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## S4E3 - C. B. McCullagh vs. Mike Licona on Miracles

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

C. B. McCullagh is a big name in historical method. What did he think about miracle claims? Listen in as Dr. Licona explains.

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 Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Michael Laconan. Dr. Laconan is Associate Professor of 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 501c3 non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt Jears, your host. On this episode we'll be exploring the historical views of CB McCullough and it's part of our series or theme this season, the fourth season of the Risen Jesus podcast, where we're looking at the historian and miracles and in our first episode we sort of gave an introduction to the contested concept and essentially contested concept of a miracle and how it should be defined and how we can even identify a miracle, that distinction. And we spent last week's episode looking at the thought of David Hume, who was a philosopher and historian who contested or objected to the claim that we could take for credibility the testimony or the witness claims that people make about miracles.

And in today's episode we're going to be looking at CB McCullough. Now Mike, for people who have been following apologetics for a number of years, they may have seen debates with William Lane Craig and he has frequently mentioned McCullough as an authority figure on historical methods. And the work that Craig has drawn from and that you use is called justifying historical descriptions.

And here, McCullough says this, he says, well, he gives a list of criteria and he even uses that as an example, the resurrection of Jesus. And here's what he has to say on that. One example, which illustrates the conditions most vividly is discussion of the Christian hypothesis that Jesus rose from the dead.

This hypothesis is of greater explanatory scope and power than other hypotheses, which try to account for the relevant evidence. But it is less plausible and more ad hoc than they are. That is why it is difficult to decide on the evidence, whether it should be accepted or rejected.

Now before going further and addressing McCullough's conclusion here, we need to first understand what he's saying when he uses some of these terms. Let's take these first two, explanatory scope and explanatory power. What does he mean by those terms? Well, explanatory scope.

Imagine, okay, imagine a jigsaw puzzle and you've got all these pieces and you're trying to form the picture, the proper picture of this jigsaw puzzle. Well, the more pieces that you can include in that picture would be like, you've got scope there, the least amount, fewer pieces, you have less scope involved. So when you have a hypothesis, a description of the past, let's say that each piece of the jigsaw puzzle represents a fact.

You want to be able to include as many of those as possible. So let's say there are 10 facts that are known about a certain thing. The hypothesis that can include eight, nine or 10 of them as greater explanatory scope than the hypothesis that can only account for five of them.

All right, explanatory power can be looked at in a couple of different ways. One way is just as in a jigsaw puzzle, you don't want a to, we've all tried one and put it together and

we take a piece and it's like, well, it can fit there, but not really and kind of push it and make it fit, you're forcing it to fit. Well, in the same way, sometimes historians can take facts and try to make them fit their hypothesis.

It doesn't fit naturally, you really have to push it to make it fit. So in that sense, you could say it lacks explanatory power. Another way of putting it would be to say, and this would be kind of along the lines of the way McCulloch puts it, given the truth of a hypothesis, we expect certain things.

And to the extent that we get those things, that hypothesis would have explanatory power. So for example, let's say Kurt that you have a brother that has been imprisoned overseas in China for the last 15 years, he's an older brother, and he's had no contact with the outside world during that time. And he's going to come home, and he's been released, you're going to meet him at the airport.

And when he gets off the plane, you as a Chicago land person, you say, you're not going to believe his brother. But in 2016, the Chicago Cubs won the World Series. Amen.

Amen. And he says, no way. And he said, no, I can prove it.

Well, given the truth of that hypothesis, what would you expect? You would expect a celebration of ticker tape parade, right? You would expect for there to be a World Series trophy. You would expect for there to be, as you go to a Cubs game near Wrigley Field, you've taken me to one. And it's fun.

But you got these stores along the way and they've got jerseys and caps and T-shirts for sale. You would expect that there would be some T-shirts or sweatshirts or something that would say, Chicago Cubs 2016 World Series champs. So that would be what we would expect if the Cubs had won the World Series to the extent that we get what we expect, then that hypothesis may be said to have explanatory power.

Now, just let me throw something in. One other thing that's not related to this, but related to Bihan Makala. He's an amazing historian.

This guy is a philosopher of history who recently retired. He's an Australian and he's my favorite philosopher of history. He is the one who really sets out very clearly some criteria and methodology for obtaining knowledge about the past.

