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S5E8 - Non-Canonical Christian Literature

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Join us as we explore some apocryphal books in the Christian community and their evidential bearing on the resurrection of Jesus.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike Racona. Dr. LaCona 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 Juris. You're the President of Risen Jesus. On today's program we're looking at some interesting non-canonical Christian literature.

Before we begin our conversation, if you don't yet already subscribe to this podcast, I want to encourage you to do so. Whether you're watching on Dr. LaCona's YouTube channel, click on the subscribe button or if you're following us on a podcast app, be sure to subscribe so you can get a notification on when new episodes are released. Well, Mike, on today's program we're looking at the non-canonical Christian literature and I don't know if we need to put Christian in quotes here.

Maybe it's Christian by identity. The persons wanted to identify as Christian. But typically we see where some of the theology may be in some of these documents can go a little one way or the other that doesn't align with the canonical Christian literature.

Is that a fair broad description of the material you'll be talking about? Yeah, it depends which ones we're going to be talking about, I suppose. There are a number of New Testament apocryphal books and you only surveyed a couple of them for your project here. Looking at the historical evidence for the fate of Jesus, so that would include his death and resurrection, those being the two big issues.

So what did you find in the Gospel of Thomas and maybe before you tell us that, tell us about that document? Well, the Gospel of Thomas is basically saying literature. It has 114 what are called Logia, sayings of Jesus. So it's not a narrative like we find in our canonical Gospels.

It's just Jesus teachings in it. Most scholars dated to the late first to late second century. So that's a big time period, about 100 years.

Most of those dating it to the late first century are members of the Jesus seminar. They're of a rather skeptical ilk. But most scholars dated somewhere between the early second to the mid second century.

Nice. So the sayings here are the teachings. So there's presumably not all that much material about miracles or other types of narrative events.

Is that fair to say? That's right. Sayings literature. And it's typically argued that by some that this is early.

They try to argue that it predates the synoptic Gospels. The reason they'll say is because it's sayings literature and they'll point to sayings literature which existed prior to the middle of the first century. And it did, but it also existed afterward after the first century.

You've got some in Syriac that's later on in the second century and afterward. So just because it existed before the synoptic Gospels were written is irrelevant. I mean biographies existed before the Gospels were written, but that's irrelevant.

You've got these Logia, these sayings, teachings of Jesus and Thomas that appear in a different order. Then we have in the synoptic Gospels. And they, like I said, they appear outside of a narrative context like such as what we find in Q. They're shorter and less theologically adorned than what we find in the Gospels sometimes.

And they will argue, those arguing for an early date of Thomas will say that it's the Gospel of John was written in response. In response to the Gospel of Thomas. Because the Gospel of John tries to make Thomas look terrible.

Like you've got Thomas that right before the Jesus goes to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus says he's going to go see Lazarus. But this comes in the context where it says, wait a minute, in Jerusalem they're looking to kill you.

And so don't go there. And he says, well I'm going to go. And Thomas says, let's go so that we may die with him.

And they interpret that as being Thomas saying that sarcastically. But I don't see why there's any reason to interpret it that way rather than thinking that Thomas was just trying to obey Jesus and talk about his willingness to die with Jesus. Then they also point to Thomas, the doubting Thomas scene that tried to make Thomas look bad.

I prefer the nickname Truthful Thomas. He just wanted to know what the truth was. Yeah, sounds good.

And the thing with Thomas, all the disciples with the possible exception of the beloved disciple, all of them doubted that Jesus had been raised from the dead based on the testimony of the women. None of them seem to have been expecting it. So Thomas isn't just the bad guy here.

They're all that way. And then you've got the fact that Jesus may not be rebuking Thomas here. A lot of people take him as rebuking Thomas when he says Thomas, you've seen and you believe blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.

But the Greek word that's used there for blessed is *macarias*, the same thing that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount. And more recently scholars have noted that that term can vary likely as it does in the Sermon on Mount means flourishing. It has the sense of flourishing.

