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S4E8 - Do Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence? [SEASON FINALE]

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Is there a greater BURDEN OF PROOF for MIRACLE CLAIMS? Do extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence? In the final episode of this season of the Risen Jesus Podcast, Dr. Licona addresses these questions.

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#burdenofproof #miracles #carlsagan

Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Michael Lacona. Dr.

Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he's a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches and conferences, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today we conclude our season looking at the historian and miracles, and we are talking about the burden of proof on today's show. Mike, before we get to talking about the burden of proof, let me ask you, as someone who has surveyed the literature on the methodology here of historians and whether or not historians can make affirmations of miracle claims or even explore miracle claims, what is your evaluation of the field? Is there a turning point in the literature in the viewpoint of historians on this topic? Yes, Kurt.

All the way up maybe till the year 2000, 20 years ago, the majority of historians and New Testament scholars were saying that historians cannot investigate miracle claims. And then in 2006, the theme issue of history and theory concerned miracles and historians. And there were the whole theme issue had to do with points, counterpoints.

You know, people saying historians can't investigate miracle claims, others saying that they can investigate miracle claims. And David Gary Shaw, I believe it was, who is the general editor of history and theory at that time. He said that basically because of what historians were saying today, philosophers of history in this theme issue, that we had come to a watershed moment amongst philosophers of history where the old view that historians can't investigate miracle claims that they should even eschew such a thing that that's going to need to be reexamined and perhaps our methods going to have to be revised.

There were a number of philosophers of history in that theme issue who were arguing that historians can investigate miracle claims. Now, some said no, but you can see this was in 2006 and continuing to this very day because there have been subsequent issues of history and theory and some other things. Even in the journal for the study of the historical Jesus, where historians have been debating over this issue whether historians can investigate miracle claims.

And more and more philosophers of history and New Testament scholars are beginning to say that, well, you know, the majority, the previous position on this is probably wrong. And we need to readjust accordingly and come up with new methods to account for miracle reports. So I'm pretty encouraged with this.

I've contributed a number of articles myself on the topic. So yeah, I'm pretty excited about it. It's like I think I say in my book, you know, like the epistemological Ice Age is coming to an end.

Spring is in the air. You know, the trees are blooming. The birds are singing and a

warmth is now felt in the air toward historical, the historical investigation of miracles.

Or I see us loose might say, as land is coming. There you go. [LAUGHTER] OK, so when we're thinking about the history and miracles, though, does it require a greater burden of proof upon the historians? So maybe we can explore these claims.

But we just need much stronger evidence. I think here Carl Sagan is famous for one of the statements he said, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. And of course, I think that's philosophically dubious.

But does the historian need to use or is held to a higher burden of proof for miracle claims? Well, let's just take that. And we can call it Sagan's Saul, right? And we can take that, for example. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.

The first thing we can ask is, what does extraordinary evidence-- well, what does that look like? As I remember a guy named Jason-- I don't remember his last name. He used to teach at Southern Evangelical Seminary. He-- last I heard, he's now a Catholic philosopher.

But I remember him saying, what does that mean? Does it mean that it glows? What does it mean to be extraordinary? And I've just given us some thought. And I don't think it does require extraordinary evidence. Think about this.

Landing on the moon. Man, when I was a kid, Kurt, I was really into the Apollo Space program. I thought I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up.

The thought of going to the moon was just an amazing thing. And I remember being in grade school. And they would get all the students in a grade together.

And we'd be in this room. And they put this black and white television on. And we'd watch them walk on the moon on television, or the lift office.

I mean, it was just a big thing back in the '60s. So it was an extraordinary event to say, for people, to walk on the moon for the first time. Well, what was the evidence for it? Television.

Television. A medium that often distorts and pervericates. It's biases and all this kind of stuff.

And yet we looked at it. That's how we got our information about people walking on the moon. And we believed it.

And rightly so. An extraordinary claim that we had walked on the moon did not require extraordinary evidence. Well, let me give another example.

Let's say-- because maybe you'd say, well, it was extraordinary back then. But it

wouldn't be extraordinary for us today, right? We've grown in our scientific understanding. So I don't believe that there are intelligent aliens anywhere else in our universe that would be capable of abducting humans, or communicating with humans.

