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S3E8 - Season Finale

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Dr. Mike Licona and Kurt Jaros review the topics covered in season 3 as well as come of Mike's personal confessions and reflections after finishing his book, "The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach."

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

Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike 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, we are really proud of you. We are recapping the season where we've looked at historical investigation, and we're going to also hear towards the end about some of Mike's confessions, his horizons as he went into this project, writing the book, The Resurrection of Jesus, a New Historiographical Approach. Mike, so first let's just recap some from what we've talked about the season.

We started off asking a very basic question. What is history? Yeah, well history is

essentially a contested concept, right? Historians don't agree on that, but pretty much so I think most people would understand history as it's an attempt to describe what occurred in the past. Nice and simple.

Good. All right, we also looked at, well, we've looked at a lot this season. There's so much, and in fact your chapter in the book is, it's like over 100 pages long for one chapter.

But I appreciated a couple weeks ago when we were looking at the argument to the best explanation, and we looked at the criteria by McCullough, was it? Behan McCullough. Behan McCullough. And could you recap what those five points of method are? Sure, like the arguments of inference to the best explanation is you've got five, pretty much five basic criteria that you want to be met.

The hypothesis that best fulfills those criteria is regarded as what probably occurred. So it would be explanatory scope. Imagine a jigsaw puzzle, and you've got all these jigsaw pieces.

Each piece represents a fact. And a hypothesis, you're looking at a puzzle solution is a hypothesis. And the puzzle solution that can accommodate the maximum number of those facts has the greatest explanatory scope.

So the hypothesis that can account for the number, greatest number of the known facts is said to have explanatory scope, the most explanatory scope. And you don't have to have a perfect explanatory scope. It's the one that has the most.

So the next one would be explanatory power. It's not, you don't have to have perfect explanatory power. Of course, if you do, that makes the hypothesis all the stronger.

But the hypothesis that has the greatest amount of explanatory power, more than the other hypothesis is to be preferred over the others. So explanatory power is the ability to account for the known facts without forcing them to fit. So we talked about a jigsaw puzzle, and sometimes you can force pieces to fit, but you know they really don't go there.

And sometimes we can force, try to force facts to fit into a hypothesis, but they really don't go. So they lack explanatory power, or you could say given the truth, if we assume the truth of a hypothesis, we expect certain things. And to the extent we get those things, that hypothesis may be said to have explanatory power.

Then we look at the less ad hoc criterion. Basically, this is to say we want the hypothesis that employs the least amount of speculation or non-evidence assumptions. And then you have the plausibility criterion.

So plausibility is the degree to which a hypothesis corresponds with our background

knowledge. And the hypothesis that is most plausible is to be preferred. And then finally, we have illumination.

That is our bonus criterion. The least important one. But if that hypothesis can answer questions that have been unanswered or less certain in another matter, an unrelated matter, then it eliminates that.

It provides illumination, and that's another reason to prefer that hypothesis. So the hypothesis that best fulfills these criteria is to be regarded as what probably occurred. Okay, we also spent some time talking about horizons or biases.

Tell us again about horizons. Well, a horizon would be our pre-understanding. So if we come to say something like we're studying about Jesus, and you come to the gospels that have Jesus performing miracles, and exorcisms, and rising from the dead, and making predictions that end up coming through.

If we come to the investigation with a pre-understanding that God does not exist, that there is no supernatural element in reality, well then that horizon is going to lead us to certain conclusions. If we come to a text already with Christian convictions, or persuaded Christianity's truth, that horizon is going to bring certain presuppositions or assumptions to our investigation. We're going to be more inclined to accept certain things that maybe a skeptic won't.

So we have to learn when we're doing our historical investigation. If we're going to do it with integrity, we have to realize that our horizons are going to be in full play, and we have to take definite plans or actions to minimize any impact those horizons may have on our investigation that could compromise the integrity of our investigation. And this is something that I learned that when we're doing it, you have to take deliberate steps to doing it.

And you just can't take it and get to a point where it seems like you're neutral. You have to make a sustained effort to stay there, because I found that if I didn't, I could get to a point where I was really, I believe that I was being very objective and would definitely go where the evidence pointed. But if I didn't continue a sustained effort with that, then I would go back to my default position.

So you have to work hard at that. But that's what a horizon is. I do want to ask you about your horizons more and some confessions you make there in the first chapter.

