

OpenTheo

S3E6 - Arguments to the Best Explanation

August 28, 2019



Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

When discussing a candidate for "best explanation" there are several factors we should take into consideration (explanatory scope, plausibility, etc). Dr. Licona discusses what the various criteria are for arguments to the best explanation and how they apply to the resurrection.

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.

website | <http://risenjesus.com>

facebook | <http://www.fb.me/michael.r.licona/>

twitter | <http://www.twitter.com/michaellicona>

Donate: If you enjoy the RJ Podcast and want to keep the content coming, please join our team of supporters at <http://bit.ly/SupportRisenJesus>

Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the "Risen Jesus Podcast" with Dr. Mike Licona. Dr. Licona is Associate Professor of 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 nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jaros, your host. On today's episode, Mike, I want to look at the argument from the best explanation. I know he teased a little bit about it last week, but maybe we could spend this episode going through the criteria that historians use when looking at sort of a cumulative type argument.

Yeah, so arguments of inference to the best explanation. This is one that numerous

historians use. One of the best explanations I've ever seen from it, of it, comes from a philosopher of history who lives in Australia.

His name is Bihan Makala. He's written a book of the most recent one in which he describes it as a history primer. It's called "The Logic of History." Alright, so there he's got this set of criteria.

I'm not sure, criteria is plural, criterion. Criterion is singular, criteria is plural. So what are some things he says about what sort of method we should use in analyzing the data? Arguments of inference to the best explanation, Makala says, is the best way to go.

By the way, why I really like Makala is because I think we think a lot the same. I mean, he's much smarter, and he's been doing this a whole lot longer than me. But when I got into this, I was looking for specific tools that historians would use, methods, specific methods.

And I was surprised to find that a lot of historians don't have specific methods. In fact, it's interesting. I do teach a philosophy of history course.

And I've had students who have gone through, there have been a couple of occasions where I've had students who have gotten their bachelor's in history, and then gone on to get a master's in history. And they said they've learned more in my single course on method, on doing history than they learned in all of their studies throughout undergrad and graduate combined. So that's pretty interesting.

They aren't taught a lot of method. So everybody is like, it's kind of like, well, we'll talk about it next episode of this when we get into postmodernism, but everybody just kind of does their own thing. But what I like about McCulloch is he comes out with a specific method and he uses this argument of inference to the best explanation.

So the first criterion he uses is called the explanatory scope. And what this basically says is, we have our facts we've talked about, right, the accepted facts. And the hypothesis that is able to account for the most, the more of those facts than any other hypothesis has the greatest explanatory scope.

So let's just say we come up with 10 facts. Okay. And our hypothesis, one hypothesis accounts for eight of those facts, and another hypothesis only accounts for two.

Well, the one with eight has the greater explanatory scope. So if I had to think of an example, let's say there's a fellow who claims to be a politician. He's tall.

He's got a big thick dark beard. Where's this really long top hat? And he says he lives in a house that's white. One theory is, well, he's a janitor, you know, or something like that.

Another theory is that he's the president of the United States, Abe Lincoln. So you have

two competing hypotheses. Now the explanatory scope would say which hypotheses makes the best sense of all of the or as many of the facts as possible.

Is that right? That's correct. So with this tall guy with a beard and a top hat on if we find another fact about him that he had been an attorney. Whereas the other guy wasn't.

This guy over here ran for office, public office, a few times and lost every time. And this guy had never run for office. Well, the hypothesis that we're talking about Abraham Lincoln has greater explanatory scope than the hypothesis that we're talking about a janitor.

Okay, good. So that's the scope. That scope.

And here's the thing. If a hypothesis, this is where historical bedrock comes in, you want a hypothesis to be able to count for all of the historical bedrock. And if you have a hypothesis that is incapable of doing it, then that hypothesis needs to go back to the drawing board and either revised or discarded.

Okay. So that's scope, but there's also explanatory power. Yes.

And so what's that one and how's that different from scope? We can look at it from two different angles or you can use both of them. Explanatory power would be you want when you're looking, your hypothesis is attempting to account for the facts. You want that hypothesis to be able to accommodate those facts pretty naturally to do so without forcing them to fit.

So, you know, we'll look later on. All right. So let's go back to your Abraham Lincoln one.

Okay. So let's suppose they're all working. They fit well for Abraham Lincoln because he ran for office.

