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## S4E5 - Mike Licona discusses Dr. Ehrman on Miracles: PT 1

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode Dr Licona discusses his relationship with Dr. Bart Ehrman and what he has to say about the nature of miracles.

The Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Licona equips people to have a deeper understanding of the Gospel, history, and New Testament studies. The program is hosted by Dr. Kurt Jaros and produced in partnership with Defenders Media.

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## Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Michael Cohen. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in 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 of 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. On today's episode, we begin a two-part segment looking at the relationship that Mike has had to Bart Ehrman, as well as analyzing Ehrman's approach to the historical method and miracles. Mike, I think the next episodes are going to be particularly fun for me.

As I've met Bart, he and I have had some interactions, and I know you've had a number of debates with him and interactions. You've formed a bit of a relationship with him as well. I'd like to ask you maybe some questions about that relationship in the next two episodes here.

First, give us some background. When was it that you first became aware of his work and his research, even his popular writings, and maybe once the chance that you first had to meet him face to face? Well, I mean, his work's been around for quite several decades, so I became aware of his work a long time ago. I think really started to become intimately acquainted with his work.

Once a debate was set up with him, that was set up at the end of 2007, the final months of 2007, I think, yeah. And then we debated in 2008 in Kansas City, and that was a lot of fun. But I had to prepare for that.

It was a challenge. I was still working on my doctoral dissertation, doctoral research at that time. A lot of that would include some of addressing his concerns about miracles and historians, and what he thought happened pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus and how he approached things historically.

I'd say a lot, but it was just a fraction of the book. But I spent a lot of time reading his books and listening to his lectures to find out exactly where he was coming from, making sure I understood what he was saying properly, to prepare for that debate, and then I had a debate with him the following year. It's something too, and we just kind of got along pretty well just from the get-go.

I remember the first debate, it was so frustrating. I'd really prepared a lot for this debate, reading his stuff. And the night before the debate, I got post-nasal drip.

And all through the night, I'm waking up and I'm clearing my throat. I woke up in the morning and my voice was gone. It was so frustrating.

And I remember just talking, I went up and greeted him and said, "I Bart, I might have lost my voice. I'm still going to be able to do this tonight." And it was just so frustrating. I felt great.

I just had no voice. And then we debated the next year, and then I think Justin Brearley had Bart and I on twice. And then we had a written debate.

We've had a debate on the gospel's historically reliable that happened a couple of years

ago. That was a lot of fun. For me, that was the most enjoyable debate that we've had.

But we've just become friends over time. I don't talk bad about him behind his back. I mean, well, we disagree on some things, but it seems to be a good guy.

So we get along fine. It's the kind of guy you could sit and watch a game with. Yeah.

So, yeah. Cool stuff. In October, I had the chance to sit down with him at the Defenders Conference and hear about the backstory basically to how he became a sort of pop culture sensation just through a matter of some strange circumstances, rare statistical anomalies that basically brought him into the limelight.

You know, there are plenty of New Testament scholars that are historians in America and some of them even write pop books, but nobody ever hears about them. So why is it that everyone knows about him? Well, through a number of happenstances, he just got the attention of some reporters and then went on the daily show with John Stewart and that really just skyrocketed his fame. So that was interesting hearing that.

And also learning about his upbringing. You know, he went to Moody. He wasn't evangelical Christian.

And eventually he came to leave the faith. But what I appreciated and I guess I'll bring this up now was he wrote about his experience at the Defenders Conference. And he said this, you know, which you spoke at.

He wrote what I was most interested in was how Christian apologetics, the intellectual defense of the claims of the faith, has changed in the many years since I was involved in the movement, shifted in ways I never would have imagined, very much away from our old fundamentalist assumptions and assertions into a far more reasonable and intellectually sustainable form of discourse that requires actual research and knowledge rather than hardcore theological assertion based on completely dubious premises. So, I mean, of course, there's a lot packed in there and I may not agree with the completely dubious premises claim. But the fact that he recognizes there are evangelical Christian scholars that are doing good critical research.

I think says a lot about not just apologetics today, but about his experience as well because we had invited him a non believer to speak at a Christian event. And so I appreciated having him and having his view presented fairly and having the audience receive his presence well. You can't always say that about some folks or some audiences.

So I'm glad to have done that and to see sort of some fruit come out from that experience. So, that was cool. That was a great conference card.

I mean, you put on just a really fine conference and it was an honor to just be on a stage

with the same people up there. You know, Ermin, Keener, you, Rob Bowman. It was just really cool.

