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## S4E2 - Hume on Miracles

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Are Hume's objections to miracle claims valid? Listen in as Dr. Licona deconstructs Hume's naturalistic framework.

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

Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike LeCona. Dr. LeCona 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 501c3 nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's episode we're continuing our discussion on the historian and miracles and we'll be specifically looking at the philosopher David Hume and the concerns he has raised against the idea that a historian can account for a miracle claim. Mike, why don't you tell me a little bit about David Hume and we'll get into his objections.

Actually, David Hume was trained as a historian and he wrote, he was a Scottish skeptic, he wrote around the same time that the Declaration of Independence was being written

here in the United States. So he wrote on miracles and he was saying that as a historian you could never, ever adjudicate in a positive matter on a miracle claim. And he was very influential back then and his influence continues very strongly even today.

Yes, there are many people that will say David Hume has disproven miracle claims, something like that. Now there's a number of passages where he makes this claim but you provide one passage in particular and for the sake of our listeners I'm going to be reading some passages from Hume so that they know we are taking right out of his work here and of course it could be up to the listener to judge whether we're fairly taking that claim in context. But so here's what he says.

Hume writes, he says that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains after deducting the inferior. Like maybe you could unpack that passage a little bit for us. Yeah, I mean he is setting the bar extremely high for the establishing of a miracle claim.

You wouldn't do this for any other historical claim out there. Imagine if you took these criteria that he is giving here and you applied that to any other kind of hypothesis. Well you would never be able to establish anything historically.

And so he sets the bar, the burden of proof so high for a miracle that it would be impossible even by his own words it would be impossible to establish a miracle. And we'll get into some of the problems here that it poses but this is basically a nice summary of his position that he says it's basically impossible. It's so improbable that we should ever take any claim of a miracle seriously.

So he provides four reasons for supporting points for his position. First he says that the witnesses are never good enough to warrant preferring their testimony over a naturalistic explanation. And here's what he says on that.

He says, "There is not to be found in all history any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men of such unquestioned good sense, education and learning as to secure us against all delusion in themselves, of such undoubted integrity as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others, of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood. And at the same time a testing fact performed in such a public manner and in so celebrated a part of the world as to render the detection unavoidable. All which circumstances are requisite to give us a full assurance in the testimony of men." Mike, what is he saying there and what exactly is the concern that we should have with that? Well Hugh is saying that in order for us to be able to verify that a miracle has occurred, that miracle would have had to occur in a civilized part of the world, a Western modern

society and witnessed by a lot of people, all of which were of unquestionable character and intelligent people, educated people and no chance of them being deluded.

So that's the burden of proof, the standards that he puts on a miracle claim before one would be justified in believing it. And that just seems to me that that is just unduly biased toward a skeptical view. You wouldn't do that for any other kind of a historical report and I think it's unfair to do that with a miracle report.

Sounds like he would only believe David Hume if David Hume came to him with that claim. Well, that's exactly right. That's exactly right.

And yeah, I mean we can get into some of these other things that you bring up. I mean there's a lot of other things that we could say about this. Yeah, but so I mean it seems like he's got such a high standard for the type of person from which the testimony would come that as you'd mentioned with regard to any other historical event we don't hold that standard.

We don't think that they have to be, you know and eyewitness testimony in court does not have to be someone of a high civilized character. It could just be someone who saw it happen, you know, and that testimony is valid. It doesn't have to be someone who meets all these check marks such that again they're only describing David Hume.

I mean that's my take on it anyway. All right now he has a second reason for his claim that the testimony of a miracle is so unreliable or that we shouldn't accept it at all. He says here we ought to give the preference to such as are founded on the greatest number of past observations.

But though in proceeding by this rule we readily reject any fact which is unusual and incredible in an ordinary degree. So he draws here from the principle of analogy and appeals to what you call antecedent probability. Push that out for us.

Yeah there's a few things that we can do to untangle what he's saying here. So this was later brought up by it I think it was 1912 by a guy named Ernst Troj in what he called the principle of analogy that would say that things happen as things happen today they happen in the past right. So we don't observe miracles happening today so they did not happen in the past.

And there's numerous things that we could say about this. Number one you could say well wait a minute that's assuming that miracles do not happen today and that would fly in the face of a lot of different reports to the contrary. There are a lot of reports of miracles.

There are some credible reports of miracles that occur today. So you could actually cause the principle of analogy to stand on its head and say okay well if we're going to say that things are not fundamentally different today than they were in the past in terms

of how the world and the universe operates well if there are miracles today then that would increase the likelihood that there were miracles in the past. So you could actually use miracles for today to increase the plausibility of miracles that happen in antiquity such as with Jesus and his resurrection.

