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S3E7 - The Postmodern Historian | Risen Jesus Podcast

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Postmodernism presents many ideas that clash with the practice of studying history. Dr Licona discusses how one with a postmodernist perspective might view historical fact and research. What are the shortcomings and benefits of this type of worldview?

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 of 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 Risen Jesus, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Jaros, your host. Mike, on today's episode, I want to cover a section in one of your chapters here on Postmodern Historians. Now, to me, that comes across as sort of an oxymoron of sorts, but maybe you could first tell us what does that term mean? Yeah, well, modernist would be, you know, we can use methods and so forth to get to the past.

It was a historian from years ago that talked about, you know, when we're looking at the

past, it's like Vias and Gate and Leak. Giverson, where we want to look at how it actually occurred. And so this is like realist history, it's called, that we want to know how things actually happened.

We want to have, you know, certainty that it happened this way. Postmodernist comes along and says, "No, we can't have that kind of certainty because there are so many different challenges to the past. We start off with, you know, events happened, but they happened within a certain grid." And that grid involves interpretation.

So, like 9/11 that happened here in the United States, we interpret it within a certain grid of being attacked by Islamic terrorists. Okay? And this is what happened in our country. But the nation of Israel would put it within a little different grid and they'd say, "Well, yes, that was a terrorist attack, Islamic terrorists on your nation, but Islamic terrorists have been initiating attacks all over the world.

It just finally came to your house." Muslim over in, let's say, a jihadist in Afghanistan or Pakistan might say that they've got a different narrative. They'd say, "These weren't terrorists that did it. These were holy men engaged in jihad in the cause of Islam, the true religion, and they gave their lives for a good cause." So, you have these different grids in which the narrative is told.

So, what actually happened? Because everybody's putting their own spin on it. That'd be one thing. Another thing is, how are we learning about the past? When we talk about Jesus, well, if we're looking at a Jewish leader in a day, say, Caiaphas, the High Priest, who turned him over to Pilate to have him crucified, he is going to look at the data and explain it differently than say one of Jesus' disciples did.

And so, we are learning about the past. Our only window into the past is through the eyes of specific people. And they're looking at things from different grids and different horizons.

And then you've got the problem of memory. That memory is not perfect. We all know that there are occasions where we don't recall the past accurately.

And that's not just with us. It's even with historians. They're also reliant on sources who have their own horizons and grids that they're reporting the facts from.

And they may not always be accurate. Then you put all that together, and then even our moderns, we are interpreting them. So, we're interpreting others, who are interpreting others, who are interpreting facts or data.

And so, you get down to the thing, and the postmoderns are saying, "See, we just can't even know the past. We can just bear facts about the past, but putting together a narrative. There's just too many things you can't know." And then when it comes to Jesus, "Sorry, we might be able to establish He claimed to be divine, but that doesn't

mean we can establish He is divine.

We can establish a lot of historians will say, "Well, we can establish that the disciples claimed and believed that Jesus rose from the dead, but we can't establish that Jesus actually rose from the dead." So, there's all these kinds of things that go into the postmodernist history, and so they say, "Well, anything that we reproduce here is nothing more than historical fiction than narrative. And we can never know whether that narrative is true. Some may be more true than others, but we don't know if any of it's true." Now, the radical postmodernists are the ones that would deny and say, "History is just a dead discipline." But they're the radical ones, and most historians haven't followed that way.

So, the postmodern historian is one who's just extremely skeptical about discovering facts from history or certain conclusions, but it does seem like they're not saying we can't know anything. So you did say that the postmodern, some would say we can even know that Jesus claimed to be divine. So maybe there's a spectrum even from within the postmodernist camp.

Yes, there is. Whereas a radical postmodernist, you can't know anything. You can't know what you had for breakfast.

Which, although some of us do have trouble recalling what we had for breakfast. Well, I mean, I can just tell you something. It's not really postmodern, but I lectured at Clemson a couple of years ago, and afterward some students came up to talk to me, and this one guy said, "But we just really can't know this stuff." And he was given all these things, and I was dialoguing with them probably three, four minutes.

And finally I said, "But if we go that far, like what you're going, it seems to me that you couldn't even be certain that we're having a conversation here right now." And he says, "Well, you're right. We can't." And I said, "So then why am I wasting my time?" And I turned to the next guy and said, "So what's your question?" And just left this guy in the dark. Because it's just, I forgot who the scholar is.

