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S4E6 - Mike Licona discusses Dr. Ehrman on Miracles: PT 2

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode Dr Licona continues his discussion on 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 RizzJesus podcast with Dr. Michael Lacona. Dr. Lacona is associate professor in theology at Houston Baptist University. And he's a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, conferences, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs.

Mike is the president of Rizzin Jesus, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. My name is Kurt

Charris, your host. On today's episode, we continue our discussion on Dr. Bart Ehrman, the historian and miracles.

Last week, we looked at two of his arguments in support of his claim that the historian cannot come to the conclusion that a miracle occurred. And those two arguments were that the sources are poor, and that a miracle by definition is the least probable explanation. So we shouldn't really take any sort of credence or have any confidence in that position.

And Mike here gave some reasons why those two concepts were mistaken, looked at some counter examples, and said, well, even if the sources were poor, then we have good reason for thinking everyone's got a bias. And we should be willing to evaluate and keep that in mind when we're reading these sources. And with regard to the least probable explanation, well, the least probable explanations occur all the time.

And so even if something is statistically small, so minute from occurring, they still occur frequently. And so we should take that into consideration. So Mike, I'm hoping on today's episode, we will finish going through Bart's position.

He's got three more arguments, so why don't we get right to it? So Bart's third argument in support of the claim that we cannot know miracles is that the claim that Jesus was raised is a theological claim rather than a historical one. So we've sort of come across this before, but what would you say to that? Yeah, we have come across that before with John Meyer, right? So John Meyer basically said, as soon as you say, God raised Jesus, then it becomes a theological argument rather than a historical one. And we looked at that and said, well, to an extent, that is correct to say that God raised Jesus, or God did this, is to make a theological argument, because historians can't prove that God did it.

However, as with Meyer, I suggested that what we could do is a form of methodological naturalism. I mean, we have two options. We could either do a form of methodological naturalism that says, we can affirm that the event occurred, but we could not affirm that it was God that did it.

The historian could take that kind of an approach and just leave the calls of the event undetermined. Historians do that a lot anyway, right? I remember trying to think of his name King Ludwig. I forgot which one it was.

But of the Neusch Wansstein castle over in Germany, he's the one that built that in the 1800s. And then later on, he was kind of insane, and he was confined to a smaller castle. And then he and his physician went out one night for a walk, and he didn't hear the physician ever return.

The next morning, they found them both face down in the water, drowned. Now, was it murder? Was it an accident? We don't know the cause of what caused them to drown.

But we know that they drowned.

We know that they died. So historians have these kinds of things. Charlemagne and Carloman, that was supposed to be an attempt in the late eighth century to revive the Roman Empire.

And the two brothers didn't get along. They split up their empire. And then Carloman was dead at one day.

And it's like, okay, well, was he poisoned? Or did he die by natural causes? Well, we don't know. Historians don't know this, but they can still determine that Carloman died. And in the same way, a historian, in a form of methodological naturalism, it wouldn't deny the event occurred, but it would just say that we can't determine what the cause of the event was.

We couldn't determine that God did it. Now, I do want to reiterate here that this is a form of methodological naturalism that differs from the typical form. The typical form would say, at least in history, would say, well, if it was a miracle, you can't even say the event occurred, which I just think is a bad way and an overly biased way of doing.

I like Myers way. So that'd be one thing. The other option would be to say that the event occurred and just like scientists posit theoretical entities like black holes, quark strings and gluons to explain observable phenomena, historians can posit a theoretical entity such as God to account for the data, known data that we have.

If Jesus rose from the dead, we would posit a theoretical entity, God, as the cause of that event. I think it's fascinating here that Bart recognizes these distinctions between the theological and the historical. And while you and I would disagree with him on how he parses that out, the fact is that he recognizes these is important because in stating that the way he has, he's implying that the position that he thinks dead people don't rise from the dead.

And of course, everyone agrees with that. People typically don't rise from the dead and even the ancients knew that. So when it happened, it was so surprising to them that that was, you know, what was part of the central message of the Christian church was like, hey, wait a second, something new has happened here.

And we want to tell you about it. So I mean, we would all agree with Bart that dead people don't rise from the dead. But here we have an instance in which it's occurred despite it being rare, extremely rare.

