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S5E9 - Non-Canonical Christian Literature PT2

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

We continue our discussion on Non-canonical Christian sources.

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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's a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the president of Risen Jesus, a non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt Jares, your host. On today's program we continue our discussion on the non-canonical Christian literature but before we continue that conversation I want to remind you to subscribe to the program whether you're watching on YouTube, subscribe to Dr. Licona's channel or the podcast on a podcast app such as Apple Podcasts or through the Google Play Store. Be sure to subscribe so you can get notifications on when new episodes are released.

Well Mike, last week we discussed two of the non-canonical Christian literature and I put air quotes because I understand your project was a little different historical not so theological in terms of the methods there but for me as a theologian I think more having this realm of orthodoxy and so yeah at any rate so we talked about the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter and there are a number of other New Testament and apocryphal works that just didn't take focus here with your purposes but the next one that you looked at was the Gospel of Judas and maybe you could tell us a little bit about the Gospel of Judas and why it's caught some attention. Well the Gospel of Judas became a news item in 2006 when National Geographic featured it in a documentary series and produced a book on it. The manuscript of the Gospel of Judas was discovered in Egypt in the 1970s.

The guy who discovered it tried to sell it and was unsuccessful at doing it at that time so he just put it in a safe deposit box and where it remained for about 30 years perhaps even longer. The manuscript is dated to around the year 300. The Gospel of Judas was originally written scholars think around the mid-second century and the reason is Irenaeus who writes somewhere between the years 174 and 189.

Irenaeus mentions a Gospel of Judas and said that it was the product of a group called the Canaanites, not Canaanites but the Canaanites and what the Canaanites did was to make heroes out of biblical villains. So Judas being one of those. So the Gospel of Judas presents, it's Gnostic literature because it presents the names of five Gnostic figures in it and in it Jesus gives Judas secret knowledge that he gives to no one else and of course that sounds very Gnostic in nature.

We have resurrection presented there as disembodied post-mortem existence. So I don't know of anyone who, not even rather skeptical scholars who would say that the Gospel of Judas has really anything to offer us about the historical Jesus or the historical Judas. So I just said it's unlikely to give us anything for our project related to the resurrection of Jesus.

Yeah it doesn't seem historical in any way and in terms of its intent or if it were it's extremely revisionistic and it's sort of intriguing that humans have this, for whatever reason it still catches their attention. Oh this is the true story of what really happened. You can sort of have that way about them.

I can think here of the Disney film Maleficent where the villain of the Sleeping Beauty

story they make into, they give her a backstory and all of a sudden you become sympathetic to the cause of the villain. You almost feel bad or sad for them as you see them become the villain. So they might not make them out to be the hero but all of a sudden their evil is explained or understandable.

So it's interesting that humans have that about them that we want to know these things. So you see that with the the canites like you said making these villains out to be the good guys. Yeah crazy stuff.

Yeah it's sort of nothing new for humans to do and as you mentioned before when you're thinking about entertainment and the stories people wrote those are the ideas they sort of came up with and you see that but it doesn't bear much of anything for the project that you're performing here but it's good it's good that you mention this because people are going to be curious you know does that document have anything to say on that material. So glad you mentioned it. Now there's another series here the the Revelation dialogues.

Maybe you could tell me about that something I'm a bit unfamiliar with and perhaps our listeners are as well. What are the Revelation dialogues? Well this is a category of literature that is typically dated to the second half of the second century and into the third century. There's typically three different pieces of literature that belong in this category.

The first is the epistle of the apostles and this is a dialogue it features a dialogue between the risen Jesus and his disciples in which he opposes Gnostic teachings. So you've got Orthodox teachings in this. So you find we find Jesus talking about his full deity and bodily resurrection but again this is just this is fictitious.

This is a response to Gnostic teachings. It doesn't really tell us anything about the historical Jesus or anything that would come from a primary source. Then you have what's called the treatise of the resurrection.

Sometimes it's called the letter to Reganos and so Reganos is a man who is asking some questions and then this what this letter is is or the treatise on the resurrection. This letter it's a letter written by Gnostic to Reganos answering his questions. So resurrection there refers to a spirit leaving the body and going to heaven.