I would also say that with human he says you know we've got to go with the greatest amount of things that we observe. If we observe these things happening on a regular basis would we call them a miracle. Some definitions of miracle would say that the thing is extremely rare.

Now I don't agree with that definition. I mean besides like what if at sunset every day there was a billowing voice that came out of the sky and it said I'm God follow my son and it happened every day and there was no plausible natural explanation for it. Well it would be a supernatural event we have no plausible natural explanations but it wouldn't be rare by any in any sense because it happened daily.

So you know if he's saying it's got to happen on a regular basis I would say that would go against how many people define miracle. And there are also I would say there are also times where an extremely rare event still happens even if it's unexpected. For example people win the lottery.

You know or you know historical events like Napoleon Bonaparte being exiled and coming back into power just an extremely improbable set of circumstances but which nevertheless actually came about and there's nothing miraculous about that but by this criteria he would have to dismiss it. Yeah it would rule out unique events and one in particular which is extremely important and that would be the origin of the universe. Today almost all cosmologists would say that the universe began with a big bang and that the universe came into existence out of nothing.

Well that would be a unique event to say the least. So if you if we take Hume's principle here you would have to reject this finding of science which is today accepted by almost all scientists. Alright let's go to his third reason here.

Hume says that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations. It is strange that such prodigious events never happen in our days but it is nothing strange I hope that men should lie in all ages. So he talks about the poor quality of the witnesses.

Yeah well I would I mean he's right that with some miracle claims the witnesses are poor. You have numerous superstitious people, uneducated people who are making claims to miracles. They do happen with those people but what Hume doesn't acknowledge is that there are also very intelligent people, very highly educated people who are claiming that miracles have occurred.

Craig Keener has got a PhD in New Testament studies from Duke so no one can you know question his education here. He's one of the most brilliant New Testament scholars I've ever met. I don't know how he does all the work that he does and Keener can give accounts of some miracles that he has personally experienced.

One that comes to my mind because I mentioned in the last episode about nature miracle, a storm, a rain stopping and a breeze coming off the ocean. Well he can tell the story of a few decades ago when there was an evangelism team near his seminary and the students were going to go out and talk to people in the community that day but they expected it to rain all day. They prayed the rain stopped and it didn't come back for the rest of the day.

The way Keener tells it it's even cooler than this and he says it's not that my memory has been corrupted because I had the diary where I wrote it down that very day. So he can tell some miracles like that. He's shared some others with me that I think are pretty cool.

My friend who was in a coma for 21 days and at 4 o'clock when I prayed for him on the 4th of July 1987 he came out of the coma. That's pretty cool. Miracles do happen today and they are told by people who are very intelligent people who are highly educated.

There's a guy, he's a physician, I forgot his name, I have met him personally and he had these tumors, horrible tumors all over his body and it was going to kill him. They prayed and he was healed and the tumors just went away. Pretty cool stuff.

Here's a physician, a highly educated and intelligent guy and he can personally attest to the miracle. He's got photographs of what he looked like then and of course you can see him. Now he looks normal.

So yeah they do abound. Miracle claims abound amongst the ignorant but they also abound amongst the highly educated and intelligent. So that's something you have to take into consideration.

Yes so when Hume says here basically that this only happens with a certain type of person. He's not being fair to the evidence that no there are smart people that are also making these claims. That's right he's easily refuted by the evidence.

What he's saying is just simply false. It's demonstrably false. Okay his fourth point.

Yeah and people can lie. Sure people lie all the time but people tell the truth a lot don't they? We find people telling truth all the time. So just because some people lie doesn't mean that a person is lying when they are speaking of a miracle claim.

Yeah. The fourth point here is on the conflicting testimonies of people. So he says or rather you describe his point here as that the testimonies of miracles in one religion are

weighed against an infinite number of witnesses who testify of miracle claims in competing religions and so that they sort of cancel each other out.

How would you respond to that position? Yeah there's a prominent atheist philosopher today. A friend of mine his name is Evan Fales. Good guy.

We had a very lengthy debate at St. Thomas University in Minneapolis a few years ago and good guy I like him and he calls it Demolition Derby because you have these claims of the various religions and they crash and they cancel each other out because the evidence for one is evident against the other and the evidence for that one is evidence against this one. And the way I would answer the Hume's claim and Fales claim there is if we take that line of reasoning and apply it to worldviews let's see what happens. So let's take the view that God exists and let's take the view that God does not exist to atheism.

