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S2E7 - Synoptic Problem - Concluding Implications [Season Finale]

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Mike Licona closes out season 2 by discussing important topics that the Synoptic Gospels impact; including inspiration, inerrancy, and undesigned coincidences.

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

[Music] Hello and welcome to The Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Licona. Dr. Licona 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, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt Jaros, your host. On today's episode, we're looking at the implications of the Synoptic Problem, and Mike, the Synoptic Problem has been the theme of Season 2 here on The Risen Jesus podcast, and we've looked at the background, we've looked at the text to see what evidence we might have for some type of relationship existing between Matthew Mark and Luke, and then we looked at the pros and cons of the different theories out there, even looking at the hypothetical Q document or source out there. On today's program, I want to chat with you about the implications of the Synoptic Problem.

I'm sure for some of our listeners, some questions might come up for them as they think

through these things, and as I think through these things, I've got a question for you later. I'll let you start here. What do you think are the implications for the Synoptic Problem say for the doctrine of inspiration? Oh, well, there are several, but when we come to inspiration, it's interesting to note, at least when I'm talking to various Christians about this, that many Christians in the pews think that when we're talking about Matthew Mark, Luke, and John, that they wrote entirely independently of one another.

It's like they were sitting in different rooms at the same time, though, writing almost simultaneously, but they had no contact with one another. Maybe one wrote later or whatever, but they had no contact with one another, and they're just four independent accounts. What we see is that is not the case.

It is not the case. What I say to my students, there's a couple of principles I give to them, and one that I try to repeat throughout a course is that our view of Scripture should be consistent with what we observe in Scripture. I think that's very important.

Let me repeat it. Our view of Scripture should be consistent with what we observe in Scripture. What do we observe in Scripture? We believe it's divinely inspired.

I'm not here to challenge that. I think the Scripture is divinely inspired, but what does that look like? What does divinely-inspired Scripture look like? Many times, we will come to it with a preconceived view of what Scripture looks like. When we look at it and we see things like the synoptic problem, we notice some things we may not have noticed before.

Mark's awkward grammar. We saw that, which Matthew and Luke improve. After Jesus' baptism, Mark says that the Holy Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, and the term that's used there is the same term that is consistently used of Jesus casting out demons.

It's not a friendly term. It's like the Holy Spirit cast out Jesus into the wilderness, like Jesus cast in a demon out. It's not friendly.

But Matthew and Luke improve that awkward term by saying that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Remember, Jesus, in one part at one point, and Mark says, "For nothing is hidden except that it be revealed." Well, that's pretty awkward in Greek as it is in English. But when we see Matthew and Luke, they improve, they smooth that grammar by saying, "For nothing is hidden, that will not be revealed." I don't see that you've got the Holy Spirit, the first time the Holy Spirit sees that, that the Holy Spirit says, "You know, I can do better than that.

Let's say, have Matthew and Luke say it this way." Or we mentioned the editorial fatigue and things like this with the miners versus the talents and stuff going on there. So, that's something to consider. Certainly seems that there are different views of inspiration.

And the synoptic problem sheds a light against the dictation view, the idea that God just dictated the words that the authors would write down. That's a misunderstood view of

the evangelical position on inspiration. But for many people, they might think that.

That's how it happened. Well, that's exactly right. So, under a dictation view, if you're going to have that view, then you must look as though God later on sees Mark and wants to improve the grammar.

It's God's that's doing it because he's the one that's dictating. Or, again, when the parable of the talents versus the parable of the miners, yes, some reduction can take place. But we see that Luke confuses some things here.

He seems to be aware of the parable as Matthew reports it. There's some cross-pollination of details or Luke has redacted it and changed some of the details himself, but he doesn't clean it up because he says, "Give it to the one who has 10 miners, whereas the guy didn't have 10 miners. He had 11.

I don't see the Holy Spirit once the first scholar found out, found God out." It's like God got caught. And the Holy Spirit hits his forehead with the palm of his hand and says, "Oh heavens, how did I miss that?" We don't imagine that happening, but that's what would have to happen if you're looking at a dictation view. So God permitted a human element in the process of divine inspiration, and that element includes items needing improvement and seemingly carelessness that includes some minor kind of mistakes.

All right. So great, great segue. I wanted to ask you about the doctrine of inerrancy.