He lost all those times. And, okay. But let's say a person's trying to make the janitor hypothesis work and they said, well, he didn't run for office in a sense, but he ran for student body president, you know, when he was in high school or, you know, we kind of making that you're forcing it to fit.

And where it doesn't really go naturally. Word picture I like to give is imagine a jigsaw puzzle and all your puzzle pieces are represent facts. And you know when you're putting a jigsaw puzzle together, you can take some of those pieces and you can force them to fit when you're having difficulty knowing where it goes.

Now, you suspect it really doesn't go there, but you can make it fit. That's what some people do with facts in order to accommodate the hypothesis. And in that case, when you got to force them to fit, you lack explanatory power.

Okay. The other way to look at it is to say, all right, let's look at a different, couple of

different hypotheses here. Now, I know this thing with Abe Lincoln kind of come up with that on the spot.

So let's say what the Abe Lincoln hypothesis you'd say, given the truth of that hypothesis that is referred to Abe Lincoln, we would expect certain things to result. Okay. And to the extent that we get those things, that hypothesis may be said to have explanatory power.

If you took the janitor hypothesis about a tall guy, beard, top hat who lived almost 200 years ago, lived in a White House when he's a janitor. And White House, we've got to add a little to that, of course. We'd say it's a big house, right? And it's located in Washington, D.C. And decisions that impacted the country and came out of there.

Which toilet to clean first, we'd go to suite. So you would say, given the truth of the janitor hypothesis, what kind of things would we expect? Is that the kind of things we get? No, we don't really get those things. So that would lack explanatory power.

So it would be fair to say that scope is about the quantity of facts, but powers about the quality of the facts. Is that the quantity of yes, but it would be the quantity of facts that the hypothesis explains. Yeah.

And the quality meaning how well the hypothesis explains them. Yeah, yeah. So for scope, that's the quantity, but then power is the quality.

That's correct. Yeah. Okay.

Right. So you don't want the jigsaw puzzle piece to be jamming in. You don't want it to be jamming in.

And same with explanatory scope. When you're trying to come up with a solution to the puzzle, the puzzle that can use the most pieces would have explanatory scope. So the puzzle solution that leaves a number of orphan pieces lacks explanatory scope.

Yeah. Interesting. Good.

All right. When I know philosophers use this term about plausibility sometimes, the plausibility of a theory. What is that? What is plausibility? Plausibility is the degree to which a hypothesis is compatible with our background knowledge.

All right. So, let's just make it. All right.

So if you look, we talked on a previous episode about a former roommate, college roommate, who claims that he won the lottery All right. If our background knowledge is that winning the lottery big in that particular state is one chance in 300 million. Well, that impacts our plausibility that you'd say it's a low.

It's it's implausible. Now that plausibility can change as we learn more data, of course,

right? Or you can say this, we're both baseball fans, right? So if we started off the what year was it that the Cubs won the World Series would be 2017. 2017.

That's right. Okay. So if we were to go back to April, the season opener in 2017.

2016. Forgive me. What's how plausible would we think it is based on the background knowledge that the Cubs had never won a World Series at that point? No, they had back, you know, 100 plus years back.

1908 was that last time. And everything just, you know, they just never are able to do it. What's the plausibility? If you were living back then in April of 2016.

If someone's OK, all right. So let's put it this way. Let's suppose your brother, you have a brother and he committed a crime overseas and he's been in prison for 20 years and totally out of touch.

He comes over. He's released. He comes over.

You meet him at the airport and you say, you hug each other and then you say, well, you're not going to believe this, but the Cubs won the World Series in 2016. He says, no, I don't believe that because it seems implausible, right? Yeah. So, or since we're talking baseball, Albert Pujols is one of the greatest home run hitters of all times.

OK. So he averages getting a home run, I think, won in every 16 at bats. So he's going to average getting up four to five times a game.

So let's just call it four times a game. So I wake up in the morning. It's baseball season right now.

And let's say I haven't checked the box scores or what happened that it was a one in four chance. One in four chance. So it's plausible.

The hypothesis that Pujols hit a home run in last night's game is plausible. Now, if you're talking about in the National League and there's a pitcher and he's never hit a home run, if you say, well, so and so hit a home run, that's the hypothesis that he hit a home run in last night's game, based on our background knowledge, we would say that hypothesis is implausible. OK.

Yeah, fascinating. And it has a lot to do with our expectations that we just don't expect the pitcher to hit a home run. They don't practice batting.

And we would expect the good hitters to hit home runs. So plausibility just deals with our background assumptions. Is that safe to say? That's that well, our background knowledge.