So I could be wrong on that. I don't really have a theological reason for it. I just-- mine would be more scientific in the things I've heard from the Christian astronomer Hugh Ross, would see him.

He gave several reasons why the closest planet to us that may be capable of sustaining intelligent life, I think he said, is 23,000 light years away. And even if they were capable of communicating with humans in person and coming to Earth, that's the 23,000 light years, if they could travel at the speed of light, would take 23,000 years to get here. And of course, no one could survive that long.

And even so, you'd have all kinds of problems with space debris, radiation that would prevent it from happening. So even if intelligent aliens capable of meeting us in person, communicating with us, existed, they would not even be capable of making it to the Earth. Now, that's my view at this point.

I'm open to change on that, but that's my view. Now, let's just suppose that my wife has been out shopping. And she comes home, and she's just beside herself.

She's terrified, and she says, Mike, was just at the grocery store. And I saw an alien in the parking lot, a real alien. The spaceship landed.

And an alien that was of horrific appearance came out. And I just jumped in the car and ran home. First, I'm looking, and I'm trying to discern, is she trying to be honest with me or pull a joke? Now, we've been married now in another two months.

It will be 33 years. And I've known her for probably another two years more than that. So I know my wife well enough that I could discern, I believe, whether she was telling the truth.

So let's suppose I look and say, OK, she really believes that she saw an alien, a spacecraft land. I don't believe in aliens. But I can ascertain that she's trying to communicate what she believes to be the truth.

Is that enough to convince me? Well, I don't know, but it's really going to get my attention. Now, let's just suppose a moment later, my next door neighbor Bruce Knox on the door. And now he is beside himself because he saw the same alien spacecraft land in the parking lot at the grocery store.

And he's saying, well, what are we to make of this? And then we turn on the television, and we find that you've got Fox and CNN, all these news networks, they're getting reports from all over the world of alien landings. And they're showing these on television.

Well, none of that evidence is going to be extraordinary.

My wife, she can testify, OK? Bruce, coming over, he can testify. None of that's extraordinary. It wouldn't be extraordinary to turn on the television and see these things.

But my bias or my belief, background knowledge, or background belief that aliens do not exist, it's going to take additional evidence to convince me. Now, it may only take that seeing the alien land and step out of the spaceship to convince my wife. Or if I was in the parking lot, maybe if I saw that, that would probably be sufficient for me that I was wrong and that aliens really do exist.

But I might be in at home, and here in some testimony, I might require additional evidence to update my worldview to allow these kind of things. So it wouldn't take extraordinary evidence, but it might take additional evidence. So that's one thing I'd say.

Let me just throw in one more thing, Kurt. That doesn't mean that additional evidence is required to determine that a miracle occurred, whether the report is truthful. But when we're talking about burden of proof, that additional evidence may be required to convince me to move on it.

Hmm. Yeah. It's really intriguing when you consider that, I think skeptics realize the untenable nature when they want video evidence of a first century event.

They know it's impossible. It's impossible for that to have happened. And we see the inconsistency for non-miraculous events.

Why don't they require a video camera event of Washington crossing the-- Delaware. Thank you. Yes.

The Delaware on Christmas Day. They don't care for that. And the question is, why? Why don't they care to hold that same standard? At least for me, as an apologist, that tells me there's something else going on here.

Because there's an intellectual inconsistency that they're not applying across the board. You want to see the consistency. So when we apply those same standards, when we apply the same standards of history, what conclusion does that lead us to? And I think-- and as you do, it's favorable toward the Christian position.

OK, but I'm digressing. OK, so getting back here to burden of proof, talk about the areas of risk assessment and the American legal system and how these impact these notions of burden of proof in historical work. Yeah, risk assessment.

Now, this dovetails into what we were just talking about. Now, I do think that some skeptics do have an unreasonable burden of proof. I remember in my debate with Matt Dilihoney, which happened a few years ago, which interestingly, other than my debate

with Shabir Ali from 2004, this is probably my most viewed debate.

The last I looked there, I think there was like 400 and some thousand views on my YouTube channel and probably over 100,000 more on his. So it's been viewed quite a bit. And in that debate, I asked Matt, I said, look, suppose we're debating here and some terrorists come into the auditorium right now, and they come up to the stage and they say, Matt, we're OK with you, but Lacona, you have debated Muslims and have said that Muhammad was a false prophet and suggested that.