It might have been Ben Witherington. I know, it was Luke Timothy Johnson. He said, "It can get to the point of cognitive cannibalism." Ah, yeah.

Again, we can't prove that we weren't just creative five minutes ago, right? But... Yeah, we've pre-existing memories and all that. Right. It'd be ridiculous to think that we were.

Right. We are rationally justified in believing that we are as old. I think that's called proactively basic beliefs in philosophy, right? So, yeah, the postmodernist, there's a spectrum.

But overall, the majority of historians today have not gone with the postmodernist view. In fact, toward the end of the 20th century, you had a leading light in the postmodern

movement. He's in the US's name's Keith Jenkins.

And he was saying that the debates have occurred and pretty much historians go on practicing as though we can know the past. So he was kind of conceding defeat. That they had not won the day in order to convince historians to go the way of postmodernism.

Now, that doesn't mean that full realism, to say the V.S. and Gaitley Givescen, we can know how it actually occurred. That doesn't mean that that sort of radical realism is confirmed. Most historians, almost all, are of the opinion that... Tempere their expectations.

Exactly. Right. But that's the pursuit, right? The pursuit is trying as best we can to discover as much as we can of what actually happened.

Right. We'll never get there, but that is our pursuit. Yeah.

It's kind of funny because if the postmodernist movement in history had succeeded, it would almost do away with history itself as a discipline. That's correct. So that's probably why, at least some guys wanted to keep their jobs or something.

You know, it's kind of interesting that if postmodernism is true, then their books written by postmodernists become worthless. Yeah. You know, and they go even further, and here's why.

They go further, and it's like language itself. We don't... You know, we each have different definitions for words, and what one person means can be interpreted differently from... And listen, anybody who's married understands that. You're talking to your spouse, and you interpret what they're saying in a certain way, and we misunderstand them.

And we are misunderstood on occasion, too. We want to be understood, but we misinterpret maybe a facial expression they give, or what we perceive as a tone in their voice when they say it. And we misinterpret them.

Well, when people are writing, the author wants to be understood. Right. And there are... Even the postmodernist writer wants to be understood.

Yeah, it's exactly right. But at the post... The radical postmodernist is correct. That language.

And I've heard these objections from others, you know, that the language, we can't really communicate because... But we have general idea, and good enough to be able to understand what another person is saying for the most part. Yeah. All right, good.

So that's sort of one response to the postmodernist view that it's, in a sense, self-

defeating. What are some other ways we can reply and realize some of the shortcomings of that view? Well, I remember one. I think it was Thomas Haskell.

I'm not... It might have been someone else, but someone wrote and... I'm trying to go back to what I remember writing back in 2009, and it was 10 years ago. And they talk about a map, or, you know, so you get some two travelers there in France, and they get lost in the country, and they're trying to find their way to Paris. And they come across a farmer, a vineyard worker, and said, "Hey, we got this map here, but we don't know where we are on this map." Okay, so how do we get to Paris? And he looks at the map and he says, "This is all wrong.

This is all wrong." I mean, look at the countryside here. You just got... It's just pastel green here. It doesn't... I mean, look at the beautiful countryside that we have here with the vineyards and the aroma from the flowers and the sound of the birds, and that is not at all accurately represented on this map.

And then you come to... Look at Paris with all of its culture, and the great wine, and the great food, and the great people. And it's just represented by a black dot with a slim line around it. I mean, that's not Paris.

That's not at all what Paris looks like. So I can't help you at all. You know, so what... The lesson we learned from this is you don't have to be precise or exhaustive in what you're giving in order to communicate things, because we all know we can get places from maps.

All he had to do was point to basically where they were at, and they could get to Paris from the map's work. So you can't... You shouldn't judge a map by the criteria that we're going to use for judging other things, like history or biography. Then you're making a categorical mistake there.

But we want to be understood. We don't have to be exhaustive in our descriptions in order. What we are looking for in history is to find an essentially faithful representation or an accurate gist.

That's what we're looking for. That's our expectations. And then when we get it, we know we hold it provisionally.

We're holding it with an open hand saying it could be otherwise. That there may be some data, some artifacts or documents that pop up in the future that show us that the conclusions we have arrived at are mistaken. And then we're forced to revise our conclusions.

Good. Let me ask you this. Is there anything good that can come from Nazareth? Or rather, is there anything good about the postmodern historian category? Yes, certainly.

