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S5E2 - Canonical Gospels as Historical Sources

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Welcome to Season 5 Episode 2! In this season, we are diving into the historical sources pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus and discussing how probable or helpful some of them are. In this episode, we discuss the reliability of the Canonical Gospels as historical sources for the resurrection of Jesus.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University and he's a frequent

speaker on campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jares, your host. On this episode, we'll be looking at the canonical Gospels as a historical source pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus. Mike, the Gospels seem like a great place to begin as we consider the historical sources about Jesus.

Why is it that a historian should consider the Gospels for a source about Jesus' life? Well, first of all, the literary genre in which they're written are ancient biographies. Scholars today typically refer to them as Greco-Roman biographies. And the reason is that there are certain ways and qualities of ancient biographies that appear to be common throughout the Greco-Roman literature when they write in biographical format.

And for some reason, there were only two Jews at that time who were writing ancient biographies. That's Philo, who was writing close to the time in which Jesus lived, and then you've got Josephus later on. Philo wrote three biographies.

Josephus wrote an autobiography. And then after that, the late Louis Feldman, who was the leading Josephus scholar, he's not a Christian, but a Jewish historian, he said that after Josephus and Philo, we don't have any biographies of Jews until modern times. So it seems that Jews were typically not writing biographies at that time.

So Greco-Roman biography was pretty much the only game in town. And Josephus' autobiography shares a whole lot in common with the literary conventions of Greco-Roman biography, as does one of Philo's three biographies that he wrote, his life of Moses. So typically, the gospels share a whole lot in common with that Greco-Roman biography.

But if you have problems with Greco-Roman biography and that label as some do, then you could just say ancient biography since the extant Jewish biographies shared a whole lot in common in terms of the characteristics of that genre. So what you're saying is that, and I want to be careful here, that the gospels are not history, but the gospels are historical. That's correct.

And let's be clear about that. When we say history, the difference between biography and history is history, when you're writing a history, it's like Roman history, okay, or the history of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides, or the War with Ygotha, or the War with Catalyne by Salist. These are histories because they're discussed in a war, an era, a nation, things like that.

The Book of Acts in our New Testament is a history of the first three decades of the Christian church. A biography in contrast is, I think what you said correct, it is historical just like a history is, but it's called a biography because it focuses on the life of an individual. And the genre there of ancient biography, part of the challenge, as you've

seen, is that there's a spectrum of the historical nature of a biography.

Is that fair to say? Yeah, it's like the life of Apollonius of Tiana by Philostratus. Most historians don't believe that that contains a tremendous amount of accurate information. They do think that it contains some accurate information about Apollonius of Tiana, who was a traveling philosopher who lived in the first century.

But a lot of things in there they would say is not trustworthy. You've got the life of Elias in the *Historia Augusta* in the late fourth century that is regarded as largely unreliable. Lucian of Samosata in his book *How to Write History* mentions a biography of Alexander the Great written by Aristobulus.

And he says that Aristobulus presented a rough draft of the biography to Alexander while they were on a voyage. And Alexander took it and threw it overboard after reading it. And he told Aristobulus that he should do likewise with him because Aristobulus had included stories that were entirely fictional like Alexander taking on an elephant single-handedly and beating and killing the elephant.

So, I mean, this just shows that not all biographies are equal, not all biographers were interested in the same degree of accuracy as others. Now, you have some that were more concerned with it. So, someone like Suetonius is considered the greatest Roman biographer and he writes closer to how we write biographies today, even though he's got a lot of weaknesses in his writings, like he's indiscriminate as to use of sources, his attention to details such as dates and numbers are entirely unreliable.

Plutarch is regarded as the greatest of all ancient biographers. And as Christopher Pelling, the leading Plutarch scholar in the world would say, Plutarch is true enough. Plutarch will not hesitate to bend the facts a little in order to suit his portrait, the portrait he's trying to paint of his main character.

So, yeah, they varied in the kind of accuracy and precision to which they were committed. So, yes, the Gospels are ancient biographies, but that only biographers know biographies, but it only takes us so far because they varied in their accuracy. Fortunately, you've got Matthew and Luke and we can measure, as you can with Plutarch on occasions, like Plutarch's life of Coriolanus studies have been done and suggest that Plutarch's only source for that his only source was Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

And so, we can compare Plutarch's account with Dionysius and see what Plutarch does with that source. You know, does he fill in the gaps at times? Yes, he does that. He invents material, but there's very similitude.