We've used this example of Luke's alleged editorial fatigue, and here it seems like he's done his math wrong. Wouldn't that mean for the doctrine of inerrancy that there's an error in the text if Luke has done his math inaccurately? Well, it's a good question. I think that depends on how one defines inerrancy.

If you define it by the Chicago statement, you might have problems with it. Now it's been a long time since I've read the Chicago statement, so it's possible that one could read the Chicago statement and it would allow some things like this. But I would say that most inerrantists out there that take a very strict view of inerrancy, they would look and say, "Yeah, this doesn't jive with our view of inerrancy." But we have to admit those folks that hold such a strict view, while most of them would deny holding a dictation view in practice, they still think that way in a quasi-dictation view.

It's just it's kind of mysterious why these things. Or they try to explain these things away. And I'm sure you can explain, like Luke's math here, you could explain that away by saying, "Oh, well, it was inerrant in the originals, right?" And that's entirely possible.

But we don't have the originals, so we cannot know that. So, but if you want to hold such a strict view of inerrancy and say, "Well, it was in the autographs, it was correct, but it's not here," you can do that, okay? But whichever option you choose, whether you say, "Okay, the autographs were inerrant, but the Bible we have today is not," is what they

would have to say. So then you have to ask yourself the question, given that kind of definition is inerrancy the best term for our Bible, because you're talking about an inerrant text, in the autographs, which we no longer have.

You're holding the inerrancy of the text we no longer have while denying the inerrancy of the text that we have. And I think that's important. So, but you could take that view, or you could take a broader view, a more flexible view of inerrancy and say, "The Bible, like the Lozant Covenant, the Lozant Covenant, the Bibles without errant," and all that it affirms, all that it teaches.

That would permit some kind of a minor miscalculation like this, or editorial fatigue, and still be inerrant, okay? Or like one of my students recently said, "It's theologically inerrant." I think that's pretty good. Thanks out there to that student named Sharon. So, I think there's different ways of defining inerrancy, and look, whichever option we choose, we probably can't have certainty that it's the correct option.

We prefer an option because of a sense gained from additional observations of the Gospels over time, or we prefer an option because we're inclined to think in a certain manner based on our history of thinking about it. I think we just need to examine why we think in a certain way, but remember, whatever our view of Scripture should be consistent with what we observe in Scripture. Also, a part of the inerrancy debate is, say, one's view of genre, and that we can't be, per se, imposing our view of what the text is when it might be a different category altogether.

For example, in the Old Earth, Young Earth debate in apologetic circles, Young Earthers would accuse Old Earthers of denying inerrancy because the text says what it says, which is just an exercise in begging the question of what the genre is. So, that plays in as well into the Gospels. It does.

Genre is a big thing. Probably in another season, we'll talk about gospel differences and the compositional devices. I was reading, finished reading Matthew through in Greek the other day, and I noticed that when it came to Jesus being on trial before Pilate, once he was condemned, it said, "And Pilate beat him with a whip and handed him over to be crucified." Now, if we're going to take that in a very literal sense, then we imagine Pilate actually having the whip in his hand whipping Jesus and then handed him over to the soldiers to be crucified.

But of course, that's not what it's saying. Pilate ordered it. I think most of us reading that would recognize that's what's going on.

Well, that's the kind of stuff that we see in Greco-Roman biography and much, much more, but it's interesting to see how some readers on the far right will have no problem with making sense of Matthew saying Pilate beat Jesus with a whip and then handed him over to be crucified and not think of that literally. But then when you posit some of these

other compositional devices, which were used every bit as much, if not more, than that kind of one right there, it's deceit. If we acknowledge that that's what's going on.

Yeah, there's some leniency in how we understand certain phrases. Even to this day, when we say that a politician said so-and-so, it may have been his public relations fellow who wrote the article that was published in the newspaper, but the politician is still credited with those words. Yeah, and we're used to that kind of stuff.

So we have no problem with it. It's just that some on the far right, when they see some of these differences for which we would posit a common compositional device used by people like Blue Tark and Suetonius and many others at that time, they reject those. Why? Because they're not used to seeing them.

Yeah. And it makes them uncomfortable. But when then you ask them to give an explanation about the difference, it's either a mystery or they torture the text until it tells them what they want to hear to fit in with their own view.

So again, our view of Scripture should be consistent with what we view in Scripture, observe in Scripture. Very nice. Now, there's a growing interest of resurgence, perhaps.