So it's a spiritual resurrection is disembodiment. It is a spiritual resurrection rather than a physical transformation, revivification and transformation of the corpse. And then the third piece of literature within this category is called the Apocryphon of James.

And this is it presents Jesus. He's risen from the dead but he hasn't yet ascended to heaven. Even though that this narrates a discussion between Jesus Peter and James that is alleged to have taken place 18 months after his resurrection and still Jesus has been

with him all this time.

He hasn't ascended to heaven. So you know this is it is fictitious. There's really nothing in here that we would look at and think of as being worthwhile that goes back to the first century.

So that's the resurrection or the revelation dialogues. Yeah, let me let me ask you here. So when you're analyzing a document, you know as a historian and you see the revelation dialogues here, how is a historian can what can help you differentiate between a work that is fictional and a work that is historical.

So for example with the epistle of the apostles, you know as you mentioned this is orthodox teaching. But so how do you know that this is a work of fiction as opposed to history? Okay, well if it's stated to the latter part of the second century, then we got to figure that's probably not a primary source that goes that goes back to Jesus. But we do have primary sources.

You've got the writings of Paul. We've got the Gospels and several at least at minimum several of them are rooted in eyewitness testimony. So we can get back and virtually all historians of Jesus will say that we can get back through the Gospels and through some help with Paul.

We we can get back to a number of sayings and acts of Jesus that you know at least is going to tell us give us an idea of the gist of some of the things that Jesus said and did. But this is just too late. And then we look at it it's setting and why it's written.

It's it's written to address the Gnostic teachings of that time and that form of Gnosticism as far as we know did not exist in the first century. So we just don't have reasons to think that this would be a primary source. Whereas that's different from what we have with the New Testament literature.

Hmm interesting. Yeah good good. I know historians have all their their methods.

I know as well looking at the writing style for example trying to date the manuscript evidence and all that is a part of that whole process. And it helps you determine yeah whether this is is this a primary source or is this something that you know comes 150 years later and all of a sudden yeah the whole intent it seems changes. Yeah.

All right well let's let's move to an intriguing topic here within the non. So there's maybe debate here over the non-canonical Christian literature. The pseudo mark the ending of mark.

Tell us about that and what scholars think about that. Yeah it's interesting you would point out you know if we're calling this non-canonical and yet pseudo mark with what many scholars refer to a pseudo mark are the last 18 verses that we find in many of our

Bibles today in the Gospel of Mark. This is chapter 16 verses 9 through 20 and in virtually all of your modern English translations there are going to be brackets around these verses and with a footnote at the bottom that says these verses are not found in the earliest and best manuscripts that we have.

And it's rare to find a scholar today. There are few but it's rare to find a New Testament scholar today that who argues that these 18 verses appeared in the original Gospel of Mark. These verses are where it talks about Jesus says you'll go around you'll pick up poisonous snakes and you can drink poison and you'll be okay.

You know the kind of stuff that they do in some of these small country churches in West Virginia up in the hills. We have copperheads and watermoccasins and things like that that they're handling. And you know sometimes they get bit and sometimes they die as a result.

So but these most scholars don't think that this was written by Mark. You know our two like I said our two oldest manuscripts that contain Mark's endings don't include it. That would be the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus.

Both of them written in fourth century. The vocabulary and style of these verses are not Markin. So the scholars will look at and say you know these are the kind of these are the kind of vocabulary terms that Mark uses everywhere throughout his Gospel.

But he uses some really unique terms here a bunch of them. Not just a few but a number of them. And then the style just seems to be completely different in these 18 verses than Mark's writing elsewhere.

And also I think one of the for me one of the strongest reasons for thinking that these verses do not belong to the original Mark is they do not cohere well with verses one through eight. So let me just turn to them real quick. And we can look at we can look at that.

So it's Mark chapter 16 verses one through eight. So you got when the Sabbath was over Mary Magdalene Mary the mother James and Salome brought spices bought spices so that they could go and anoint him very early in the morning on the first day of the week they went to the tomb at sunrise. They were saying to one another who will roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb for us.

Looking up they observed that the stone which was very large had been rolled away. When they entered the tomb they saw a young man dressed in a long white robe sitting on the right side they were amazed and alarmed. Don't be alarmed he said to them.

You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene who was crucified. He has been resurrected. He is not here.