And so, you know, we're on common ground there. And so we sort of see here the importance, the implications. Right.

Bart recognizing the implications. If Jesus did rise, then we'd have to say that's God and

that's theological. So we're on the same page there on the implications.

He's just not willing to say that it happened. That's true. And just a little caveat.

Yeah. We all would agree that dead people don't rise by natural causes. Right.

Right. Yeah. I mean, generally speaking, yeah, by natural causes.

Right. I remember in his debate with William Lane Craig, which I think happened in 2006, I was at that debate. And I seem to recall that he said something.

Well, why say the Christian God would have done it? Why not just say it was Zeus or some other kind of God? Well, I guess technically speaking, a historian, you know, if I were given that, I would say, well, that doesn't dispute whether Jesus rose, it just disputes the cause of the resurrection. And maybe a historian can't determine the cause. So you would just leave the cause undetermined, right? But to say, well, how do you know the Christian God did it rather than Zeus? That is just a call on the question of God.

That who raised Jesus is not to call into question that Jesus was raised. And that's a great segue to his fourth argument here for his position, Mike. He, he, Erman says basically that if we accept that Jesus worked miracles, we must also be willing to concede that other miracles occurred as well, say in the Islamic religion or other religions or views.

So that doesn't mean that Christianity is true on his view. It just means we have to go a bit further. But and of course we wouldn't want to do that, would we? Well, yeah, I mean, I don't think that we would have to acknowledge that if we think Jesus performed miracles, I don't think we would have to acknowledge that miracles were performed in other religions.

However, I think if we're going to be honest, historians, we have to be open to looking at the data and looking at the possibility that they did. And I'm open to the possibility that miracles occur in other religions. And you know, the cause could be God.

He could be doing it for some reason. Maybe a person doesn't believe that God exists at all. And he's doing it to reveal that he does exist.

And maybe at a later time he's going to reveal more specifically that it's Jesus or maybe even it's a demonically empowered that the person experienced a miracle or something like that. And I think we can acknowledge that the supernatural can indeed happen and miracles can happen in other religions. But I would also follow that some of the examples that he uses like Apollonus of Tiana, that it said that he rose from the dead or Honi the Circle drawer, which, you know, Honi is Jewish prophet who I think he existed in the first century BC according to Josephus.

And so he asked for rain and he draws a circle and he says, "I'm not going to come out of

this circle until it rains and he prays and it rains." You know, so, you know, when we look at the evidence for that, the evidence he's meant that Honi has mentioned in two sources, he's mentioned in Josephus who writes at the end of the first century and he's saying, "Honey existed 100 BC." And then I think it's mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, he mentions the miracle in a lot more detail, but he says, "I think that it's written 500 years later," or something like that, that Honi existed 500 years after the first century BC. So I mean, there's some, you could say it's just to an extent is there, but whoa, it is just really, I mean, something is unreliable between those sources. Yeah, there are a lot of red flags.

Yeah. And when it comes to Apollonius of Tiana, here you have a historical figure who lived in the first century, died at the end of the first century, but we really only have one good source on him, and that's Phil Stratus' life of Apollonius of Tiana, which is written on the year 225, or about 125 years after Apollonius' death. And there's a number of problems with it, and it says, I mean, there's even conflicting accounts whether Apollonius died or how he died, and then there's only one, even though it said he appeared afterward to some people on a number of occasions, there's only a description of one of those appearances, and that we don't know when it occurred.

It could have occurred a couple of days after his death, it could have occurred a century after his death, we don't know. But he appeared to one of his followers in a dream, other followers were around. Apollonius, the follower woke up and said, can you see him? Can you see him? No one else could see him.

And he said, I saw him, he appeared to me in a dream. I mean, really do we have to consider that as a legitimate miracle? And there are others, you know, like, I think to the Emperor of Aspasion, things like that were a heel to blind men. I think, you know, what we were looking at last week, this resembles Hume's argument, right? How miracle claims in competing religions cancel each other out, or what Evan fails referred to as the demolition derby.

This is the same kind of argument. And I think we would answer it in the same way. We could apply this to worldviews like atheism and theism.

God exists, God does not exist. And do they cancel each other out? Well, of course not. It's where you got to look at the evidence.