And that means evidence for atheism is evidence against God's existence and evidence for God's existence is evidence against atheism. So they would cancel each other out. So what does that leave us with? If God doesn't exist and God exists and neither of those options are available what do you have? Well you've got the law of excluded middle here.

So that principle does not work. The way out of this is to recognize that some things are better evidence than others. And even the late Anthony Floom who was one of the greatest and most influential atheist philosophers of the 20th century he died shortly into the 21st century I think around the year 2005 he died and he gave up his atheism shortly before he died like within a year or two of his death he gave it up because he said the evidence supported God's existence.

Floom while he was an atheist said the evidence for miracles and Christianity especially the resurrection were far superior to the miracles we have the miracle reports we have in other religions. The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is far superior to the evidence we have for miracles in other religions. So you've got to look at the evidence you just can't say they cancel each other out you have to look at the evidence.

Right and sometimes when you're talking about competing miracle claims some of those claims don't have any eyewitness testimony others do some of the miracles may have one or two eyewitnesses whereas say with Jesus's miracles you have claims of whole crowds of people that were there and so it was a public it was a public ministry not a private one where someone received a special revelation like seer stones or something like that for example. So and you want to look is it does it enjoy multiple independent attestation right? Right right. Is it in does it have is it reported by an unsympathetic source things like that we've got a lot of these things for for Jesus we don't have a lot of those things for miracle claims in other religions.

Yeah, yeah. Now the reason why we're talking about a human we're going to get into

some other scholars that make claims about miracles and the the fact that this claim is an essentially contested concept did I get that term correct? That's correct yeah. And essentially contested concept is because we have conversations with people every day on the street who or are with our family or our friends about these topics these subjects and they may they may not have these nuanced to the extent that that you may have them Mike but nevertheless they come into these conversations with these assumptions about what a miracle is and whether that you know it's someone's testimony is valid when they make make those claims and so it's important for us to consider these issues carefully to think about them carefully and when we are thinking about Hume's position we recognize these philosophical assumptions and that's really the concern that's underlying his methodology here isn't it.

I think so that that does motivate a lot of his arguments and that's why he's got such an unattainable burden of proof and you know what Kurt I'd like to go back to it was either the first or second of Hume's objections there's something else I want to add it has has to do with you know the regularity of with which we observe certain kinds of events occurring and this is something I just called Hume's balancing argument and to restate it I would the way he puts it is okay you know what evidence would we have for a miracle such let's just say Jesus resurrection what evidence would we have for it well we have human testimony and human testimony is often quite reliable but it's also very often quite unreliable okay so that's the kind of evidence we have we have testimony and documents that Jesus rose from the dead could be reliable it may not be according to him the evidence we have against Jesus's resurrection or the laws of nature they would state that when a person dies their corpses the molecules in their body are not going to re- realign themselves to bring that body back to life and the person is going to stay dead and we observe this with an exceptionless regularity okay so historians he would say has to go with the evidence and the weight of evidence and so over here you've got human testimony which can be quite good but not always and then over here you've got the exceptionless regularity of the laws of nature that when a person dies they stay dead they're not coming back ever and when you put the two on a scale boom it tips very heavily toward natural law you know the evidence and so we could call that the balancing argument the problem I have with the balancing argument is Hume has not really stated it correctly because what we observe with an exceptionless regularity according to the laws of science is that these molecules aren't going to rearrange themselves the person is not going to come back to life by natural causes and this is something that all of us all of us whether Christian or atheist we can all accept this we would all acknowledge that this is not going to happen if the corpses left to itself the corpse is not going to come back to life by natural causes the problem is is that nobody's claiming that Jesus was raised by natural causes the claim is that God was or God raised them or he was raised by a non natural or a supernatural cause and if God exists and wanted to raise Jesus then all bets are off he's a game changer and so the argument becomes Hume's argument becomes illegitimate and that's not special pleading let me

