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S6E1 - Intro to Historical Bedrock

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Welcome to beginning of season six of the Risen Jesus Podcast! We'll be spending the season unpacking the chapter from Dr Licona's book on Historical Bedrock. Join us for this introduction to the topic.

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Transcript

[MUSIC] Hello, and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Michael Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he's the President of Risen Jesus of 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host.

Well, we've made it to season six of the podcast here. In the first season, we were introduced to the star of our program, and in season two, we looked at the synoptic problem, which is a common problem in New Testament literature and studies for scholars and laypersons interested in these questions about the New Testament. In our third season, we began to ask the question about the philosophy of history, what is history, and how can we know these things from the past? And in the following season, we looked at the historian and miracles, and then last season, we looked into historical sources pertaining to the life of Jesus.

Now we are going to spend this season working through the largest chapter of this ginormous mammoth book, and we'll be looking at the case of the historical bedrock for the fate of Jesus. And it's going to be an intriguing season for sure. There's a lot of meaty material to go through for those that have read from the book, The Resurrection of Jesus, a new historiographical approach.

And I'm very much looking forward to this season. A lot of good episodes coming up, including today. And so now, lest I continue talking, you're not here to listen to me, but to the star of the program, the Batman to my Robin, as I've sometimes told people.

Dr. Mike Lacona himself, Mike, it's great to see you. Well, thanks, Kurt. Good to be back on the podcast again.

Yes, it's been several months now, and we were realizing, I think it was probably two months ago, we realized, hey, we need to get together again. And finally, your schedule opened up. And so here we are, and I'm very excited.

We're back at it and having a lot of fun talking about this material. So the first question I wanted to ask you as we're working through this next chapter in your book, Thematically, is the concept of historical bedrock. What is historical bedrock? And why is that important when looking at the case for the Resurrection of Jesus? Well, historical bedrock is somewhat of a similar term for what Gary Habermas calls the minimal facts.

The minimal facts started off with Gary, his minimal facts approach was first proposed in his doctoral dissertation back in the 70s. And he said, you know, here are some facts that are granted by the majority of scholars, and they are strongly evidenced. Now, some people have misunderstood Gary on this about the minimal facts, thinking that we should accept these facts because the majority of scholars grant them.

And that's never what Gary said. It's just a matter of here are 12 facts for which the supporting data is so strong that a majority of scholars, including skeptical ones, grant them as facts. So the importance of that, of course, is if you have a skeptic, a non-believer who grants those facts, you know, they may have biases, but they're not the same bias as a Christian would have, right? So it's kind of like, look, if both Republicans and Democrats were in agreement that let's say that the COVID virus came from the Wuhan lab in China, well, then, you know, we could have a pretty good degree of confidence.

That's the case because both of them, they don't get along with one another, the Republicans and Democrats. They don't agree on hardly anything. If they agree on this, well, then it's probably true.

So if you're looking at both skeptic and believer alike who are willing to grant certain things based on the data because the data is strong, they think the data is strong, well, that gives you some more confidence that probably is correct. But it doesn't mean it's correct because a majority of scholars take them. When we talk about historical bedrock, it's pretty much the same thing.

You're saying that the supporting data is very strong for certain facts. And it serves as bedrock for our foundation upon which hypotheses may be built. So if I'm going to say what happened to Jesus, you first have to look at the historical bedrock.

What is something? What are some of the facts upon which most scholars, the large majority of scholars, a heterogeneous majority of scholars, that is, whether you're looking at evangelical, conservative Christians, moderate Christians, liberal Christians, agnostics, atheist, Jewish scholars who are historians of Jesus, if they're all agreeing on these things and they're citing supporting data, well, that would be historical bedrock upon which you would build a hypothesis. So you could say, all right, well, I grant that the disciples had experiences. They believe were appearances of the risen Jesus and you could, but, and you would build your hypothesis on that.

You could say, but they're hallucinations. You're still granting that Jesus died and that the disciples had some sort of experiences. If you're going to say Jesus rose from the dead, you still would use Jesus death by crucifixion and that shortly after his disciples had experiences, they believe were appearances of the risen Jesus.

You're building your hypotheses upon these, this bedrock, the historical bedrock, facts that are virtually passed down. We can have a strong degree of confidence in them. So that's what historical bedrock is.

So in certainly in one sense, it's a practical way of evaluating the hypotheses that historians have for what happened to Jesus. I mean, if we had other facts that we have good reason to believe but didn't quite seem relevant to that hypothesis, well, that doesn't really help us in this case in appealing to people who may have a different methodology. Is that fair? Yeah, that's fair.

And of course, I would add that this isn't something that we would apply merely to Jesus or his resurrection. This is something that historians can apply to virtually anything. You've got to look at a collection of facts that are so strongly supported by the data that virtually everyone agrees on them.