The evidence for one is stronger than the evidence for the other. And you look at it this way and say, well, when it comes to miracle claims and other religions and in Christianity, there is a significant. A amount of significant disparity in the kind of evidence we have for the miracles of Jesus versus the miracles of figures and other religions.

Right. So we're doing an apples to oranges comparison here. When for many, I won't say

all, but for many of the claims of religious miracles in other religions, they are private affairs.

It happens to one person or maybe just a couple people. What we're dealing with, especially with Jesus, are public miracles that occur in front of hundreds, if not thousands of people. And that's certainly something that is of a different context and a different type than these other claims about a particular person having one thing revealed or an experience they saw in the forest.

Yeah, but you do have some public miracles like with only the circle drawer, like with this patient healing to blind guys. So that's not always the case, but the disparity of evidence is, I mean, you just have with the miracles of Jesus, for example, you have early sources like Mark, it would be our earliest gospel. And he mentions the multiple miracles of Jesus.

You have multiple independent sources because not only is it in Mark, it's also in John. We also find it in the Q material. So whether you think Matthew used Luke or Luke used Matthew or that Matthew and Luke used the common source, you still have another source there that reports miracles of Jesus that may not appear in Mark.

So you've got that recurrent attestation. You've got Josephus who mentions the miracles that Jesus was a miracle worker. And he is an unsympathetic source, right? So and you've got it in multiple literary forms such as you've got it in biography, you have it in historiography, and you haven't letters because Paul in the Paul on Corpus, you've got mentioning of Jesus's miracles.

You have it in the book of Acts as well and in Josephus's antiquities of the Jews. So biography, history and letter, multiple literary forms. This is some of the strongest multiple attestation that we can look for.

So we don't have that kind of stuff with most of the other miracles reported. And some of the other miracles reported in other religions have plausible natural explanations. So for example, the miracles of healing these two blind guys by this patient, when it's reported by Suetonius and Tacitus, it almost seems like in some case they see this more as a staged photo op than they do a legitimate divine act that was going.

Yeah, interesting. Okay, Erman's fifth and final argument is essentially the claim that the tools simply aren't available to the historian to conclude on miracle claims. So you use this terminology here, you say that historians are unable to adjudicate on miracle claims.

And that's what Erman says in support of his claim. Sort of almost like just a premise conclusion of sort of repeating his position here. But why is that mistaken? Well, you know, as we have discussed with that, yeah, they may not have the tools to be able to confirm that it was God who did it.

But we do have the tools as historians. If the data is sufficient, we have the tools to be

able to verify that the event itself occurred. And at that point, then we may consider the cause and we could either say leave it undetermined or we could say, all right, look, it's extremely unlikely by natural causes.

And the event occurs in a context in which we might expect a God to act, a religious context and then say, well, this would seem in that case, I think we're justified to posit God as the theoretical entity who did it. We can go either way. I'm fine with either way.

I kind of like to be overly cautious here and just say, well, let's just leave the cause undetermined. If you want to believe God did it, you can believe it by faith, but we can still affirm the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. I think we can do that.

Now, that's something that the consensus of scholars aren't going to agree on. They're going to say, well, the canons of history don't allow you to do these kinds of things to which I would say, well, there are no canons of history. And this is something that a number of philosophers of history and historians have acknowledged, no canons of history.

Well, some like Erman and some others would say that there are canons of history. Well, that just shows you that there aren't because historians themselves don't even agree on whether there are canons of history. So a canon of history would be a principle that is accepted by all.

So they can't even agree on how to define history. They can't agree on how to define historiography or how much of the history of the past can actually be known, whether it can be known or whether every reconstruction of the past is historical fiction. So yeah, there are no canons of history.

We do not require a consensus in order to say that something has been verified. Right. We can disagree with people and yet still think something happened.

I mean, there are times when a minority position ends up being what eventually comes to be accepted. And those people that believe the minority position at that time were right. We think that they were right.

So we could think of some examples when that happens. Okay. Good.