And yeah, the audience was just tremendous and I loved how they treated Bart with respect and warmth and that's the way it should be with Christians. And, you know, I'll just throw out something to the skeptics. I mean, right after that conference, he invited me to write three articles for his blog of 8,000 paid subscribers.

And most of them treated me with warmth and respect, great respect. So, you know, and I find that unusual for the skeptical community. So that was a pleasant surprise for me, just as I'm sure your conference was a pleasant surprise for him.

That said, I do want to add, I mean, apologetics, Christian apologetics has come a long way over the last 30 years. Now that you have a lot of people specializing, it's, you know, there's a whole lot more quality apologetics now. The arguments are a lot better now than they were back then.

They've got to go a lot deeper. And, of course, you know, it's been the pushback of skeptics that have revealed certain weaknesses in some of those arguments that have caused us to refine them. We've had to refine them because we see some weaknesses in them.

And hopefully they do the same on their part, you know, some of the things that we say causes them to re-examine some of their arguments as well. Yep, yep, that's right. Yeah, and I fully agree with you there.

I think it has come further because, as you said, people have gone deeper. Just telling people to read their Bibles does not work anymore because the culture has also shifted. We don't have that common ground anymore of thinking that the Bible is historically reliable.

So it does no good to tell the relativist to read their Bible. They'll just say, "Well, that's true for you, but not for me." So we have to adapt, and sometimes it forces us to go deeper into the arguments to reveal what is now a more sophisticated version of some argument or versions that are available for people that are seeking a robust defense of the Christian worldview. Okay, let's move along here to what Bart says about the historian in miracles.

So here you provide a segment from his works. He writes here, "There still remains, though, a huge, I'd even say, insurmountable problem when discussing Jesus's miracles. Even if miracles are possible, there is no way for the historian who sticks strictly to the canons of historical evidence," I think he means evidence there, "to show that they have ever happened." I'm saying that even if they did, the historian cannot demonstrate it.

So Bart here thinks that the historian can't say miracles happened, and he provides four

arguments in support of his position. The first point here, and we may not get to all five on this week's episodes, but the first one here is that he argues that the sources reporting about Jesus' resurrection are poor sources. What would you say to that claim? Well, this is something on which Bart and I are going to disagree.

I don't think that they're poor sources. He'll give five reasons for that. Shortly after our second debate, I think it was, I put together a lecture that addressed those five objections, and I was able to do it in a real interesting way.

They called it the ABCs, Ds and Es of defending the Gospels. It became one of my most popular lectures. There's authorship for A's, B for biases, for contradictions, Ds for dating, and E for eyewitness testimony.

Of those five objections, let's just take the first one, authorship. He'll say that the authors are biased, that they're not disinterested in any sense. That's one thing he says about them.

You look at that and you say, "Who is unbiased? What author is unbiased? Are there any?" Even in one of our exchanges on Justin Briarley's unbelievable, he said that they were biased. He said, "I was biased." I said, "Well, Bart, we're all biased. All historians are biased."

In fact, many historians don't agree on. One thing that most of them do agree on is that every historian is biased. There's no such thing as an unbiased historian who is completely entirely open-minded and objective.

There aren't any. It's a myth. They don't exist." Justin at that point asked him, he said, "Well, how about that? What Mike says, Bart? Do you think so? What about you? Are you biased?" He says, "Well, of course I am." Does that mean that we're because of Bart acknowledges that he is biased, that we shouldn't believe anything he says, or we should hold everything that he says in question because he's biased? What about does that mean that a Jewish historian could not write on the Holocaust? Does it mean that an African-American historian couldn't write on slavery in the United States because they'd be biased? What about Richard Dawkins writing on atheism and given reasons why he thinks atheism is true? Should we just card what he has to say or hold everything in question because he's biased? In fact, he even goes further.

He says in his book, "The God Delusion," he says that his objective for writing the book, he says, "If religious readers," something to the extent of if the book works as he intends, religious readers who pick it up will be skeptics when they put it down. So you not only have a bias on Dawkins' part, you also have him with agenda, propaganda. His book becomes, you could say, in a sense, propaganda.

Does that mean his arguments are wrong? No, of course not. His arguments are wrong. I

mean, he's wrong because his arguments stink, not because he's biased and because he has an agenda because his book contains propaganda.