give a little parallel here on a different thing let's just say we want to examine whether someone could walk on water and so all the governments of the world agreed that they're going to test every person living in their country to see if they can walk on water and all more than seven billion people living in the world all of them fail they try on a swimming pool they tried in a lake a pond a river in ocean and none of them can walk on water and there's only one left and he's a three-year-old boy and he's standing by the swimming pool he's ready to try to walk on water and his dad comes up to him he asks him to give him his hands the boy gives him his hands he holds him over the swimming pool and then the dad walks alongside the swimming pool and the sun walks on water seven billion people more than seven billion people unable to walk on water doesn't tell us anything about whether the three-year-old boy could he said well wait a minute Mike that's cheating because the dad assisted him he was an external agent who assisted him and that's exactly what we're saying here a hundred billion people in the history of the human race who were unable to rise from the dead unassisted tells us nothing pertaining to whether God raised Jesus the external agent raising Jesus is a game changer all bets are off human is wrong and one other I think factor to consider is that when he humans as they may be called object here it's as if they don't realize that the witnesses didn't know that dead people stay dead of course they knew dead people stay dead which is why they were saying it's a miracle so it's true yeah now that's just another variable there to consider that yeah he's got this extremely restrictive and flawed and demonstrably restricted method and that's why we should put his aside and consider some others which we're going to do in future episodes as well okay let's take a question here from one of your followers Mike this comes from David and he's wondering how do you respond to Richard Carrier's argument that the martyrdoms of the apostles are nothing but late legends having little if any grounding in history well I would say I do deal with this not Carrier's argument but I do deal with the matter of the death of the apostles or what happened to the apostles I believe it's probably chapter four in the book so as I looked at these you know I readily admit that a lot of the reports that we have about what happened to the disciples come rather late you know maybe 300 400 years later but there are a number of accounts that would seem to suggest that that these all these apostles were willing to suffer continuously and willing to die the death of a martyr for the gospel proclamation I think our earliest is probably the gospel of John that talks about Peter's execution so you go to John chapter 21 and Jesus and Peter are walking along the beach at the Sea of Galilee and he tells Peter that when he is old there he's going to be taken someone's going to lead him where he doesn't want to go and he will stretch out his hands and John says this was to signify the kind of death with which Peter would glorify the Lord crucifixion all right so at this point if we take when John being written which most scholars would place somewhere between 90 and 95 or within let's say 60 to 65 years after Jesus death church tradition tells us that Peter was martyred in Rome I think around the year 64 65 so this is being written 25 to 30 years after Peter would have been executed and so here we have John the gospel of John that's informing us of the martyrdom of Peter around that same time we have Clement of Rome who was



one of the called an apostolic father I don't know why they call him apostolic fathers because they weren't apostles these were leaders who for the most part would have known the apostles or have direct ties to them Clement of Rome is believed to have known the apostle Peter and he mentions the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul and I talk about this in the book so you've got those so then you have some other authors you have people like Luke in the book of Acts that talk about how the disciples were you know many of them were suffering they were being thrown into prison they were being beaten you had some of them like James the son of Zebedee who was martyred he was uh I forgot what it was I think you put the death by the sword and in the book of Acts I think it's Acts chapter 12 you've got Paul who he was imprisoned he was beaten he was severely persecuted for his gospel proclamation so you have Luke you have Turthalian you have John um you have Dionysius of Corinth origin talks about the martyrdom of some of the apostles certainly the sufferings of the apostles how they were all persecuted uh polykarp mentions the persecution of Christians of the disciples Ignatius um and um let's see Clement of Rome I mentioned him so you've got all these different sources that mentioned the how these disciples were willing to suffer and die for their beliefs some of them are earlier than others but these are multiple uh many of them are independent sources like so for example Clement of Rome is going to be independent of the gospel of John um you've got Paul's writings that he talks about how he was persecuted and willing to die so you've got a lot of these now Sean McDowell has done extensive work on this in his doctoral dissertation and it was published in a book the fate of the apostles I believe is called it's an excellent book um so I anybody who really wants to get into that I think that's probably the most comprehensive treatment of the fate of the apostles that's probably ever been written Sean McDowell has done this so it's kind of expensive because it's an academic book but anyone who wants to check that out um I would say it's probably the finest treatment that's been done on the subject very nice good I hope that uh that's a satisfactory answer for David and if anyone else has a question for you Mike they can email me [curt@defendersmedia.com](mailto:curt@defendersmedia.com) we'd love to hear from your you with questions or comments about the the program that we've been bringing to you here well if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona you can go to [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 all sorts of free resources like ebooks videos of mics debates and lectures or if you want to just read some articles that mics written that websites a great resource for you to check out if this podcast has been a blessing to you would you consider becoming one of our financial supporters you can go to [risenjesus.com/donate](http://risenjesus.com/donate) please be sure to subscribe to this program on youtube you can follow mike and the various events that he's speaking at and other updates about his ministry on facebook and twitter as well we'd love to get you following mics ministry work this has been the risen jesus podcast a ministry of dr michael kona