But before we do that, a few questions about the book itself. It was a project that took you a long time to do. And it's a different approach, isn't it, than say NT Wright's big thick book on the resurrection of the Son of God.

So how does your approach differ and why do you think that your approach was a needed viewpoint or method of approach? Okay. NT Wright's book is a fantastic book. I

had just been in my doctoral research for a few months, and then NT Wright's book, *The Resurrection, the Son of God*, came out.

And my doctoral supervisor had me read it and then write a review that was published. So enjoyable read, good book. When I started my doctoral research, what I was looking for was something that McCullough provided.

These are the tools that you can use a strictly controlled historical method. This is how you approach the question. And you can really get in and apply the strictly controlled historical method.

That's what I was looking for. I got disappointed as reading things written by philosophers of history and professional historians that most of them don't have a strictly controlled historical method. They're just out there.

It's like one postmodernist historian wrote in that noble, I think it's called that noble dream. In the 1980s, he says, gosh, I can't remember his name, Peter something, I think. And he says that by the time he got to the 1980s, the practice of history resembled that which we find in the book of Judges, that every man did what was right in his own eyes.

There was no king in Israel. So they just kind of like went with what they wanted. And no one was holding anyone else accountable.

It's just you do your own thing. What McCullough, I think contributed was he gave a strictly controlled historical method specific common sense criteria that you could apply to hypotheses. And you don't see biblical scholars doing this at all.

They just throw stuff out there and well, this doesn't have Garrett Ludeman saying the atheist New Testament scholar, well, we know Jesus didn't ascend to heaven since we know that there's no heaven to which someone can ascend to. Or we have James Tabor who says, well, we know that since women never give birth, unless a male has impregnated them, we know that Jesus was not born of a virgin. We know that since dead people don't come back to life, we know that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

That's weighing in with the worldview, not with the evidence, right? You have to control that horizon. And what I liked what McCullough did he provided that so back to right, I was hoping Wright would do that. And Wright does do it.

He just doesn't do it to the extent I was looking for. But what right so but Wright does have a a good a robust section on historiography, which again, we're talking about the philosophy of history and historical method. He's got some good stuff on that it just wasn't to the extent I wanted.

I think the greatest contribution that Wright makes in that book is all the excellent research he did on what people in antiquity believed about the afterlife, what Greeks

believed, what Jews believed, and the various views of the afterlife. So he concludes that when resurrection was mentioned, it almost always meant that something happened to the corpse. And so when the Christians mentioned resurrection, that they meant something happened to the corpse.

It wasn't to be taken in a metaphorical sense or anything like that. Again, I think it's it's decent. I think that's the major contribution of the book.

He does go on to do some exegesis, some helpful exegesis of some difficult passages. And then he does some work where he assesses a few alternate hypotheses like cognitive dissonance and a few others. But he doesn't do too much with that.

What he does is he punts the Gary Habermas there. And he says Gary is doing a lot of work on this. And so just look at his stuff because Gary is going to come out with this magnum opus, you know, he punts this future work.

So where my work differs from Tom Wright's is I spend a lot more time on historiography and spelling out a specific method by which we can conduct strictly controlled historical method. I also have a significant contribution on the historian miracles, which is probably more than anyone's done in the past. You have a number of historians.

I know we'll be talking about this in the next season. A number of historians who will say you cannot investigate miracle claims historians can't they don't have the tools to do that. And I say rubbish.

I don't think that their objections are I don't think they hold up. And then I go to the sources and assess the sources. We'll spend a season on that.

And I do exegesis as well, but I get a little more in depth with some of the really tough problem texts like 2 Corinthians 5, 3 through 8. And that many apocalypse thing about Matthew's race ain't. So I deal with that in more detail. Whereas I think Tom says some texts are just so strange they may have happened.

And that's just what he says. So I go with more detail with that. Plus I with the exegesis, I contribute some groundbreaking stuff in terms of like 1 Corinthians 15:44.

It is sown in natural bodies, raised the spiritual body, what that actually means. I do some stuff with in the final chapter, I do very I subject the main hypotheses that are given by skeptics out there. I subject them and the resurrection hypothesis to strictly control historical method to see how these hypotheses actually come out.

So it's a step by step by step by step. And also the if you look at the footnotes, I can salt an abundance of sources out there. Where's Tom? I mean, he's got great sources he does, but it's a more limited number of sources that he can salt than what I do.