Yeah, background knowledge and background assumptions. Yeah, because for what

might be plausible for one person might not be plausible for another. Is that a fair statement? That's correct.

That's because subjectivity gets into the scene. You know, like when we're talking about the resurrection, it's going to be a matter of do you do you think that the supernatural is even possible? So if you don't think God exists, if you already have a presupposition that God doesn't exist, that the supernatural doesn't occur, then you're automatically going to say the resurrection hypothesis is implausible. But if you come at it with an open mind and you say, OK, I may not believe God exists.

I may not think that the supernatural is there. But if I'm going to be do this investigation with integrity, I got to be open to the possibility that there is a supernatural dimension that's going to be impossible. And I think that the supernatural dimension that's supernatural events at least can occur that God may exist.

And if Jesus rose from the dead, that could be evidence that would change my background knowledge. So I got to be at least be open to it. So just as the Christian has to be open to some things that might be uncomfortable.

So do skeptics if they're going to do historical investigation in their integrity. That we really should approach even when we say something's plausible or not with at least an ounce of humility that maybe the person we're engaging with has that different set, that different set of background knowledge, different set of horizons. And we can't just dismiss with an attitude that what they're suggesting is very implausible.

And they might think it is. Good point. OK, I'm moving along here with this set of criteria.

What is this Latin phrase, ad hoc? Yeah, it is a Latin phrase and it means for this. OK, and so we you've heard of ad hoc committees, right? So an ad hoc committee is a committee that would not exist normally, but given a certain scenario or situation has come up, it was formed ad hoc. It was formed for this for this very purpose.

So an ad hoc element in a hypothesis would be something that we wouldn't necessarily arrive at a natural, naturally that this is the case. It's an ad hoc component that was meant to suggest that meant to answer things. So for example, if we say that purple polka dot ikis from Pluto are responsible for all the unexplained phenomena in our universe, that is an ad hoc hypothesis, right? And there's always going to be some extent of a degree of ad hocness in a hypothesis.

Yeah, because folks are trying to figure out what could best explain the data that's available. So as they're making a suggestion, there's a bit of creativity in trying to understand that. Yeah, but then speculation or non evidence assumptions can be ad hoc.

The hypothesis that has the least amount of ad hoc qualities is preferred. Yeah, we have to, I think, cover the twin theory. Yeah, here.

William Lane Craig was in a debate at UC Irvine and has a debate opponent. I forget who it was. Greg Kevin.

Okay, Greg Kevin. I debated him a few years after, I think, 2012. You know, I think he suggested here that the best explanation of the data was that Jesus had a long lost twin who, after Jesus died, what immaculate timing that the long lost twin would show up in Jerusalem and that Jesus's disciples would mistakenly think it was the resurrected Lord.

That's true. Greg, I had a debate with him. It's on our YouTube channel.

You know, it was a fun debate. We had a good time I had lunch with him, like a year later, we got together. He did his doctoral dissertation on that.

He's a philosophy professor and he said, "Hey, it can't be hallucinations. If it's not hallucinations," and he says, "It couldn't be that they saw the risen Jesus because of the hallucination. That only leaves one option because it wasn't the risen Jesus.

He's an atheist." He says, "The only plausible option is that Jesus had an identical twin who came later." Now, he made me promise before the debate that I wouldn't bring that up. And he says he rejects the identical twin hypothesis. He's changed his mind.

But certainly, so this would fall under that ad hoc. Oh, yeah, very quite ad hoc because there's not a scrap of evidence that Jesus had an identical twin. And then there's all kinds of problems with the identical twin hypothesis.

Yeah. All right. Illumination.

The last one here. What is that about? Illumination. This is kind of like a bonus criterion.

It's icing on the cake. Okay. So it's probably the least important of these five.

The most important would be plausibility and then explanatory scope, explanatory power. Less ad hoc would be on the third level. And then the final would be illumination.

And that would be the hypothesis sheds light on other questions that are being asked. So, for example, my hypothesis on how to explain gospel differences by appealing to compositional devices that are part and parcel of writing. We can show we're part and parcel of writing, ancient biography and history.

It does shed illumination on another question, another matter. And that is Christology in the gospel of Mark. So many scholars have said that Mark does not present such a high view of Jesus as John does.

John clearly says, Jesus is God. Mark, it's nowhere near as clear. But when you read the gospel of Mark through the lens of ancient biography, understand the gospels are ancient biographies.