I'm not sure if resurgence is the right term, in argument in apologetic circles called "undesigned coincidences." And it's a technical term, but refers to really that there's this independent material from between the gospels, all four, and sometimes outside of the gospels, that help to corroborate the story. These are incidental remarks. They're coincidences and it helps to confirm this.

But it seems that given the synoptic problem, there might be some concerns with undesigned coincidences. Let's just take a few here by way of example. So when Jesus was handed over to be scourged by a pilot, there was a group of guards, and one of them asked Jesus, "Proface I and tell us who hit you." There's an undesigned, there's an alleged undesigned coincidence here.

Yeah, well, that someone pilot handed them over. It's before they handed Jesus over to Pilate. It's when Jesus is before the Sanhedrin.

He drew in a high priest. And Jesus makes his confession that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. They're going to see him seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven.

And they charge him of blasphemy, condemn him to death. And then you've got Mark and Matthew and Luke saying they spit on him and beat him and slapped him in the face. And they said, and they blindfolded him and say, "Proface I, who is the one that hits you." Well, I've had a couple people come up to me, two people, in fact, who are apologists to my respect.

And they're not New Testament folks. They're general apologists. They have very effective ministries.

And they said, "Mike, what do you think about this?" You know, you got this undesigned coincidence where they refer to another apologist who is saying this. And it's like, okay, well, in Mark and Luke, you know, it says they spit on him, they slept and they beat him, they blindfolded him and said, "Proface I, who's the one that hits you?" Well, when you come to Matthew, they spit on him, they slap him, they beat him, and they say, "Proface I, who is it that hits you?" But Matthew doesn't mention the blindfolding. So what this apologist says is, you know, this doesn't make sense.

The prophesy who hit you, they say they spit, slapped, and beat him. "Proface I, who's the one that hits you?" Well, if he's looking at him, of course he could do that. So that doesn't make sense.

It only makes sense when you read that in view of what Mark and Luke say about Jesus being blindfolded and hitting him and saying, "Proface I, who's the one that hits you?" So you say, "This is an undesigned coincidence." Matthew makes perfect sense in light of Luke and what Mark says. And so this shows an independence of the accounts and corroborating data. And at first, if you don't know about the synoptic problem and a discussion in it and the interdependence of the gospels, it's like, "Oh, that's kind of interesting." But then when you realize that Matthew and Luke are both using Mark as their primary source and editing him at times and supplementing him with other sources in their own, like in Matthew's case probably his own eyewitness testimony, well then that's not an undesigned coincidence at all.

It's just a matter of Matthew is getting, had this information from Mark because a lot of it's very similar and it's just, he omitted the part about the blindfolding. It's just an unintentional omission is what it is, probably, an unintentional omission that may not make sense. It just read in isolation, but he's using Mark here.

So it's nothing that confirms or corroborates anything. So the the undesigned, the alleged undesigned coincidence only seems to work if one were to believe that the gospels were written independently as if there was no contact between them, like you'd mentioned at the start of our episode today. That's correct.

So I mean, there are some interesting ones like Luke has Pilate. The most interesting undesigned coincidence I've seen. So I read through J.J. Blunt's book, which was written almost two centuries ago.

He's the one that came out with this. You've got Jesus before Pilate and Pilate says, "Are you a king?" And Jesus says, "It is as you say." And Pilate goes out and says, "I find no calls of fault in him." What? He just claimed to be a king. You can't do that with the Romans.

That doesn't make any sense at all. But when you read it in light of the conversation between Jesus and Pilate in John, where Pilate says, "Are you a king?" And Jesus says, "Well, my kingdom is not of this world." Yes, my kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my followers would fight.

Well, that all makes sense now. It's an undesigned coincidence. Why? Because Luke and John are independent of one another.

But Luke and Matthew, when they're having the same story that's there with Mark, well, then they're not independent as we solve with the synoptic problem. Yeah. So, right.

So the concern that the synoptic problem poses might just apply only between intersynoptic alleged undesigned coincidences. But once we deal with John and say, the book of Acts, we might be dealing with other situations here. Yeah.

In order for it to be really impressive, in most cases, you're going to have to show independence between these two. And what I find is what some of these undesigned coincidences that the person given them is not really aware of the synoptic problem. Now, that's not in all cases, of course, but some of the ones that have been shown to me and say, "What do you think of this?" It hasn't been impressive.