My bibliographies I think 55 pages long. And I mean, I'm really consulting tons of sources and it's not I'm just referencing them. I actually use them and reference them where they say such things in the footnotes.

Yeah, great. So what's been the reception of your book overall? It's been mixed. Generally speaking, it's been very positive.

So even those who would not necessarily agree with my conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead will say that, I really do give honest assessments. You might not agree, but he really looks at the evidence. He doesn't skim over things and he interacts in an ironic way with those who don't agree.

In other words, when I'm looking at the hypotheses of people like Barterman or Garrett Lutiman or John Dominic Ross and Peter Crawford or Michael Gould or people with whom they don't think Jesus rose, well, you know, I'm not really dogging them. I'm taking very objective, fair-minded analyses. In fact, Peter Crawford and I became friends.

I mean, he's one of the other scholars that I criticize and assess and criticize. He came up to me at the end of me in the Society of Biblical Literature. We had debated.

We had a friendly debate and he came up to me and he says, I just wanted to let you know that I thank you for giving a fair assessment of my hypothesis. He said a lot of people had reviewed it and they did not represent me accurately and you did. We just had pleasant discussions.

So I consider it to be a friend and I mean, we may not agree, but we can still be friends. So those were some. Of course, you're going to have some, I guess the strongest criticisms have come from uber conservatives.

But they're usually theologians and they just don't understand what it means to do a historical investigation. They're more of the view. Well, you just got to believe the Bible and the Bible says it and you can talk in historical terms.

But at the end of the day, you can't call any of the biblical stuff into question or even bring it up or else you're compromising. You're moving away from orthodoxy and they just don't understand that if you're going to act as historian, you cannot come to the text with theological presuppositions. You have to come as much as possible as an empty slate.

You'll never be able to do it, of course, but you have to do your best to manage and bracket your desired outcome while your investigation proceeds. So yeah, it's been mixed reviews, but mostly, largely very positive. Even though you write about Horizons in the first chapter, you also deal with these in the rest of the book as well.

But you talk about your confessions too, going into the project. What are some of those

confessions you have? Well, I tried to follow the method I'd established and be honest with that. So I made it public right from the very beginning that I'm a Christian and that I already believe Jesus rose from the dead and that I want my investigation to back up that belief.

And if it doesn't, here are some potential consequences that are unpleasant in my life because I'm going to follow truth. So I would lose my job, which was a good job. I would lose it.

There would be some consequences. So I have motivations for this to be true. Nevertheless, I'm more committed to truth than I am, the benefits because we don't have to fear truth.

What we have to fear is that our biases will get so much in the way that it keeps us from discovering truth and cost us eternity. And that's the kind of thing that keeps me up at night and keeps me really trying to think in an unbiased, none of us are going to be perfect with it. But I tried to be as open-minded and fair as I can with this.

And I'm pleased with it. I know for myself who has a tendency to doubt at times and second guess a lot of things, not just my faith, but a lot of different things. I know and I wanted to, I wanted at the end of this that as I go forward with my life, I would never look back and say, I wish I'd done that part with more integrity.

So I look back and I know that I did this investigation with the maximum amount of integrity and honesty of which I was capable. And I don't have any regrets with it. And apparently Gary Habermas liked it because I mean he's the leading authority on this subject.

And he says, this is the best book on the resurrection that's ever been written and that's out there right now. It's the one he uses as a textbook. And when the leading authority in the world on this topic says, I've got the best book on it, that makes me feel pretty good.

That's right. That's right. Great.

All right. Why don't we take the last question of the season from Stephen Joyner here. He asks, what are the best arguments against the historicity of Jesus slash resurrection and the best way to refute them? The best arguments against Jesus, and I'm guessing he's thinking the existence of Jesus, yeah, I would say there aren't any.

There's no best ones. There are no good arguments, period. And I mean, even years ago, you had the famous radically liberal New Testament scholar Rudolf Boitmann saying that you'd have to be insane to deny that Jesus was the origin source of that a real Jesus actually existed.

And today there are no credible New Testament scholars or historians who doubt the

existence of Jesus. They are people way out there on the radical fringe on the same level as Holocaust deniers and things like that. The best evidence against the resurrection of Jesus.

Well, we're going to be discussing that in future seasons. So you'll just have to wait until then, my friend. Stephen, thanks for your question.

On next season, we're going to be looking at the historian and miracles. So be sure to tune in and anxiously await when that comes out. If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael Acona, you can go to our website, risenjesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels.

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