And you do that just to put your own bias in check, of course, it's a good thing to do. Of course, you can acknowledge more facts than that and some things like there are some scholars who reject the empty tomb and some who grant it. So you can still build a, you can still add those to your collection of facts that you're going to use for your hypothesis.

But I would say that if your hypothesis cannot account for some of the historical bedrock, that would seem to suggest that your hypothesis is weak and it either needs to go back to the drawing board or be discarded. So you would say that we could come to understand the gospels as historically reliable through a number of methods and analyzing a number of situations, pericopies in the text. We could think that, hey, Luke's generally reliable, but in terms of making a case for bedrock, that's sort of a distinct method with its own specific purpose, right? Like Habermas wanted to say, hey, what if these skeptical scholars don't grant these things? Can I still make a case? Is that a fair way of describing sort of the approach here to studying the gospels? Yeah, I would say so, the latter part of what you said it is different from establishing, let's say, the general reliability of the gospels.

Now we're just looking at individual things. And this is something that classicists do. So my friend John Ramsey, who is a retired classics professor at University of Illinois in Chicago, he said to me that pretty much classicists don't talk about the general reliability of an account.

So for example, they wouldn't say that Suetonius' lives of the 12 Caesars are historically reliable. They wouldn't say Tacitus' Analns of Rome is historically reliable. What they

would do is go to individual stories within Tacitus' Analns of Rome, or Suetonius' lives of the 12 Caesars, or whatever you're looking at, Salist's War with Catalyne or his Histories.

And you assess each individual story. And so that's kind of what we're talking about with historical bedrock here in a sense. But you're getting even more specific because you're saying this particular claim, the claim that let's say Jesus died by crucifixion.

What's the data for it that supports it? Do we have good evidence that Jesus actually died by crucifixion? Well, virtually every historian would say yes. So we'd look at the evidence for it. There's all this different evidence for it and say, yeah, that's some pretty good evidence there.

Oh, by the way, I seen on the cake virtually every scholar, qualified scholar in the relevant field who studies the subject even grants this as a fact that Jesus died by crucifixion. And so that would qualify as historical bedrock. One of those facts that you're going to use to build a foundation of a hypothesis.

So yeah, I keep emphasizing this point because I think there are some that may be confused on the intent of the minimal facts argument and the approach here with looking at the historical bedrock. And it's certainly not the case that you think these are the only things that can be known as historical facts in the gospels, the things we'll be getting into. But rather you think that the level of certainty is so high here, right? You may think that there are other facts in the gospels which the certainty is a little lower even, perhaps a little lower than that.

There's a spectrum, you might say. And you yourself have gone on the record where you've admitted that you can maybe have some hesitation over a certain passage and the intent of the author there. And so you really wrestle with these things.

And I think that's one of the things that I admire you for and others do as well. You're really authentic in your search for truth. But what you have come to with your research is you've found these other facts of history and then there are these top level, tier historical facts that you call bedrock.

Now is that term common in other historical, in writings by historians? Do they also use that term bedrock or is that something that you or Gary have coined? Actually, I heard that term on a video by a New Testament scholar named Paula Fredrickson who is not a believer. She's not a Christian. But she used it and referenced it to the disciples' experiences that they had experiences they believed were appearances of the risen Jesus.

She says these belong to historical bedrock facts that are known beyond doubt. So I thought, wow, that really makes sense. I like that term.

Now minimal facts has a different, at least the way Gary started off with it, it has a and is

commonly used by a Christian apologist today. Has a little different role to it. So the minimal facts is like, okay, well, I can prove the resurrection of Jesus just using a very small collection of facts.

I don't even need a whole lot. Let's just take these that are granted by the majority of scholars. So you can use that as, let's say minimal facts as apologetics.

But what I was doing here with this, my research historical inquiry into the resurrection was trying to conduct a historical investigation with integrity, acting in the role of a historian, not as an apologist. So I'm trying to think through my method very carefully, what is the best kind of method to use here, or at least something with which I can identify and think is a reasonable way of approaching history. And the historical bedrock upon which you build a foundation just seemed to make a whole lot of sense to me.

So I like to Paul of Fredericksen's term. I don't recall in my research, anyone else using it. But you will find a lot of historians as well as New Testament historians.

So general historians, those who are studying issues outside of religious issues, you will find general historians and New Testament historians alike who they may not use the term historical bedrock. You don't find them using the term minimal facts. But you'll find them pretty much using the same kind of principle.

So I remember John Meyer, the New Testament historian John Meyer, I think it was volume one of his series, "A Marginal Jew" on the historical Jesus. And he talked about, let's suppose you put a Jew, an agnostic, and a Christian together in a room. It almost sounds like the beginning of a joke, right? You put a Jew, an agnostic, and a Christian in a room, all of them trained historians.

And you get them to agree on, talk about the data and agree on a collection of facts that they all can grant because the data is so strong. And he says, whatever those facts are, that is what we would call the historical Jesus. It's that Jesus you can prove with a great amount of confidence.