See the place where they put him. But go tell us disciples in Peter he's going ahead of you to Galilee there. You will see him there just as he told you.

So they went out and started running from the tomb because trembling and astonishment overwhelmed them and they said nothing to anyone since they were afraid. That's one through eight. Now follow me here in these next couple verses verse nine early on the first day of the week after he had risen he appeared first to Mary Magdalene out of whom he had driven seven demons.

She went and reported to those who had been with him as they were mourning and weeping. Now isn't it strange here it's almost like it starts over when it says on the first day of the week after he had risen he appeared to Mary Magdalene. So there's no mention of the other Mary's there or the other's salami and there's no mention of of I mean you've got the angel once again that's announcing to Mary and only Mary apparently right here that Jesus had been raised.

So that's just strange it just doesn't cohere well with the remainder of the verse verses one through eight. So you know when you look at the manuscript evidence it's not there in the earliest manuscripts it doesn't sound like something Mark would say that's right the story isn't coherent it's sort of a restart it just all the evidence sort of stacks up to say huh this sounds like it was added in the text sometime later. But let me ask let me ask you this Mike so how does Mark end and and what do scholars think is the the true ending of Mark lost or does it sort of end abruptly you know there with the with the angel saying go and go and tell others and they left and we're trembling.

Yeah well there's basically three major positions all right you we could say two major positions two major positions all right one is that Mark ends at verse eight all right and it's a strange ending because it says out of fear and trembling they fled from the tomb and said nothing to no one and that's where it ends. So a lot of scholars think that that's where Mark intended for his is is gospel to end and there's no mention of an appearance to Jesus but it's really strange that it would end so abruptly and in such an awkward manner some some rather skeptical scholars will will say see you've got a the empty tomb tradition and the appearance tradition these are two separate they come from two different camps because they said nothing to no one but they don't take into consideration that earlier Mark's gospel chapter one verse 44 Jesus heals I think it's a leper and he says you know go and say nothing to no one same kind of grammatical structure there but show yourself to the high priest and and what the Lord has done for you what what is being meant by that is by saying nothing to no one he's saying don't stop along the way and and tell anyone what's happened go directly to the high priest to the priest in in the temple and I think what Mark is saying here it when the angel it says they said nothing to no one they didn't stop along the way to tell anyone they went directly to the apostles and besides in chapter 14 verse 28 Jesus is predicting his resurrection and he says after I have raised I will go ahead of you to Galilee there you

will see me and then in verse seven of chapter 16 the angel says he has gone ahead of you to Galilee there you will see him just as he told you it's referring to chapter 14 verse 28 now the the skeptical scholars will say yeah but 1428 was later at it you know how convenient right so I I think it's more likely that the end the second position is either Mark or Mark did not intend for his his gospel to end there and that can be subdivided either the ending was lost or Mark was unable to complete it maybe he got sick and died or he got thrown in into prison and he wasn't able to complete it I think that is more likely and that is not the the majority position however the majority of scholars think that it ended at chapter 16 verse 8 but the reasons they give for it are legion it's like if there's 15 different scholars there's 20 different explanations for why it ended that way there is no consensus not even anything approaching a consensus or a majority position on why Mark would have ended his gospel there so I think one explanation among the many as you say is that Mark wanted each Christian to share their own story about what it means to them that Jesus is resurrected you know and that's possible it's yeah I just find those unlikely you know the the the longer ending that we see verses nine through 20 it's not exceptionally late uh irenaeus and tation tation around 170 and is the attest around irenaeus somewhere between 174 189 they both mentioned they're aware of the longer ending to Mark so we know that it was composed sometime in the second century perhaps sometime around sometime prior to 170 it came about and you know what's interesting here nt right tom right um he makes an interesting observation or or or posits an interesting scenario here he suggests the possibility that verses nine through twenty was a separate account perhaps from a lost gospel and he makes us an interesting observation he says you know these rather skeptical scholars they try to detect traditions that are earlier than what we find in the synoptic gospels traditions that are earlier and contradict what we find in the synoptic gospels like try to find something where Jesus didn't rise he just ascended and was exalted in heaven or something that's not bodily resurrection that's what they're looking for um so they're very willing and they're very willing to posit and accept something like an earlier version of q and multiple recensions of this hypothetical source q i do believe that there was probably a q source um but they tried to posit multiple and earlier versions of q and earlier version of the gospel of thomas that we have an earlier version of the gospel of peter that we have and then they like the secret gospel of of mark so it's like they're they're more than willing to embrace these kinds of things to find um traditions that predate the the synoptic gospels but right goes on to say they never consider the possibility that verses nine through twenty are the remains of a lost gospel and uh or are part of mark's lost ending here and they never tried to take this this uh this longer ending and try to reconstruct what mark's lost ending might have looked like um or he says you know maybe Matthew because Matthew's gospel follows mark's resurrection narrative on a number of points maybe Matthew's gospel pre um preserves some of the lost ending of mark what why aren't they trying to figure this stuff out and it would seem that um these things would be a lot more promising than looking at trying to identify earlier recensions of q or earlier versions of the gospel thomas gospel peter and things like this and one