It's according to what we know would have occurred at that time, such as soldiers, Roman soldiers, making sure that they have their will written out on paper. And on their bodies when they go into battle. Well, we can do something similar with at least Matthew

and Luke because scholars are convinced that they both used Mark as their primary source and supplemented it.

So, we can compare how Matthew and Luke used Mark and see that they use Mark with integrity. And that gives us confidence where we can test Luke and Matthew. They come out looking pretty good.

And so, where we can't test them, they should get the benefit of the doubt. But there's also challenges when it comes to the gospels that are typical like they're anonymous, they're biased, they contain some differences in the way they report things. We can unpack that if you want.

Good, yeah, that's exactly. I was going to ask a follow-up here. The gospels, if we're considering the gospels, aren't they just the biased memories of the followers of Jesus, the social prophet, a good moral teacher.

And because of the followers here, maybe these miracle stories are just a way of exaggerating Jesus as this figure, like with Alexander the Great taking on the elephant with one arm. We have to, at least when we approach the text as historians, not as theologians, but as historians, we have to be open to that. So, you mentioned Alexander the Great, Plutarch mentions a story about Alexander's birth that he was, I forgot which God it was, who allegedly impregnated Alexander's mother.

So, in a sense, he, now his mother wouldn't have been a virgin, but he would have a divine paternity. Suetonia mentions the divine paternity of Caesar Augustus that around midnight Augustus' mother, Atia, was in the Temple of Apollo, and Apollo took the form of a snake and entered Atia and impregnated her. So, Augustus is the son of God.

He is the son of Apollo. And so, when we see stories like this, and there are others, okay, like I think Dionysus was the product, the child of Zeus, who impregnated a woman. So, we've got these kind of stories.

So, you're looking, you say, well, is the virgin birth kind of like that? Is it cut from the same cloth as some of these? And what about the miracles? There are other miracles in the Greek, the Roman, the Jewish literature. So, we come to the text without the presuppositions of that, that can't be involved in a text that's allegedly divinely inspired, because the historian can't presuppose it, it's divinely inspired. So, these are some of the challenges for the historian when we come to the Gospels.

Yeah, so, we can't view the text theologically, but we can have some good assumptions. For example, if we believe God exists and works miracles, that's going to impact how we read the text, whether that's the Gospels, or even some other document about Alexander the Great or some other Roman figure. So, that all plays into our methodology.

Is that fair? That's fair. And that's where we got to look at evidence too. You've got the miracles of Jesus.

According to Graham Twelfthtree, who's a specialist on the miracles of Jesus, he says that the miracles of Jesus are one of the very best attested components of Jesus' life. It's attested in the earliest sources, like Mark, the Gospel of Mark. It's in multiple independent sources, such as Mark and John.

It's even mentioned in unsympathetic sources, such as Josephus. He mentions that Jesus was known as a worker of amazing deeds. He doesn't call them miracles.

The term that he uses there, though, is the same thing he uses for one of the prophets. I forgot if it's Elijah or Elisha in the Old Testament. But yeah.

He's a worker of astonishing or amazing deeds. So, you look at these things, and we have really good evidence that Jesus did perform, at least deeds that were interpreted or viewed by witnesses as miracles. Let's talk about the date of the Gospels.

Decades later from the time of the events. So, the Gospels are allegedly to have been written decades past when these events occurred. And don't people have a faulty memory? We have documented cases of what's called the Mandela Effect.

And that's where people think that Nelson Mandela died in prison. In America, we have maybe what we could call the Sin Bad Effect, where people think Sin Bad, the comedian and actor, was in the 1990s film Shazam. But actually, that's not the case.

It was Shaq. And I think it was called Kazam or something like that. So, the Mandela Effect can really play with people even just a couple decades later.

Maybe that's what we're seeing here with the Gospels being written so late compared to when the events occurred. Well, we have to be open to that kind of possibility. But that's why we look at things like multiple independent sources.

So, when we come to Jesus, just the new testament literature alone, you've got the Gospels. So, you have Mark, the earliest of the Gospels. You've got John, which most scholars, they would think that, well, they debate over whether John was familiar with the synoptics.

But even those who do think that John was familiar with the synoptics, most of them do think that John wrote independently of them, that he provides another testimony. You've got Paul who mentions a number of items about Jesus, his crucifixion for one, and that he was believed to come from the seed of David, which would mean the messianic line that Jesus was believed to be the Messiah. Of course, through Paul, we know that he believed Jesus rose from the dead.