And so you've got to die. And they behead me right up there in front of everyone. Everyone's and I witness to it.

And then everybody just flees out of the auditorium. The terrorists take off. Everybody leaves the auditorium in terror.

An hour later, they are being interviewed by law enforcement and the media. And then I come walking out of the auditorium. My head's attached.

You can see scars on my neck. And I say, hey, look, I was in heaven. I came back.

God brought me back once again to testify that Jesus is Lord and he offers eternal life and we're to repent and get right with God. And hey, Matt, while I was up there, I met with a friend of yours who died five years ago. And on the day of his death, you had a private conversation with him.

And no one else knew about it. And here are the contents of that conversation. And I peed it to you.

And it's exactly what you guys had said, but nobody else could have known it. I said, in that case, let's say that happened. Would you at that point at least acknowledge that there is a spiritual dimension of reality? And he said, well, I don't know, but probably not.

So some skeptics can have an unreasonable burden of proof there. But that doesn't mean that all do. And I think we can certainly sympathize with those that said, look, my worldview, my background beliefs right now would suggest that God does not exist and that there is no spiritual dimension of reality.

So when you suggest that Jesus rose from the dead, I've got a lot to overcome before I can believe that. Because of my background beliefs right now, I can sympathize with that. I mean, look, I'm not really fond of Islam.

I'm not. Would I become a Muslim if I knew that Islam was true? Yeah. Because even though I may not be fond of the religion or a lot of what's taught, I may not even like Allah, the way God is presented in the Quran.

But I would become a Muslim because I fear God and I don't want to be damned forever.

So but I wouldn't want Islam to be true. I believe Christianity is true.

But if Christianity is false, I'd want to know that, of course, and follow the correct worldview. But it would take some really strong evidence because of my background beliefs to move me over to Islam. So I can sympathize with the skeptic who says, look, my background beliefs are just causing me pause.

I can't become a Christian. There's too much to overcome at this point. I need more evidence.

So the way I would look at that when it comes to risk assessment is this. If I have a friend who just changed careers, let's say, and he becomes a stockbroker, and he comes to me and he says, hey, Mike, just got a tip on a company and it's penny stock right now, but this thing is almost guaranteed that it's going to grow by 1,000% in the next six months. Would you invest some money? And he shows me all this information that they have on it and it looks really good.

I mean, really good documentation, which would convince me that this stock is in a position to grow 1,000% over the next six months. Yeah, I might invest a little money with that. But let's suppose he says, OK, but I want you to dump all of your retirement savings in it.

I want you to take it out of your four or three Bs or IRAs and throw it into this. Well, no, I'm not going to do that. Why? Because there's too much risk involved.

Well, wait a minute, Mike, if it's good enough to put 100 bucks in or 1,000 bucks in, then it's good enough to put all of it in. Nothing has changed by the fact that I'm asking you to put all of your money in it rather than just \$100 or \$1,000. Well, that's correct.

But the potential negative consequences is going to require for me a whole lot more guarantees before I would do that because the risk is so great. But it doesn't determine-- it doesn't do anything to challenge whether the data that would allow me to put \$100 or \$1,000 into it would suggest that it's true that this stock is poised to grow 1,000% over the next six months. The same thing could be said about Pascal's wager.

Now, Lays Pascal said, let's just assume for a moment that the evidence for Christianity being true is 50/50. 50% that it's true, 50% that it's not. It's still, for all practical purposes, it's best to be a Christian.

Why? Because you have everything to gain and little to lose. But if Christianity is false, you've lost nothing, even though you've gained nothing. So you are better off becoming a Christian.

Well, that says nothing pertaining to whether Christianity is true. It just gives you a pragmatic reason that if it's 50/50, you should arrow on the side, be willing to arrow on

the side of Christianity being true. And it's the same thing with the risk assessment model.

Because the consequences of believing, non-believing, are so great, that doesn't mean that more evidence is required to determine whether Jesus rose from the dead. But you may require that additional evidence before it's enough for you to move in that direction. OK? And I can sympathize with that.

Yeah, yeah, interesting. OK, let's talk about the burden of proof with regard to the justice system. That's something some apologists frequently use as an analogy that I can think John Work Montgomery has done so.