wonders why they they don't try to reconstruct mark's lost ending uh from these things and you know perhaps it's because they already know ahead of time that it wouldn't yield the results that they desire yeah interesting always uh always fun to think about uh those uh verses in the bible that you know maybe bracket off i mean there are some other ones or even the missing verses yeah depending upon which english translation you're reading uh this you know the closer you look the more you realize oh hey there's a there's a history here of uh of scribes working and uh there are scholars hard at work trying to to determine the most faithful representation of the autograph of the original writings so great well let's jump to uh a question from one of your followers chan he asks while the resurrection is the foundation on which the truth of christianity rests do you agree that as laymen we need to be well rounded on a wide range of topics if so why do you think so and what topics do you think are the most important well i i assume that chan here is referring to laymen who are involved in christian apologetics or interested in christian apologetics and i i think he's he's certainly correct that the resurrection of jesus is one of the most important if not the most important thing uh to be looking at because of jesus was raised from the dead its game set match christianity's true period um and uh so a lot rests on it because of if jesus didn't rise well then christianity is a false religion and and you know there's no sense in following jesus if uh and and devoting your life to him if christianity is a false religion but if you're really into apologetics you want to learn apologetics and and you want to learn how to interact with others uh using evidences for christianity and being able to answer objections to christianity well then yeah you should be a little more well rounded you should study arguments for god's existence so you're looking at some philosophical arguments you're looking for some uh using some of the scientific data which has been very friendly to suggesting that there's an intelligent designer who was responsible for the creation of the universe and guided it in such a way that it would be uh friendly for for life and that we could have intelligent life as we have it today so and i think you you you're well uh you do well if you study things like the problem of evil pain and suffering and learn how you know become familiar that's a very difficult argument to address you want to be able to address that you want to you know so there's philosophy in there there's some science in there and of course there's some historical things as well especially when we come to the new testament um the authorship of the gospels and and being able to talk about whether they're reliable and and things like that these are all important topics so yeah i would say not just a resurrection but there are many other things to study and um and it can be a lot of fun as well getting some of the fundamentals down about uh the gospels like the abc's d's and e's you know dr lacona's got a great lecture on his youtube channel called the abc's of the gospels or the abc's d's and e's of the gospels you've got a couple variations out there yeah the abc's is on youtube and then i think i have the fuller version um on vimeo my vimeo channel i don't have much on vimeo but that one's on there yeah yeah great so that's that's a great place to start for someone looking to become a little bit more well-rounded on gospel historical questions so great question from chan wonderful answer from dr lacona thank you for that and thanks for cluinescent

on the some of these other non-canonical christian literature documents uh looking at um the gospel of judas the revelation dialogues a few different documents there and then the pseudo mark always fun to think about that one pseudo mark uh so good thank you so much for that dr lacona if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of dr michael a kona you can go to riz and jesus.com where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the gospels and the resurrection of jesus it's there that you can find free resources like ebooks pdfs videos loads of great material please go check out the website if this program's been a blessing to you would you consider becoming one of our monthly supporters you can go to riz and jesus.com/donate to begin your support today be sure to like dr lacona on facebook follow them on twitter and subscribe to this channel his youtube channel or the podcast that you may be listening this program through whether that's apple podcasts or the google play store this has been the riz and jesus podcast a ministry of dr mike lacona

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