And we know that the other apostles were testifying and proclaiming that Jesus rose from the dead, we can get to their testimonies from Paul. So, I mean, there's just a number of things like this and some others through multiple independent sources, early sources, unsympathetic sources, like some of those will be talking about Josephus, Tacitus, Lushin, Marr Bar-Sarapean and some others, non-Christian sources. That's why we look at those things.

You look at communal kind of memory, not just the memory of a single person, but the memory is preserved by a community of believers, which back then it's different than it is today. Okay, so what you're talking about, like some of the examples that you gave about Shazam or whatever, I don't know what you're talking about there. So, that's probably some misunderstandings by some individuals would be my guess.

And yeah, our memory is not perfect, but we tend to recall the gist of things. And if that weren't the case, then we wouldn't be writing histories today. We wouldn't be doing documentaries still today of World War II interviewing vets from that war, even though it's, you know, what are we looking at? 75 years later.

And yet there are some survivors and they can still testify to some of those things. If their memories are entirely unreliable, stop interviewing them, right? Stop interviewing Korean war vets, stop interviewing Vietnam war vets more recently because the Vietnam war has been over for 45 years, and that's a longer period of time than the time the Gospel of Mark was written. And when Jesus died, so many of us will recall us who were adults at the time have a pretty good memory of what happened on 9/11, where we were, what the weather was like, when we learned that the Twin Towers had been attacked by terrorists in the Pentagon and the plane crashed in the Pennsylvania farm field.

So we do have, you know, some decent memories and even if some people misremember what the weather was like on 9/11, which I think it was pretty much the same here in the U.S. It was sunny all over. But if someone misremember that still you got communal memory, most people I've asked who were adults at the time if they remember what the weather was like on 9/11, they remember it because they were emotionally involved and impacted by that event. But of course, if you ask them what 9, the weather was on 9/11 last year or even this year, they may not know.

But they'll remember what it was like 20 years, 19 years ago, because they were emotionally impacted by it. Yeah, yeah, I can still recall teachings of my college professors. And, you know, those are those are lessons and teachings which even if I don't remember verbatim, I still remember the the essence of their teaching and could put it into terms that would be faithful representations of what they taught me.

You know, they impacted me in that manner. Yeah, that makes sense. And you know, there's an example, a guy named Joe Galloway, who was a, he was a combat reporter

with Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore that is represented by the movie *We Were Soldiers* with Mel Gibson and Sam Elliott in it.

And I saw Joe Galloway in a documentary. And so, he's talking about those four harrowing days of intense combat with the North Vietnamese Army during, I think it was 1964, 1965. And he says, you know, you see it, you live it, you experience it, and it will be with you all of your days.

And he's saying this decades later. And, you know, we have to remember if these people actually saw Jesus walk on the water, they saw him raise the dead. They saw him confront the Jewish leaders.

They saw him crucified. And then later, they saw him alive and in perfect health, having been raised from the dead. You will remember those things decades later.

Good. Well, Mike, here's a question. The authorship of the Gospels is a contested issue.

We can't exactly have a high degree of certainty because the Gospels, you know, maybe on the manuscripts, it'll say the gospel according to Matthew. But it doesn't say within the text, this is Matthew, the disciple of Jesus, who has written this. So, you know, the Gospels in that sense are, you know, unreliable because we don't know exactly who wrote them, do we? Can we be certain about who wrote them? If we're by certain, we mean 100% no.

The evidence we have for the authorship of the Gospels, I think is good, but it's by no means perfect. The Gospels are anonymous, strictly speaking because in the earliest manuscripts, they do not have the titles, the gospel according to Matthew, gospel according to Mark, etc. And none of them have the name of the author in the poem, the beginning of that gospel.

But people make too much out of this because out of the nearly 100 biographies that were written within 150 years on each side of Jesus, biographies written of anybody, you know, the 48 that we have that have survived from Plutarch, the 12 that we have that survived from Suetonius, the one we have from Tacitus, Josephus's, you know, autobiography and some others. Only one of them within that period of 150 years of each side of Jesus, only one of them contain the name of the author in the title or the poem. And that's Lucian's passing of Peregrinus.

That's it. Other than that, there are no others. So the next time you have it, it's the life of Eelius and Historia, Augusta, latter part of the fourth century.

So it was customary not to have the author's name there. And in fact, all of Plutarch's lives are entirely anonymous. His name doesn't appear anywhere throughout those biographies.

You have the war with you, with the war with Catalyne, the histories, all by Salus, they're entirely anonymous. You have Livis Roman histories, entirely anonymous. And yet somehow the ancients knew that the authors for this, I would say, and we can, you know, get into it a little more if you want.

