, we quoted last season. Augustine references how we shouldn't suppose that these are independent.

So it's almost like this view that the written independence has come from sort of, I don't know, maybe a lack of study there and say what others say. I don't want to use it. I mean, sometimes a pejorative term of fundamentalism kind of comes in, although historically that term wasn't a pejorative, but kind of comes from that.

- Well, more of the rather conservative group. But it's usually from people who have not immersed themselves in New Testament studies, who have not looked carefully at things like the synoptic problem. They just come with their presuppositions, their own horizon, which needs the mature.

And it only comes, it only matures as you learn more and you engage in studies within the discipline. - Yep. That's why recognizing horizons are so important.

Good. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work in ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can go to his website, [risenjesus.com](http://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 find ebooks, articles, videos, all sorts of resources that Mike has written, including his debates with other scholars on topics like the resurrection of Jesus.

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