So that's kind of the same thing we're talking about here when it was historical bedrock. People just call them different things. I like the term historical bedrock again for the reason you build a hypothesis upon it.

Okay, so you've got your bedrock, but then you might have other layers of facts and common facts. And so there's, again, not, we don't want to push people away from pursuing other passages in the gospels that they might think are historically true and can be useful for an overall case, a larger case for the reliability of the gospels. So there are different tactics in apologetics and this is one of them.

And Gary, as you said, he started out with, I think it was 12 facts that he said, this is great stuff. And in your book here, you say sort of quoting him, what if my list were

challenged by some skeptical persons or perhaps we are simply interested in discovering a reduced historical case that could still bear the weight of an investigation of Jesus' resurrection. What would such a case look like? So he gets it down to six and then I think maybe sometimes he even says, well, even at four or three, you can really, really get people to basically realize, hey, the resurrection is the best explanation.

And we'll certainly be getting into that next season when Wayne hypothesis. So I don't want to jump the gun there. So I remember when Gary would say, you know, go ahead and pick any three or four out of these 12.

Any three or four, we can do it on any three or four of these. But his minimal facts argument has morphed over time. And now it's kind of like, look, minimal facts, it probably resembles more like what I would talk about with historical bedrock now.

Gary would say, here's three, four facts that are granted by virtually all because the supporting data is strong. So I don't think Gary and I are too far off. We're pretty much aligned on that kind of method.

Yeah. So and you're right. There are other things that we can look at.

So since writing the book, sometimes when I'm lecturing and even in debates, I'll add that the earliest claims were they believe that Jesus had been raised physically, bodily from the dead. Well, this isn't something that is granted by a consensus of scholars today, a large number, perhaps even a majority. In fact, according to Gary Habermas, the majority today, I think he would say three quarters, perhaps.

Maybe that's a little high. I don't know. I forgot what he'd be saying now.

But more than half would say that they believe Jesus had been raised physically, bodily from the dead. That's what they were proclaiming. Some, a lot of skeptical scholars won't agree that that's what they were saying.

But I think the data in support of the disciples claiming that he had been raised physically bodily from the dead is very strong. So I'll throw that in there and make that part of my case for the resurrection of Jesus, just because I don't, even though it's not part of historical bedrock, I think the evidence for it is really strong and I'll throw it in there. So it just depends how I want to argue for the resurrection that particular day.

So as we look forward to the coming weeks and coming episodes here, what's a preview of some of the data in looking for that case for historical bedrock? So what are some issues that we'll be looking at? Well, I looked at a lot of the literature between 1985 and, let's say, 2008. That was pretty much my survey of the literature, a lot of it. But Gary Habermas has done a whole lot more, 1975 to around the present.

So I don't know how many sources I looked at it. It was hundreds, hundreds and

hundreds. I think his bibliography is now over 5,300 academic sources since 1975.

Some of the facts that I'd be looking at would be things, and he would grant them as well, be things like Jesus' death by crucifixion. That's granted by virtually 100%. I mean, you'll find a few scholars who will either deny Jesus died by crucifixion or call it into question.

It's about as rare as Hensteeth to find a historian, historian of Jesus who would grant that. So Jesus' death by crucifixion. Second, subsequent to Jesus' death, a number of his disciples had experiences.

They were persuaded were the risen Jesus who appeared to them. And then third, you had a skeptic of the church named Paul, Saul of Tarsus, who later became Paul, a skeptic who was persecuted in the church, who became a Christian when he had an experience. He was persuaded was the risen Jesus appearing to him.

Now those three facts that I gave you right there are granted by virtually 100% of critical scholars in the relevant fields who studied this subject. So that's pretty strong. And then you have some that are just not quite there, strong evidence for it, but you don't have quite nearly 100% granting them.

And that would be things like the group appearances that the, or some of these experiences, occurred within group settings. I think Gary told me somewhere between 75 and 85% of critical scholars grant that. And then saying that Jesus had risen physically bodily from the dead, being in the original proclamation about his resurrection.

That's up there as well, but it's nowhere near, nearly 100%. So, and there's other things we can discuss as well, but that's just a few of the facts we can regard as historical bedrock. I'm very much looking forward to it, to looking at the subjects that you listed there and more.

Like you said, there's even more material that's coming up. I'm looking forward to some great conversations. Mike, thanks so much for clearing up the questions over what historical bedrock is and talking more about the minimal facts.

It's great to clear up and level the field a little bit to see where the truth is with the intent of the minimal facts and to maybe bring some peace for some people who may be concerned that it's trying to do too much when it's got a specific intent. So I appreciate you clearing that up and always it's great to see you and to chat with you and I look forward to the coming episodes. Thanks Kurt, this would be fun.

If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, visit RisenJesus.com where you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. Be sure to subscribe to this

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