You know, we do, as I mentioned a moment ago, we do attempt to try to get back to the past to describe it as closely and as fully as possible. But the fact that historians are select in what they report, so what we are getting from the Gospels, of course, or any ancient biography or history is not everything. As you pointed out previously, John chapter 21 says, "If everything Jesus did was reported, you know, all the world could contain all the books." So there's many more things.

I mean, just think about your life. You're 31 years old. And if you were to write an exhaustive biography of everything you've said and did, it would take 31 years to read, right? You can't do that.

So if you were to write a biography of Kurt Jarrus for the first 31 years of his life, we would be very selecting the things that we report. So that's what every biographer does and we're not reporting every word, every detail of the conversation. So we can't expect everything that is being reported about Jesus to be exhaustive and some editing has taken place in order to give us a gist of what was going on.

The postmodernist remind us of this so that we don't, so that we realize that what we are reading, even in the Gospels, is not exactly how things actually happened, at least in many of the cases. It's certainly leaving out a lot of details and may not be exactly how the things happened. There may be editing in there in order to communicate more clearly certain points.

Conway Wong asks this. I recently heard the podcast on Christian apologetics and why some Christian scholars actually don't like to get involved in apologetics. I'd like to hear more on that.

Is it a, this is going to hurt my academic reputation thing? Yeah, that's a good question Conway. There could be a number of different reasons for that. There are some camps of scholars and they apologetics is just a bad word.

And you know, but you have people like Bart Erman who is a bona fide scholar and he does just the opposite which is being an iconoclast. So just as an apologist is trying to defend a certain position, an iconoclast is trying to tear it down. So, you know, it cuts both ways.

So they would say, well, there's an agenda behind it. To an extent, I think there, such concern is legitimate. When I come to the, it's funny with my book on Plutarch and the Gospels, Gospel Differences, I've been criticized from both sides.

So I have a skeptic that says I was trying to defend the Gospels and I have an evangelical saying I'm trying to tear the Gospels down. So the horizons are in, right? But they think that if I'm doing things that might bolster the Gospels, that I'm being an apologist, well, when I wrote the book, I can say that my motive is behind it was to

under, and doing the research, was to understand what we are reading the Gospels. And the book does not defend the reliability of the Gospels.

It doesn't tear down the reliability of the Gospels. It's not even a question that's being asked. It's, why are these differences in the Gospels? You know, we ask the wrong question.

It's like, instead of asking, we typically Christians will say, how do we reconcile these differences? How do we solve? How do we harmonize these differences? Where I think the better question is, why are these differences here to begin with? And so I wanted to understand the whole thing about how ancient history or biography was written. So that's what I was doing with the book. Now in the end, I do say that, you know, for one thing that has, well, two things that has revealed to the Christian, the conservative Christian, we have to be careful that we're not reading our own desires for how we want the Gospels to be written with modern precision, how biographies are written in the 21st century.

We need to be careful not to read that into how they were written in the 1st century. We can misread them in that way. But, and that can make Christians feel uncomfortable.

For the skeptic to say that the Gospels are hopelessly contradictory, I think we've laid that to rest, that they are not. If you look at them and take into consideration the compositional devices. So I wasn't trying to be an apologist there.

When I was going through my study on a resurrection, I wasn't trying to be an apologist. I was really trying to get the truth and the bottom line. Because I'm trying to find truth, an apologist on the other hand is trying to take conclusions and use it for a purpose of defending.

Now for me, if my conclusions can work for apologetics, then I want to use it because I believe Christianity is true and I want to defend the faith. But when I'm doing my research, I'm not doing it for apologetics. You could come at your research without being a Christian and then you'll be led to a conclusion there versus having the conclusion in mind for defending in public.

It's a matter of really trying to manage your horizon, your bias, and to take your desired outcome and do your best to lay it aside while your investigation proceeds. So you can do that investigation with integrity. And I can tell you this is not easy.

But if you're a researcher, which I consider myself a researcher and I'm dealing with these questions, then I want to deal with them as a new testament, a serious student in the New Testament without apologetics in mind. If I can use the conclusions for apologetics, fantastic. If I can't, then I can't.

Does that make sense? And a biologist is doing it though with the objective. Nothing

wrong with that, but that's not what a researcher does. And you said being a researcher can be a difficult task, but with the method in place, it makes it easier to make light of ones, horizons, and assumptions, and conclusions and all that.

Great. Thank you, Mike. If you want to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Michael O'Connor, you can go to his website, RisenJesus.com, where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels.

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