I don't know how much time we have, but the evidence we have for the traditional authorship of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is actually better than the evidence we have that Plutarch wrote those 48 biographies attributed to him. And no classicist question the authorship of those 48. So certainty? No.

How good is the evidence? I mean, some things are still in question, of course, with the gospels, especially Matthew. But there's disputes over John as well, over some ambiguity or vagueness in some of the testimonies. But I think we're on to say that we have no idea who wrote them, I think is naive and misleading.

To say we can't be certain of it, I think would be fair. But I think we can have a pretty good idea about, we can say that the gospels aren't minimum, they are rooted in eyewitness testimony. Yeah, yeah.

And maybe we could say it's reliably certain, but maybe not, you know, a high, high degree of certainty, something like that. You know, there's, there's a spectrum there. For some of them, like Mark and Luke, we have better evidence, right? Right.

Right. John, even the majority of scholars today who reject the traditional authorship of John, saying that John the son of Zebedee did not write it, most of them still think that the author of John's gospel used one of Jesus's eyewitness disciples as his primary source. Yeah.

And I think there's good evidence that even if Matthew did not pen that gospel, he was a major source behind it. But I think Matthew was intimately involved in the composition of that gospel. Yeah, interesting.

So this leads us to a question from a listener, Lucas. He's wondering if this is a good argument against methane authorship of Matthew, and he provides a tweet here from inspiring Christianity. So the tweet is this, the fact that Matthew, one of the 12 apostles, copied the story of his own call along with over half of his whole account from someone who was not as close to the events as he was.

I think he's referring to Mark there. Isn't a challenge that Matthew wrote Matthew seems like a knockdown argument for me. So if Matthew really wrote Matthew, why would he be so dependent upon Mark even for events that Matthew would have been an eyewitness of? Yeah, that's a fair question.

I think a lot of folks on both sides of the aisle, whether conservative or skeptical or liberal, I think they make the mistake of imagining Matthew sitting down and penning

this gospel by himself. Or for that matter, any of the gospel authors doing it with the possible exception of Luke, but maybe not even Luke. Luke's Cicero was one of the most highly educated and proficient writers in all of Rome.

And yet, he talks about how he's writing a letter to Tyro, who was his amanuensis, his secretary, who helped pen things, write things down. And he said that Pompey had come over and asked him to read something he had written. And Cicero says that he declined to do it because Tyro had not had the opportunity to improve it.

So Tyro helped him not only the composition of material to make it better, but also in his oral presentation of it. And then you got Paul. And at least three of his letters, he mentions at the end, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand," which means he didn't write the rest.

Now, does that mean that they were taking, his secretaries were taking dictation? Probably not. And here's why. My friend Randy Richards has done groundbreaking work on this.

And he says that he will in his class, and he's written a book about Paul and the secretaries of his letters, he says that in his class he will give a piece of papyrus, a reed, an ink to his students, and will say to them, "Okay, take some dictation. Paul and Apostle, pick up the reed, dip it, ink right down a minute later of Jesus Christ, do the same a minute later, buy the will of God a minute and a half later. You can't dictate in this way." So what probably happens is Paul gives them some, the secretary some ideas, they take notes, they write it down, they compose the letter, come back to, that's if he's not writing it himself.

They compose the letter, come back, Paul reads it, make some corrections, they go, they do the final draft and Paul signs off on it. When you come to Romans, which is the crown jewel of Paul's letters, chapter 16, verse 22 says, "I, Paul, who wrote, I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord." Tertius probably did a whole lot more than taking notes. He probably artistically framed that letter, and that's why it's the best of Paul's letters.

So if Paul and Cicero will rely on a secretary to do a whole lot more than take dictation, then we can expect the gospel authors who probably, with the exceptional Luke, probably did not have the education upon Cicero that they're going to rely even more on a secretary who would take notes and then compose those things. So it doesn't matter that the disciples were Aramaic speaking, whereas they're written in Greek and all this kind of stuff. So yeah.

Yeah, good. Well, interestingly enough, give the rating of possible to the gospels here, but we're going to leave that on a cliffhanger and discuss that in next week's episode about that rating of possible. I would love to hear an explanation from you on that, but

we've run out of time for this week.

So thank you for cleaning us in a little bit about the gospels and the material that they provide regarding the evidence for Jesus. They're of course maybe the most well-known source for the life of Jesus that people know about. If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael Kona, you can visit RisenJesus.com. It's there that you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus or the historical reliability of the gospels and a host of other subjects as well.

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