He does this more than any other historian I've ever read or philosopher of history. And he writes very clearly. I mean, I don't agree with him on everything like what we're going to talk about.

He doesn't think historians can investigate miracle claims, but this guy is just brilliant. He's my favorite, like I said. And he's become a friend in recent years.

We've conversed through email several times. He endorsed my book on the resurrection when it was reviewed in the Southeastern Theological Review, which the entire, it's the spring or summer issue of 2012 or 2013, 14, something like that. If you go to my website, risenjesus.com, you can see the whole issue.

And he provides a critical review of my book there. And then I respond to it. But he's a great guy.

I just love the Hanukkahla. Okay. So that describes explanatory scope and power.

So scope is that how many pieces of the puzzle fit power is how well the pieces can you include? Yes. Right. And the power is how well the pieces fit in the puzzle.

Like I said, sometimes you find a piece and it looks like it, but it doesn't quite fit. So that's power. He has two other terms here.

Less plausible, so plausibility and ad hoc. Could you describe what those mean and how they apply here? Yeah, let's go with less ad hoc first. Ad hoc is a Latin term meaning for this.

So you've heard of ad hoc committees. An ad hoc committee is formed for this for a specific task. If that task wasn't there, then the committee would not be needed.

So an ad hoc element in something would be, it's thrown in there to explain something you wouldn't typically think would be, you know, there otherwise. Another way to put it is it's non-evidence assumptions or it's improvisation. So when you have to improvise, when they're non-evidence assumptions, guessing on some things, that's ad hoc.

So for example, back in, I think it was 2009, I tell this story in my second debate with Richard Carrier, which was at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. And just in the previous year or a few months before that, my wife and I had just finished eating dinner, my family had them. And we had just sat in a room that we had and we're reading.

And ambulance came in our neighborhood and just raced by and then you had all kinds of police cars and stuff like this. And so we go down, walk down, so what's happening? It's at the very end of our block and they have this guy, the neighbor there, and they're putting him in the police car and driving away. And we're thinking, what happened? You know, is this domestic dispute? What's happening here? And we have all these kinds of guesses, you know, we're trying to fit things together, but it's ad hoc and taking guesses to formulate hypotheses.

You know, we could say, well, it's a bad economy back then, really bad. We were having 3,500 houses, I believe every month in the Atlanta area being foreclosed. So the economy was just tanking.

And so it was like, well, you know, maybe they were having their house foreclosed on. It had been up for sale for like 6 months and it still wasn't sold. And maybe the guy had lost his job.

That's ad hoc. Right. It's a non-evidence assumption.

It's just improvisation. It's a guess. So every hypothesis is going to have a bit of an ad hoc element to it.

The hypothesis that is least ad hoc wins in that category. So from this category alone, not considering the other ones, someone might say, well, the God hypothesis is ad hoc. You're bringing this in.

But you might say on some other theories, say mass hallucination, that the disciples all had a common experience of a hallucination is some might say even more ad hoc because we don't have any evidence that there's some corresponding group experience of everyone else is also seeing the pink elephant over in the room. We don't have anything like that. So you might for this category alone evaluate the imported theories.

That's correct. You want to look at them and the one that is least ad hoc is, you know, and I think we could argue that the resurrection hypothesis is not ad hoc. We'll get into that, you know, as we get into other seasons.

But yeah, you get the idea. It's going to be measuring the ad hocness element in a hypothesis. But yeah, so I know we went over this a little bit in, was it the previous season, but yeah, this is good review.

But that's the least ad hoc criterion. And I think this is a better criterion in historical investigation than say Occam's razor. And the reason being is Occam's razor not really meant for historical investigation.

You know, you're looking for simplicity there. And a lot of times in history, you've got multiple causes. History can be very complex.

It's like sometimes you got a perfect storm kind of situation. And in that sense, the Occam's razor isn't going to be, it could lead you to some false conclusions. Whereas the less ad hoc criterion, I think can be more helpful.

Yeah, right. Yeah, it could be more accurate. Yeah.

Okay, last term here from this passage, plausibility. What does that mean? Plausibility is the degree to which a hypothesis is compatible with our background knowledge. So I know that a three year old is not capable of bench pressing 200 pounds, right? So the hypothesis that a certain three year old benched 200 pounds would be implausible.