That's why we look for the compositional devices that ancient biographers used. We find that Plutarch says the reason, the objective behind biography is to illuminate who this person is, the character behind it, the qualities of this person. So you come to the gospel of Mark and the very first, the way it starts off, as Isaiah the prophet said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.

Well, we come to find out it's not Jesus preparing the way for God, it's John DeBaptist preparing the way for Jesus. Well, what does that say about who Mark is viewing Jesus as? And then chapter two, you've got Jesus healing a paralytic and forgiving his sins. And the Jewish leaders there say, well, that's blasphemy.

Only God can forgive sins. Chapter three, Jesus is accused of being Satan, casting out Satan when he's casting out demons and he gives the thing about, well, you've got a strong man. And if you want to rob his house, you have to go in and bind the strong man and then you can plunder his goods, you can rob him.

And what he's saying is that his exorcisms is a sign that he has bound the strong man who was Satan and now is plundering his kingdom for souls. And then chapter four, you know, he calms the wind. Well, this is something the Old Testament says only God can do.

Chapter five, he raises the dead, something the Old Testament says only God can do. Chapter six, he walks on water, something the Old Testament says only God can do. So you see that Mark is giving us events that illuminate who Jesus is.

He is the uniquely divine son of God. And this is something you see very clearly when you view the Gospels as ancient biographies, which you don't see so clearly otherwise. So that hypothesis of approaching the Gospels, reading them as ancient biographies, sheds illumination, illuminates other areas of interest that aren't so clear.

And so that's the illumination criterion. Yeah, good. Having a method in place can really be helpful for folks to realize one's own assumptions and how we can come to formulate a rational approach to the conclusions we're advocating for.

Certainly might be different than sort of that freehand history without any method to each his own type of thing, which maybe we'll look at next week. Yeah, looking forward to it. We have a question from one of your YouTube viewers.

This question comes from Christianos. "Isn't Araneus the earliest extant witness for the traditional ending of Mark? And he was writing in the second century, himself learning from one of Apostle John's disciples? I mean, even if those verses were not written by Mark, what if they're still part of apostolic tradition?" Yeah, well, I mean, we always have to be open to the possibility that they still are, that they are part of apostolic tradition, but 99.199% of New Testament scholars today would say that these verses, chapter 16

verses 9 through 20, did not belong to the original Gospel of Mark. And that's why in modern translations you see brackets around them, sometimes the entire text of 9 through 20 are in italics, and then you'll usually see a footnote at the bottom of the page that said these verses do not appear in the oldest and the best manuscripts.

So yes, they do appear in Araneus who is writing somewhere between, I think it's 174 and 186. And he mentions these verses. However, others, many ancient witnesses would say that make note that these verses did not appear in the older Greek manuscripts.

And if you read verses 9 and like say 9 through 12, 9 through 13, you see that it's not really a smooth transition from verse 8. It's almost like it brings Mary back into the scene after she's already been mentioned and it's like it's mentioned again for the first time. Plus there are words, terms that are being used in the Greek that aren't Mark and style, and they don't appear elsewhere. Now, you know, it's not like 100% certainty that these verses weren't part of Mark's original Gospel, but it certainly suggests that they weren't.

And then, you know, these are the verses that talk about picking up poisonous snakes and drinking poison and nothing's going to happen to you. And you've got, you know, snake handlers and people like this in churches in West Virginia and they get bitten and they die, or they get really sick. So these verses, 99.99% of New Testament scholars do regard these as spurious verses that were later added on, and we're almost certainly not part of the original mark that the end Mark ended here abruptly either by choice, or he wasn't able to complete it, or the ending was lost.

So could, again, the question then, could these verses 9 through 20 be part of apostolic tradition? It's always possible, but I wouldn't go just on possibility. You know, we're not going to make any absolute judgments on this, but I wouldn't put much weight in those verses. Great.

Thank you. If you want to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael O'Connor, you can go to his website, RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels. There you can check out some great resources like ebooks, articles, videos, audio, and the like.

If this podcast has been a blessing to you, would you consider becoming one of our monthly supporters? You can do so at RisenJesus.com/donate. Be sure to like Dr. O'Connor on Facebook, follow him on Twitter, subscribe to his YouTube channel, and subscribe to his podcast as well on iTunes and the Google Play Store. This has been the RisenJesus Podcast, a ministry of Dr. Michael O'Connor.

[Music]