So what Jesus could be saying to Thomas here is Thomas, you've seen and believed. But blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed. In other words, the majority of people who are going to believe afterward are not going to see me.

Yet they can still flourish in their spiritual walk with God. So it's not necessarily a rebuke. And then you've got to look at even in John's Gospel, you've got Jesus rebuking Peter.

Or tell him he's going to deny Jesus and he does deny Jesus three times. But that's nobody argues. Well, that means that John was also written to answer the Gospel of Peter.

You've got Jesus answering Philip when he says, show us the Father. And Jesus says, hey, have I not been with you this long? I and the Father are one. If you've seen me, you've seen the Father.

But nobody's saying this is to respond to the Gospel of Philip, which is known to have been written in the second or third century. So I just don't find that kind of argument for an early dating of the Gospel of Thomas to be very compelling at all. Now, if you have the sayings here, how much evidence is there for the purpose of your project? Yeah, not much at all.

I mean, there's nothing good to show that it's early. There's some good evidence that the Gospel of Thomas is actually later, perhaps the late second century. So you had Nicholas Perrin, a good guy friend of mine.

He's now the president of Trinity and in Deerfield. And he did his doctoral dissertation on the Gospel of Thomas and he presented a pretty cool view. What we have with the Gospel of Thomas is you've got some in Greek, but you've got some in Coptic.

A lot of it's written in Coptic. So scholars are trying to figure out is there any kind of order here? Well, he translated it into what scholars refer to as the forlaga, the original in another language. So he takes this and what we have and he says, "Alright, was it originally written in Greek?" And he translates it into Greek and no particular order.

Then he translates the whole thing into Coptic, no particular order. Then he translates it into Syriac. And he finds a lot of what are called catch words.

So catch words would link these kind of verses together. It's like Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is arranged artistically so that the teachings, once you become really familiar, you see how he's artistically arranged it and connected these teachings of Jesus. Well, you see catch terms like fire in one of the la guilla and then light in the next or warmth, things like this that connects these things together.

And if it's in Coptic, almost all the la guilla, the 114 la guilla, you can connect almost all of them together, which would seem to suggest that the Gospel of Thomas was originally written in Syriac. And he said, "Well, where would this come from?" Well, then he posits that the Deatesseron by Tayshian, which is the first attempt to harmonize all four Gospels into a single Gospel. And that's written in Syriac and a lot of what the Gospel of Thomas has is reflective of what Tayshian's Deatesseron has.

So then the question is, is the Gospel of Thomas aware of the Deatesseron, which people like Craig Evans and Perrin would argue that it is. And since the Deatesseron was around

170, that would place the Gospel of Thomas thereafter. But then someone could argue, well, maybe the Deatesseron was familiar with Thomas.

However, it seems like his Craig Evans has argued that Thomas seems to be familiar with all four Gospels. And in fact, he's familiar with redacted forms of Mark. So like in Mark, I think it's 4.22. It says, "For nothing is hidden except that it be revealed." And that's as awkward in Greek as it is in English.

But you have Luke redacting it and improving no Mark's grammar. So it says, "For nothing is hidden that will not be revealed." Ah, okay, that makes sense. That sounds good.

Well, that's exactly verbatim what we find in Thomas. Luke's redacted form, which suggests that he was aware of Luke's version. Right, which would mean he was written after Luke.

So you're looking at a later first century at a minimum. Yeah, if not second century. That's correct.

But most scholars are dating between the early to mid-second century. But I think there's some decent arguments for a late second century. Yeah, yeah.

Okay, so on your rating system here. Yeah, there's only two la-gia in Thomas that even relate to the resurrection. And that's numbers 37 and 51.

And they refer to disembodiment. They interpret resurrection as disembodiment and enlightenment, respectively. But not even the fellows of the Jesus Seminar think either of these la-gia are authentic saints of Jesus.

So for practical purposes, for our investigations, it's not useful. Yeah, not useful. All right, well, let's move along and see if we can get some more with the next, the Gospel of Peter.