So, you know, we can look at a scale of plausibility. And so, okay, a three year old bench

pressing 200 pounds would be implausible, a five year old implausible, you know, a 10 year old implausible, but not as implausible as a three year old, a 15 year old, it's plausible, you know, based on who the person is. Right.

Okay. So the, there are degrees, factors of degrees here that influence this category. Okay.

That's right. You know, I got a friend named Mike DeVito. He played in the NFL for nine years.

I mean, the guy's a beast man still today's. And if the hypothesis was that he bench pressed 200 pounds, he'd probably do it with one arm. No.

It's like, yeah, that's, that's extremely plausible. So there is a spectrum there, you know, yeah. Okay.

So, McCulloch makes the claim here that the resurrection hypothesis, or maybe miracle claims are more ad hoc and less plausible. So let's address where you think McCulloch goes wrong here. Well, you know, let's just say for a moment, but let's take the plausibility criterion.

Okay. Here's where I think he goes, he goes wrong. We talked about a spectrum, you know, of plausibility, extremely implausible to extremely plausible.

And you can have this increasing degree of plausibility or a lessening of implausibility along the way. And then you get in the middle and it's neither plausible nor implausible. Okay.

He, McCulloch would say that the resurrection hypothesis is implausible or implausible to some. So if you're an atheist, you're going to say it's implausible. And it would be if God does not exist, the resurrection hypothesis is very implausible, you know.

So it's going to, but if you believe that God exists and intervenes in the world, or that's even a possibility to the degree you think that that's the case, well, then you could regard the resurrection hypothesis as plausible. Now McCulloch, in the end, he basically says that the resurrection hypothesis has a fantastic explanatory scope and explanatory power. But he says that it is ad hoc because you have to assume God's existence.

And then he says it's not implausible, but it's not plausible either. Okay, so there's two things he says here that that's his objections. Number one, he says it's ad hoc because you have to appeal to God.

And number two, he says it's neither plausible nor implausible. So you can have, at least in theory, a hypothesis that is greater in its plausibility than the resurrection hypothesis. And here's, let's do the plausibility first this time.

Because you've got world views, I try when I do my historical investigation, I try to bracket my worldview while my investigation proceeds. I tried to do that during my doctoral studies, which resulted in this large book. Okay, so extremely large book.

Yeah, so I'm neither, I'm neither presupposing God's existence nor a priori excluding it. So in that sense, if we kind of bracket that, then we would say that the resurrection hypothesis, the plausibility is inscrutable. That means it's unanswerable.

Okay, so if it's unanswerable, you wouldn't put it at a zero on the plausibility scale, neither plausible nor implausible. It's not at zero, it's not even on a scale if you say it's inscrutable. And so that's where I think it goes wrong, where McCaller goes wrong here, because if we're saying it's inscrutable, then you wouldn't say that something is more plausible than resurrection.

You could say it has some plausibility, and that'd be fine. But if it's inscrutable, that doesn't count for or against it. So that would be one thing I'd point out.

By the way, and I took that position in my book at the time, that it's just inscrutable. But after that, I gave it some more thought. And I do think that we can build some plausibility into the resurrection.

And that would be to say, okay, you could present arguments for God's existence, like scientific evidence for an intelligent designer of the universe and life itself. You could talk about objective moral values. You could talk about the complexity of life, even on a molecular level, things like that.

You could also appeal to certain things that would seem to suggest, strongly suggest, a spiritual dimension of reality that would be things like miracles. It'd be extreme answered prayer, paranormal phenomena, well-evonenced near-death experiences, viridical apparitions. These strongly suggest a spiritual dimension of reality and give plausibility to the resurrection.

You could also throw in some things like known things about Jesus, is that he performed deeds that astonished crowds, and that both he and his followers regarded as divine miracles and exorcisms. And I mean, even skeptical scholars, almost all of them will acknowledge this. They won't say that they were divine miracles and exorcisms, but they will acknowledge historians of Jesus who are atheist and agnostics, that he did indeed perform deeds that astonished crowds and that were regarded as divine miracles and exorcisms by many in that day.

In fact, a lot of his skeptics called them demonic, right? Even external sources refer to him as doing sorts of magic of songs of deeds. Yeah, like Josephus says that. He was doing, yeah, "paradaxan" or something.