So that sort of addresses the five positions or arguments of what Erman claims and the conclusion that he comes to that we can't claim a miracle happened using the historical tools. But as we've now gone through, these are mistaken for a number of reasons. And I want to at this time then also give another plug here to the book here that you've got because there's so much more to be said and that is said on this subject matter here, the historian and miracles in your book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, a new historiographical approach by IVP.

Just a wonderful work, nice and thick, a lot of meat there. And I want to encourage the listener to go ahead and if you don't have a copy purchase it, if you have a copy, reread it because it's so important for us to be on top of what people are arguing. And we can see how the conversations we have on the street line up with what some academics are saying.

And it's really important for us to be prepared to respond to these claims that are made, you know, an assertion or an objection in how we can then present an alternative position or response to that. We can be ready to respond to that. So I think that's very important.

Okay, let's take a comment from one of your listeners, Chan. He asks here, he wants me to ask you about your current research on the Gospels and what are some of the issues that you are exploring as well as when you think your next book will be released. Well, Chan, my next book will likely be a popular version of my most recent book on gospel differences.

That book, the most recent one published by Oxford was an academic treatment. And you know, it's pretty cool. Like within, I don't know, two, three, four months of that book coming out, Oxford contacted me and asked if I'd write a popular level version of it because they said it was too academic for most people.

And it is kind of heavy reading. For some, it has been drier, a lot drier than say the reading in this big book on the resurrection. So when I was in Indonesia, I had told Oxford, no, I wasn't interested in doing that because I wanted to just move on.

It already moved on to my next research, which was on gospel reliability, the historical reliability of the Gospels. But then I went to Indonesia two years ago and they had me lecturing an average of six hours a day. I probably did that for 10 days in, I think, three different cities, Sumatra, Jakarta, and Makasar.

And just great time, the people, the believers over there, just wonderful. I just love Indonesian Christians. And they were just eating this stuff up.

But they came up with a number of different questions. How does this fit in with divine inspiration, biblical inerrancy, things like that? A lot of the same questions that American evangelicals have asked. And so when the Indonesians were saying this, and they said we'd like a popular level version of that, I thought, well, I probably should do that for the sake of the church, even though I wasn't really interested in writing it.

So I had hoped to do that last year, but I had a number of other projects and then a debate that came up for which I had to prepare. And that took me off, that just placed it off until writing it this year. And then I've had a couple more projects that have come up that have delayed it.

So I'm really hoping to get to that this year. And I'm hoping to finish the book writing the popular level version of my gospel differences book by, let's say, the summer of next year. And then maybe the spring of the following year 2022, it would come out.

And then after I finish that, I'll resume my research on the historical reliability of the gospels. And that's something for which I find very, very interesting and challenging. I've been coming at that from a fresh perspective.

It's like, you know, not the typical kind of book art. Let's look at the manuscript evidence. Let's look at what we can affirm through secular historians and archaeology and historical Jesus research, what we can affirm about Jesus to see is reliable.

Instead, I want to ask the question, when we consider the genre of ancient history and ancient biography, what exactly do we mean when we say, I ask, are the gospels historically reliable? Because they operated by some more flexible principles of reporting history back then, and we might be comfortable using today. And this is something that I haven't made up. This is something that classicists for decades and decades have been saying.

And even more recently, people like Richard Burridge and Craig Keener, Craig Evans and others have come up with. And I'm finding the same thing when I read people like Plutarch and Swetonius and this. So what does it, what we mean when we say historically reliable as applied to ancient literature and what criteria, you know, positing criteria, fluctuated between four and six criteria.

So I'm playing around with this and I wrote an article that was published a year ago. You can read that on my website about the reliability of the gospels. Just go to my website, risenjesus.com, hit blog, and then it's one of the more recent entries there.

So that's what I want to get back to and it will be based on research that have occurred over years to build, you know, to answer this question, are the gospels historically reliable in what sense, what does that mean? And to give an honest look at this. It sounds like some exciting work coming out of the pipeline there for you, Mike. And I look forward to seeing the progress develop and the new releases in the coming years.

Yeah, I'm excited. I'm excited about it too. So I'm looking forward to it.

That's fun doing this stuff. 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, 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, ebooks, videos, or even the podcast embedded on the website.

And it's just a wonderful resource for those that are wanting to learn more about these topics. This podcast has been a blessing to you. Would you consider becoming one of our

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