That's a common one that maybe people have heard of. Tell us about the Gospel of Peter. Well, the Gospel of Peter, it's got a really interesting narrative in it.

We don't have the whole thing. The whole Gospel of Peter that we have is based on two manuscripts. First, you have the oxy-rinkus papyrus, which is four fragments containing 18 incomplete lines and dated to around the early third century, around the year 200.

And then you have the ochmine codex, which is dated between the seventh and ninth centuries. This is from which we get most of the Gospel of Peter texts that we have. And there are considerable variations in the ochmine codex from the oxy-rinkus fragments that are dated much earlier.

So that should caution us right there, that it's a chance-y exercise to try to base

something about an early text on largely on a manuscript, single manuscripts that's dated seventh to ninth century. And then what's interesting is you've got a resurrection narrative. And in that resurrection narrative, you've got two angels that come down on Easter morning, and the stone rolls itself away from the tomb, and the two angels enter the tomb that get Jesus.

They emerge from the tomb carrying Jesus. Now, the heads of the angels go up into the sky, and Jesus goes up even above where the angels are. It goes up even higher.

And then a voice, God's voice comes from heaven and says, "Did you preach to those that sleep?" And what's interesting here, who's the voice talking to? Well, as the angels carry Jesus out, Jesus's cross was apparently in the tomb as well, and that comes walking out of the tomb, following Jesus and the angels. And when the voice says, "Did you preach to those that sleep?" the cross answers, "Yes." So you've got a walking talking cross. Well, so, I mean, this is typically you've got scholars would say, well, they'll argue that John is much later, and Matthew and Luke are later than Mark, because they've got fuller resurrection narratives, let's say, than you find in Mark.

So you've got like, they'll say, more details means it came later. But for some reason, they want to take the Gospel of Peter, some of the more skeptical scholars, and put it against their, you know, everything that they do, their method for the Gospels, they do just the exact opposite, and they will take the Gospel of Peter and place it before the synoptics. Moreover, you find the cross in second century Christian literature you find a cross that is shown next to Jesus, it's portrayed next to Jesus.

You find it in the shepherd of Hermos, second century, fourth Ezra's second century, the Ethiopic Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of the Apostles, which is part of the resurrection dialogues. These are all second century literature. So it's more likely that the Gospel of Peter is sometime in the second century.

It is mentioned, I think, by the Bishop, Serapion, in a letter around the year 200. So we know it was composed before the year 200, but it's almost certainly sometime in the second century as a document. Yeah, so clearly later the story is, you know, if you're a skeptic, you know, you already sort of say, "Oh, this is just nonsense." But as a Christian, you also want to say, "Oh, this is nonsense," even though there's miraculous happenings in the story itself, and any Christians are not averse to the miraculous happening, but it just seems so much more legendary, you know, a talking cross, that you just become really skeptical, "Hey, this is clearly dependent on other material and not a value, especially for your project." Yeah, and you know, there's something else that's interesting here.

Serapion's letter, Bishop Serapion's letter suggests that this was being read in some worship services, and he forbade that it would be because it wasn't written by Peter. It was pseudonomously attributed to Peter, but there's nothing to suggest really that the

church actually accepted it as authentically from Peter, but those early Christians didn't seem to mind that you had these things augmented, an augmented story in there, kind of like, you know, because they didn't have television back then, they didn't have DVDs, movies, things like that, so you were entertained through stories and they didn't seem to mind this stuff, kind of like if you watch *The Passion of the Christ* and you see some of the dramatic license that Gibson took in there with some of the things, we don't mind watching that stuff, and the early Christians didn't either, about reading that kind of stuff. Yeah, yeah.

All right, well, why don't we save the rest of the Non-Acononical for our next week's episode, Mike. We're running a little bit low on time, and we've got a question from one of your viewers here that could take some further time to dissect. The question comes from Jonathan, and he says, "In your article is the sky falling in the world of historical Jesus research?" That's the name of your article.