There was a commercial back in the, I think, the 1980s, and it showed an egg, and it said, "This is your brain." And then it cracked the egg and spilled it out in a frying pan, and you could see the egg frying, and it says, "This is your brain on drugs." Well, that was propaganda, right, in order to get people not to take drugs. But that doesn't mean it's wrong. I mean, drugs really do mess up your brain, and it could very well be that the Jewish historian is the best historian to investigate the Holocaust because of their biases.

The Jewish historians will dig deeper because they don't want to see this kind of thing happen again. It could be that the African-American historian is the very finest of historians, the best kind to look into slavery in the United States, because they're going to push deeper into what caused the slavery than perhaps a Caucasian historian would do, and really get to these things because they don't want to see that kind of thing happen again. And in the same way, if Jesus was who he claimed to be, then the gospel authors, Christians, who were biased may have been the very best people to write on this.

Certainly, if Jesus was who he claimed, those who followed him would have been the best people to tell stories about him, not someone like the Sanhedrists or those who were opposing him. So, yeah, it's important to recognize, I don't want to question here, that it's important to recognize that the author is biased. If an author is biased, that does have the potential to compromise the integrity of what they're writing, the truth of what they're writing.

So, we have to keep that in mind. But we also have to keep in mind our own biases as we're reading something else. So, if someone is an anti-Semite and they're reading a Jewish historian on the Holocaust, well, and they don't think that the Holocaust ever occurred, let's say, they've got their own biases that they've got to place and check.

If you're an internet skeptic who denies that Jesus ever existed, a position that flies in the face, a virtually 100% of even skeptical New Testament scholarship out there today, and you come to study about the historical Jesus, you're really going to have to watch your own biases when you read something positive on the historical Jesus. So, I don't see the fact that the authors were biased. It'd be nice if we were able to have someone who's completely objective writing on it, but such a person doesn't exist.

Yeah, it's when the historian is looking for a desirable eyewitness who happens to maybe be excited about what they saw, even that excitement tips its hand toward bias that the person enjoyed what they saw. I mean, they weren't just like this, you know, Spock-like, to use a Star Trek reference, Spock-like, neutral tone, the experience doesn't in any way excite nor, you know, disappoint. There is no neutral observer, and so when we are evaluating whether the sources are poor, you just have to consider that.

That there are biases at play that doesn't mean that they are poor sources, though. You just have to look out for those sorts of things. Yeah, good.

All right, now, the second argument that he brings in to support his claim that the historian can't know if a miracle occurs is that that a miracle by definition is sort of the least probable event to have occurred. So here we maybe get something of a David Hume-like sense that if it would have happened, it's just so improbable that, I mean, this is Hume, it's so improbable that what's more likely is the eyewitness is lying or something like that. Yeah.

So how would you respond to that position that the miracle itself is the least probable explanation, and therefore we shouldn't even have any confidence in it? Well, I would say least probable in reference to what? Right? If a miracle is the least probable explanation, least probable how? So if God exists and wanted to raise Jesus, then it seems to me that the resurrection becomes the most probable explanation, not the least probable, so least probable in reference to what? You say, well, maybe what about the hypothesis is that Jesus was raised naturally? Okay, well, that would be the least probable explanation for the data. But if we're saying Jesus was raised naturally, it wouldn't be considered a miracle, now would it? So least probable in reference to what? You're going to have to explain that more. Why should I consider it the least probable explanation? Maybe you're going to resort to the frequency probability model then and say because miracles happen far less than anything else, like they happen less than people surviving.

People being raised by God happens, occurs on a less frequent basis than people surviving crucifixion or than mass hallucinations. Well, if we're going to use a frequency probability model, then we're going to have to think about how that would apply to some other things. So what about the hypothesis that the US dropped nuclear bombs on Japan in World War II? Well, how frequently does that happen? Well, nations have only dropped nuclear bombs twice in the history of the world.

Well, how often do governments mislead their citizens with false news? Fake news, you could say. Way more frequently than bombs dropping. Exactly.

So therefore, it would be far more probable that the US and Japan colluded together and made up, faked the photographs and made up the story about US dropping nuclear bombs on Japan in order to end the war and both countries back in a way without losing face. That would be more probable than dropping nuclear bombs. And we'd say, of course, that's ridiculous because we've got really good, irrefutable evidence that the nuclear bombs were dropped.

Okay, great. And that shows that the frequency probability model doesn't work. Unique events occur.