It just shows that person isn't familiar with the synoptic problem and how they've not looked at that. They've not seen how they don't appreciate how Luke and Matthew used Mark as their primary source. And again, that doesn't mean all the undesigned coincidences are bad.

I'm just saying some of those that have been given to me and say, "Well, what do you think of this?" Or some that appear in popular apologetics books. Yeah. So here's one example that I've seen in different talks.

It was on Herod's servants. So in Matthew 14, one to two, at that time, Herod the Tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus. And he said to his attendants, "This is John the Baptist.

He has risen from the dead. That is why miraculous powers are at work in him." Well, someone might come along and say, "Well, how does Matthew know what Herod said to his attendants or to his servants?" So there's the question. And then the answer supposedly comes from Luke.

Luke 8, 1 through 3, when Luke mentions Joanna, the wife of Chuzah, or who'sah. I'm not sure how to say that name there. Herod's household manager.

So here we get this answer or it's confirmed in Luke. So my concern over this one is, well, it's not necessarily an undesigned or unintentional confirming because maybe Luke had Matthew's gospel possibly. And Luke was an investigator.

So he was going to investigate these sources. So there's still a shared common source between Matthew and Luke. Even though it's not necessarily a literary source, it's still shared common material.

So the material's not exactly undesigned or coincidental. But it's still confirming. It still corroborates the story, which I think is important ultimately.

And you're saying that's the case if Luke used Matthew or if Matthew and Luke used a common source. Right. Right.

Okay. So what if, I haven't looked at that one in depth. So what if Matthew, like Richard Balkan believes that Matthew used Luke as a source.

So what if he's right with that? And he's in a minority there. But if he's correct that Matthew used Luke, how would this undesigned coincidence play out? So if, yes, if Matthew had written after Luke, you're saying, yeah, and he's using Luke as a source. Right.

Right. So that might make it worse than the other, than the first way. And it might be worse because if Matthew's reading Luke's gospel, Luke is mentioning here someone who's in a one of Herod's servants.

So Matthew might go and find that source and say, Hey, tell me, tell me about your experience. So it almost as if we have a clue here that Matthew now has a source from Luke, which he gained from Luke. Now, maybe it didn't happen this way.

Maybe it happened entirely independent, but there's still might be a, there's a shared common source, which is part of the synoptic problem. But I want to say we should have some caution here when we approach the synoptic problem. And we make these claims about these, these supposed connections, when there might not be as much independence, I think it might be about the degree of independence, there might not be as much independence as it sort of led on.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Some of them, I mean, when I first read JG Blount's book, I thought, some of these are interesting. Most of them are not. And it just didn't catch on, you know.

So yeah, I mean, I guess in some cases, we can just say possible, but that's about as far as we can go with it. Yeah. Yeah.

And some of them are just bogus. Sure. And it's to the credit of the argument from Undesign Coincidences, it's a cumulative argument.

So there are, you know, you might find some that you think are good and others that you think, yeah, just don't make sense that obviously press too hard. So not to throw out the

whole thing, it still has some merit to it. Yeah.

I guess the best thing would be to just pick some really strong ones. Just to go with those. Right.

Right. Yeah. We're just looking at the implications of the synoptic problem for this type of apologetic argument.

One thing I'd like to also add to this, since we were talking about inspiration and inerrancy a little bit earlier, I'm F. F. Bruce, who is just a great, great conservative biblical scholar respected by all. He died in the early 1990s and he wrote something that it's really good. I just like to quote a short paragraph here.

He said, "Inspiration is not a concept of which I have a clear understanding before I come to the study of the text so that I know in advance what limits are placed on the meaning of the text by the requirements of inspiration. On the contrary, it is by the patient study of the text that I come to understand better, not only what the text itself means, but also what is involved in biblical inspiration. My doctrine of Scripture is based on my study of Scripture, not vice versa." And I think what typically happens as we alluded to a little bit earlier, we come to a view of inspiration of Scripture based on what we've heard from our pastor, what we learned in seminary.

We've got a view that's been freeze-dried, pre-packaged, denominationally approved, put on the shelf and said, "This is what you're supposed to believe." Whereas people like F. F. Bruce would say, "No, derive your view of Scripture by studying Scripture." And like the principle I give to my students, our view of Scripture must be consistent with what we observe in Scripture. If we keep that in mind, it will be very helpful to us. And the synoptic problem certainly contributes to that in our understanding of Scripture.