He's a trained lawyer, I believe, and analyze it from the eyes of a lawyer, putting the historical facts on the record on the stand. But when we're thinking about the decision a jury has to make, a jury is held to a certain standard, whether they think something happened. And that standard is not beyond any doubt, but beyond a reasonable doubt.

So there's a criteria here in the justice system that's used to determine whether or not, or how much someone is guilty of some action. Does that apply here as well to whether or not we can say miracle claims occurred? Yeah, in some ways. Now in our legal system here in the United States, you have criminal cases and you have civil cases.

Right. A criminal case, you're going to have, and well in both, you're going to have a plaintiff and a defendant. OK? In a criminal case, the burden of proof is higher because the liberty and perhaps even the life of the defendant are at stake here.

So they require the evidence to be beyond a reasonable doubt. This is almost like rising to the same level as Hume, requiring that the witnesses be of such a nature and the evidence being so good is beyond any kind of doubt. You know, I'd say Hume's requirement is even higher than beyond a reasonable doubt.

Right. Agreed. So, and there would be some skeptics that would say, well, you've got to prove a miracle beyond a reasonable doubt.

But the legal system in that way, it doesn't really apply. And I'll get to that in just a moment. In a civil case, it's different.

In a civil case, the burden of proof is less. You have to show based on the preponderance of evidence that the defendant is guilty. So in the case of, let's say, O.J. Simpson from like 20, 27 years ago when he was on trial, the jury decided, right or wrong, the jury decided that the prosecution did not prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Simpson had committed the murder.

But then he was sued in civil court. And I don't remember all the results, but I'm going to guess that he lost in civil court. And that's because the preponderance of evidence would

suggest that he committed the murder.

So if your own trial, like a person's own trial for murder or whatever, the jury members may be convinced that the defendant actually committed the crime. But if there is reasonable doubt that he did, well, then they have to declare not guilty. That's not to say that they don't think that he's innocent, that they thought that he was innocent.

It is to say there just wasn't enough evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he was guilty. So we wouldn't apply that in historical investigation, and there's no reason to apply that to a miracle claim either. And at this, if you want to take the criminal defense approach to it, well, remember it's the defendant who's being charged with the crime, that person is presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

So if you want to transfer that to, let's say, the gospels, then you have to assume that they are innocent. You have to presume that they are telling the truth, methodological credulity, right? You have to presume that they are telling the truth and that they are until you can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that they are not. And that's something that, of course, the skeptic would not be wanting to have placed on them.

And nor should they. It's just not the way to do it. What you would look at is the kind of civil case where you have to do the preponderance of evidence there.

There's still a presumption of innocence, you could say. But now the burden of proof is less. And I think that that's what happens when we're doing history.

That's how historians do work. We go by the preponderance of evidence, not having to prove something beyond reasonable doubt. Great.

Wow. That's a nice good nutshell of the issues pertaining to burden of proof there. We covered Sagan's remark.

We covered the risk assessment and then the judicial system there, the beyond a reasonable doubt issue. So wonderful. Thank you so much.

Let's take our final question for this season from listener Chris. He writes in, "Why does the gospel of John appear so much different in its content from Matthew, Mark or Luke?" So a question about the gospels there. Again, "Why does the gospel of John appear so much different in its content from Matthew, Mark or Luke?" Yeah, that is a great question.

It really is. So I encourage folks to say, "Look, if you're not accustomed to this and really looking carefully at the gospels, you say, "Well, what do you mean about this?" So I would encourage you to read Matthew, Mark and Luke, the synoptic gospels, read each of them five times, and then go to John and read it five times. And you'll say that even though the Jesus in John is similar to Jesus, he really sounds quite different the way he

says things in there.

And he's way out there. Like in Matthew, Mark and Luke, he's really hesitant to say he's the Messiah. He wants them to keep things to themselves like the Transfiguration.

Don't tell anyone about this. When Peter says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Well, don't tell anyone this. But in John, he's out there saying, "Before Abraham was, I am." And really making all dacious claims to divinity on several occasions.

So he sounds different in John than he does in the synoptics. So another thing is there are a lot of events in John that aren't reported in Matthew, Mark and in Luke. So what's going on here? Well, in terms of the other events, I think we can easily explain that.

John is probably the last gospel to have been written. And John may have been aware of the synoptics. I don't think he's using them as sources.

I think he's an independent source. But he may have been aware of them. And he doesn't want to repeat a lot of the same things.