So, yeah, if you're going to say a miracle by its very definition is the least probable explanation, my question is least probable in reference to what? And that is something I don't think is considered. And I don't think that that is a good definition for miracle. In fact, in my work, I found nearly two dozen definitions of miracle.

And it's one of those essentially contested concepts where there is no widely accepted definition for miracle. So that was only one. And I think we've seen its flawed.

Right, right. Yeah. Events of a minute statistical probability occur very well.

It occurs very frequently. People win the lottery. Yeah.

So that's always a nice, I use that analogy because it gives you the hard math. I mean, what's the chances of winning the lottery? And it, people do win it. It happens frequently.

So, okay, let's take a question now from one of your followers here. Victoria asks here, what is the gist? So, basically summarizing here. Mike, you've used in your debates the concept that the gist is what is historically reliable, if I'm conveying that fairly.

Maybe you could elaborate on what you mean here. What do you mean by the gist of the story? Well, the word gist, I think, you know, how it's technically defined, it's a dictionary, and how we interpret it can be two different things, okay? So, I believe the way the dictionary defines it is the main and essential parts of what occurred. So, we could say that or an essentially faithful representation of what occurred.

So, you have an event. How do you describe that event? Well, as long as I give the main and essential parts, cover those without any of the peripheral details, you could say, I've given you the gist. However, if I'm saying, well, you get the gist of what happened, that's a little looser way.

I could be talking to someone on the phone and relaying an event. I don't know. My wife and I went to a baseball game, and, you know, we saw a walk-off home run in the bottom of the ninth.

By Chris Bryant. What's that? By the Cubs, you guys are going to Wrigley Field in this hypothetical, right? That's right. So, it is totally hypothetical because the home run would have been in the top of the ninth Braves were playing against the Cubs.

I clarified at Wrigley Field, though, so the Cubs would have been the home team. That's right. That's why the home run would have occurred in the top of the ninth.

Oh, you said top? I thought you said bottom. Well, I did it first. Well, then it would have been a walk-off.

That's right. Well, then it would have happened at Sun Trust Field. Yeah, right.



There you go. Anyway, if I'm relaying that story, let's say to my son later on who's a Braves fan, and maybe I got a detail wrong. Maybe I attributed the home run to one -- I don't know how -- maybe just a minor detail, you know, was wrong, and my wife corrected it.

I'd say, "Well, he gets the gist of what happened." So you get the main and essential parts of what occurred. So that's what I'm referring to with JIST. It's the main and essential parts.

I'm not saying that there's an error could be, may not be. That would be irrelevant. The gist is that you got the story, you know, pretty much down.

So, you know, an example would be, let's say, when Jesus comes out of the water, it is baptism, the voice from heaven in Mark and Luke says, "You are my beloved son, with you I'm well-pleased." Whereas Matthew has God's voice say, "This is my beloved son. With him I'm well-pleased." So was the voice addressing Jesus directly or was addressing the crowd directly? You know, I'd say Matthew changed that in order probably -- I mean, we can't get inside the mind of Matthew. We can see if we go with Mark in priority, Matthew probably changed it.

And we can only guess why I would guess and say he did that in order to make it a little more personable to the readers. So, which one was it? Well, we get the gist of what happened, right? Even if we say we don't know who changed it or what the exact words were, we get the gist. Another one quick example would be the plaque at the top of Jesus' cross.

You know, all four gospels have different wording for it, but we get the gist of what it said. Yeah, and it's not as if even if we didn't have an explanation, like you said, about the author's reasons for the modification. The fact that the gist is conveyed forward past the long, that's what matters in the end for reliability.

Regardless of the intentions that the author may have had, if they were personal, theological, literary, if it's just a paraphrase of what happened, as long as you have that gist that's sufficient for reliability. We don't have to be so wooden and narrow as some people. Even I think Bart Erman, he can still have that wooden, narrow criteria, you know, when he says "Oh, that's a contradiction, there's a difference there." Well, no, you don't have to have that for reliability's sake.

So, yeah, that's what I want to say on reliability. So, at any rate, good. Okay, well, thanks for clearing that up about the gist.

We've talked about Bart Erman in today's episode, and we're going to next week as well. We've got three more of his points or arguments in support of his position. So, I'm going forward to going through that with you.

So, thanks for talking about this material. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael Lacona, you can go to our website, [RisenJesus.com](http://RisenJesus.com), where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. There you can find articles, e-books, videos, or even the podcasts embedded on the website, and it's just a wonderful resource for those that are wanting to learn more about these topics.

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