Great way to close out this episode and perhaps this season here on the synoptic problem. Before I let you go, Mike, we do have a question from one of your listeners here. Ben asks, "I've got a question.

What do you think is the most fascinating redaction of Mark by Luke and by Matthew?" Well, you know, so many of these, that would be a difficult one. Redaction of Mark by Matthew or Luke. I mean, there's so many interesting ones.

Maybe we could talk about one of the most difficult ones. Like a puzzling one, one that you wouldn't know why they did that? Yeah, you know, like I say in my book, "Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?" I came to the last one, the resurrection narrative, and I thought, "You know, I've studied this so much. I should be able to cover this really quickly.

I should be able to write on this and get through it in three days." Well, three weeks later, I'm thinking that some of these are just really difficult. Some are pretty easy. And

there were some that I thought were really easy, but then given them more thought, it's like, "Well, that's not so easy." And some have tried to harmonize some of these differences, but you know, they really, really, a lot of those harmonizations are ad hoc and a huge stretch.

So for, you know, there's a couple of them in the resurrection narrative. Like for example, where did Jesus first appear to the women at the tomb? Well, in Matthew, it's when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary doesn't say who that other Mary is, but it's just the other Mary. So you got two Mary's that go to the tomb, see the angel, find it empty, and then the running, the angel says, "Go tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and meet them there." And Jesus meets them on their way running back from the tomb and the angel and says the same thing to them.

So that's the first time Jesus appears to them. But in John's gospel, you've got Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, comes back, tells the disciples, Peter and the beloved disciple who run to the tomb, and then they leave and Mary Magdalene is still there. And she's talking to the angels.

And then she's crying and she turns around because Jesus is there and says, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who do you seek?" And, you know, she doesn't recognize him at first, could have been because, I don't know, you know, she's got tears in her eyes because Jesus was wearing a hoodie and it's still a little dark. I don't know. She doesn't recognize him.

And finally, when he says, "Mary," you know, "Oh, Rabona." So it's like the first time Mary Magdalene sees Jesus is at the tomb itself coming out of the tomb. But in Matthew, it's when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are running back. That's one of the things, you know, and the first appearance to the male disciples is in Galilee according to Mark and Matthew.

But it's in Jerusalem according to Luke and John. Well, I used to say, "Well, that's really easy. Luke has just compressed the text so everything happened in Jerusalem." And that's correct.

But then you still have the problem with John, which I didn't realize before. John has the first appearance to the male disciples in Jerusalem. And so why is it in Jerusalem in John? But it's in Galilee in Matthew and implied in Galilee in Mark.

And I don't know the answer that I can take some wild guess, but I just don't know. So there are some differences. I don't know if there's so much redactions, but there's some differences in the resurrection narratives.

I don't know how to account for them. I've got some guesses, but they are just speculation. It's not like a lot of the others.

I just don't know. Yeah. Oh, that's great.

And I think it's a testament to your interest in pursuing the truth and trying to make sense of the text. Really wrestling with that. I appreciate that.

And I think a number of your followers do as well. You don't have these per se, these token answers to account for everything in the text. You're wrestling with it.

And I think a lot of people appreciate that. Well, I have what I think is a high view of Scripture. I do think it's God's Word.

And is that way? I look and I say, "It's like what Ben Withering, Ben Witherington once said in one of his books, he says, "Scripture inspiration looks like what we have in these documents." Right? And so another principle I give to my students is if we must accept the Gospels as God has given them to us, rather than forcing them into a frame of how we think he should have. I think that's really important. So what do we observe in Scripture? It doesn't really help us.

It doesn't help our standing with skeptics if we try to blow off these differences or try to account for them by some really wild speculation without admitting, "Well, I just don't know." But that doesn't discredit the resurrection in any way. But I just don't know how some of that fits. Yeah.

Great. Well, Mike, thanks for discussing the implications here of the synoptic problem as it pertains to the doctrine of inspiration and inerrancy, and even the argument from undesigned coincidences. I'm glad to see that when we look into the text and we see there's evidence for this relationship, that means something for what we believe about the text itself.

So I'm glad we could cover that on this episode today. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, please visit RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels. There you can check out free resources like ebooks, watch videos like Mike's debates or lectures, or simply read some articles that he has written.

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