You mentioned Hooker, Ladan, Tiesen, and Winter contend that the criterion of double dissimilarity should be abandoned, and they are probably correct. That's a quote from you, Mike. Why do you think they are probably right on this point? And so maybe first tell us what's the criterion of double dissimilarity? Well, the criterion of double dissimilarity says that the item reported in the Gospels about Jesus is authentic.

If it's dissimilar to both Jewish and Christian teachings, since it would be difficult to suggest that it came from the early church, it was invented by the early church, since it goes against what the early church would say about Jesus. The problem with that is that Jesus was a Jew, and he had Jewish disciples, and he spoke primarily to other Jews, and he often appealed to the Jewish Scriptures. And Jesus was the founder of the church, and the teachings of him that we find in the Gospels that emerge in our New Testament, that they are alleged to preserve his teachings.

So, you know, we shouldn't expect much of what Jesus said to differ from what's taught in the Old Testament Scriptures, and what we find preserved by the church. What the criterion of double dissimilarity does is it pits Jesus against the Judaism of his day, as well as the early church that emerged from him. So, it might work in a few isolated situations, like perhaps the Son of Man's Saints, because the early church doesn't seem, at least very often at all, to refer to Jesus as the Son of Man.

They prefer Son of God, they prefer Messiah. So, it's kind of dissimilar in that sense, and most historians of Jesus do think that Jesus actually referred to himself as the Son of Man, because it's multiple tested. It's so well attested.

Okay, so now that we've got the concept of the criterion of double dissimilarity, now to Jonathan's question, why do you think that criterion should be abandoned? Well, again, because it pits Jesus against the Judaism of his day and the early church, which preserves his teachings, it's like, okay, if he's saying certain things and these are being

preserved by the early church, why would we think that he would kind of say some things that go against what the early church preserves of his? Why would we expect that it would go against the Judaism of his day, or be dissimilar to how we know what the second temple Judaism was like in the first century? Yeah, he was an observant Jew, and so, you know, it just wouldn't fit to think that it's a good, it's a valuable criteria that he's speaking against the things he identifies as. Yeah, yeah, I follow, yeah. Yeah, so most scholars today don't, I mean, they may use it selectively, and another thing is it only can establish positive results, like, okay, Jesus said this, but if it doesn't fulfill the criterion of dissimilarity, double dissimilarity, then you wouldn't say this renders it unlikely that Jesus actually said or did such a thing.

Of course, that can be said of most of the criteria. Yeah, even if you were a non-Christian, you would think, yeah, that's the case. If Jesus were a good moral teacher and only, you know, a social prophet of sorts, he would still speak about his society in a way that he identified with and his beliefs being a Jew, so this criterion just doesn't seem to work regardless of whether one identifies with, you know, Christian theism or not.

Yeah, and you know, it's interesting, you do have some historians of Jesus such as Gert Tyson and Dogmore Winter who have posited that there's a better way of stating this criterion, and that would be the criterion of plausibility. And they'll have some elements of dissimilarity in there and multiple attestation and some others, so there's like two sub-criteria that are involved in it, and I think it's a decent criterion that they are proposing. I think it's certainly better than the criterion of double dissimilarity as it's usually stated and used.

Sure. Great. Well, I've learned something new myself here, so that's a very good question from Jonathan.

Thanks for listening to the program and submitting the question. And Mike, thanks for helping us as we begin to work through the non-canonical Christian literature as it pertains to looking for historical evidence for the fate of Jesus, as you're looking at, you know, specifically two issues, the death of Jesus and his resurrection. I look forward to learning more about some of this other literature on next week's program.

Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, you can go to RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the Gospels, the resurrection of Jesus, and a host of other issues that Dr. Lacona has written and has spoken on. At the website, there are loads of free resources, e-books, PDFs, videos, video lectures, debates, even this podcast. If this program has been a blessing to you, would you consider becoming one of our financial supporters? You can go to RisenJesus.com/donate. Be sure to like Dr. Lacona on Facebook, follow him on Twitter.

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