Of course, certain things you want to repeat, like the death and resurrection, maybe the walking on water and some things like this. But as Richard Bockum has pointed out, a lot of the events in the synoptics occur in Galilee, whereas a lot of the events reported in John occur in Jerusalem. So he could be filling in some things there.

But the reason they sound different has something about being out there with things that he's kind of holding close to himself and not making so public in the synoptics and just the different way in which he sounds in John. In fact, he sounds a whole lot like he does in 1 John, the same kind of grammar and vocabulary that we find in 1 John is what we find in John. So this is a question that New Testament scholars have asked and then you have New Testament scholars who have specialized in the Johannine literature.

And they come to different conclusions, but all Johannine scholars specialists seem to suggest agree that John has adapted the teachings of Jesus. He's reworked them and recast them in his own words. He's taken some liberties in the way he is relaying the Jesus tradition.

And of course he would have been allowed to do this with ancient biographical in that genre. But it's something that perplexes specialists of the Johannine literature for which there really is no consensus. And I think some of what even conservative Johannine specialists have said are quite interesting.

So for example, you have N.T. Wright, who has a statement, I think is pretty funny. He said he was once asked about John what he thought of it and how to interpret John in light of why John was so different in light of the synoptics. And he said, well, I think about the gospel of John like I think about my wife.

I love her very much, but I don't claim to understand her. And I think any of us who are married can appreciate that. And then you look at what F.F. Bruce, I mean no one would question the conservative theology of F.F. Bruce, I mean, or the integrity and quality of a scholarship.

And in his introduction to his commentary on the gospel of John and for second, third John, he talks about Plutarch and Plutarch's life of Brutus and the assassination of Caesar and the eulogy that Antony gave afterward. And then he takes Shakespeare's rendition of that of what Shakespeare did using Plutarch's life of Brutus. Now this has been done elsewhere.

You've got Christopher Pelling, the leading Plutarch scholar of today in the world. And he talks about what Shakespeare does with Plutarch. So Bruce does this too.

And what he's saying, you know, that Plutarch takes and he amplifies, he reworks and makes far more dramatic Antony's eulogy than we find in Plutarch's life of Brutus. And he says our author, John, does that and much more. And what Bruce describes what Shakespeare does to Plutarch, he says, if I can remember this right, he says, it's a translation of the freest kind, a transposition into another key.

And there was one other thing he said, it alludes me right now, but I think that's pretty interesting, a translation of the freest kind and a transposition into another key. And that's when Bruce goes on to say that John does this with the Jesus tradition and even more. So yeah, it's very difficult.

And I think anyone who says they've got John figured out, just has not spent enough time with John. You've got these Johannine specialists who are spending their lives focused on this decades and they can't really figure it out. I know that Paul Anderson, he's an evangelical, he's a Johannine specialist.

I mean, he's just spent decades and he focuses on John. And he says that John is a theological paraphrase. So anyway, there's a lot to be said about this.

I don't know the answer. I'm not a Johannine specialist, but I've read enough in the original language as well as an English, anyone reading it in English can see this, but you can see it even more clearly in the original language Greek. That something is going on with John, that it's really difficult to put your finger on what it is, but John is doing something with the Jesus tradition.

I have no problems with them doing that. I happen to believe that John the son of Zebedee wrote the gospel of John. I'm in the minority there, but even if he didn't, the majority of Johannine specialists do think that the author of John's gospel relied mainly on eyewitness testimony from one of Jesus's minor disciples who had traveled with him.

So even if they are correct, John's gospel is still rooted in eyewitness testimony as much

as the gospel of Mark is. Well, relying on the testimony of Peter. So I do see John's gospel as being historically reliable, and I do think that John gives us the gist of what happened.

He is just taking what Jesus said after decades of reflection and bringing out, bringing to light some of the more theological implications of Jesus's teachings and what he did. Great. Yes.

And there's a lot to be said there on John. We could do a whole season on it, but I know, as you said, you're not a scholar on John. So that's something that we can encourage folks to go and check out and read for themselves, and we certainly can recommend further resources.

So on that note, if you want to find resources such as that and where you can look further, you can go to our website, RisenJesus.com. It's there that you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. All sorts of great resources. There are articles, e-books, videos, podcasts, debates, and the like.

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