I think that's the Greek word that Josephus uses, like marvelous deeds, just things that

bewildered people. The same word that he uses for the miracles performed by, I think it was Elijah or Elisha in the Old Testament that Jesus was performing. These kinds of deeds, Josephus says this.

So, yeah, so I think we can build some plausibility into it, but for the sake of just trying to be as unbiased and as neutral as possible, we could just say it's inscrutable. So, you wouldn't say that another hypothesis has greater plausibility if we're going to say it's inscrutable for the resurrection hypothesis. So, I think that's one problem.

The ad hoc, McCulloch says ultimately because it's ad hoc, you can't adjudicate on the resurrection, even though he admits that there's really good historical evidence for it and he says because it presupposes God, you have to bring God into it. But he says you're making that assumption. I would answer that a couple ways.

Number one, historians always make assumptions in their hypotheses. For example, they assume that the external world is real. They assume that our senses will allow us to have an accurate perception of that external world.

They assume that logic assists us in discovering knowledge. They assume that the past is at least somewhat knowable. These are all assumptions that the historians make along the way.

And in fact, that last one, for example, that the past is knowable to a pretty good extent. Postmodernist historians wouldn't accept that assumption. And yet, realist historians, which most are, realist historians still feel that they can proceed despite the fact that there are a significant number, a significant percentage of postmodernist historians who would not allow that assumption.

So that be one thing. But let me just throw in one more, just one more here. And that is that in my approach to the resurrection, I'm very happy just to say, well, I'm not going to presuppose that God exists.

Let's just, I'm not even going to say God raised Jesus. Let's just look and see if Jesus was raised. See if the evidence points to that.

And just leave the cause undetermined. You could point, say, well, it must have been a supernatural cause of some kind, or something that we just can't identify at this point. But you have to look at the evidence.

And what you're doing there then is you're saying, let's look at the evidence to lead to that conclusion, not use it as a factor in the formula to say God did it. Right, right. And of course, if we're looking for support for the allegedly ad hoc claim that God worked a miracle or God did it, you could look at all sorts of other evidence and other reasons for thinking God exists.



So it's part of this cumulative case being made. Okay, let's take a question from one of your listeners here. And this one is sort of related to what we've been talking about when we get into these heady terms and criteria.

Sometimes, maybe this is just too high up for folks. This question comes from Tony. And this has to deal with these heavy subjects.

What role does academic endeavor have in apologetics? Well, let's see, when you say academic endeavor, I'm guessing this kind of stuff that we're talking about. Yeah. Okay.

All right, so, you know, I started off as a Christian apologist, okay, I still consider myself a Christian apologist when I can use the information. So if I'm out there and I think the information is there, the data is there that we can defend Jesus' resurrection. So as a Christian, I want to be out there defending the gospel, defending the resurrection of Jesus, and we've got the goods for doing it.

However, I didn't most of my research in this, you know, on this academic level on the resurrection was not meant to be used in apologetics. At least that wasn't the objective. Now it started off that way, to be honest with you.

I started off in my doctoral research because I wanted to prove the resurrection of Jesus from a fresh perspective. Okay. But about a year into it, and it took me five and a half, six years, a year and about a year into it, as I'm reading the philosophers of history and historians, they're saying there is no such thing as a completely neutral objective historian.

We all have our biases. Every one of us do does. So when I realized that, I said, you know what, I do have my own objective.

I do have my own biases, and I recognized that it had the potential to compromise the integrity of my investigation and being the way I'm wired as a doubter. I really wanted to do as an open-minded, as objective as an investigation as I was capable. Was I 100% objective and neutral? No, nobody can be.

I think there were periods when I was, but I found if I didn't make a conscious effort to stay there, I'd go back to my own, you know, biases. I wouldn't even realize it, you know, at the time. So I had to work hard at minimizing my bias.

And so anyway, that's what I did about a year into it and through the end. And so, you have to do that if you're going to do a historical investigation with integrity. When I did my recent book, *Why Are There Differences on the Gospels*, that was eight years of research and writing.

And I really wanted to find, you know, about why there are these differences in the Gospels and whether compositional devices could account for those. When I was doing

my research, I was not doing it with trying to establish the historical reliability of the Gospels in mind. That was not my objective.

It's like, all right, well, let's just see what the evidence comes to, what it does show. So that's what I was after. That's the academic work.

Now, sometimes you can use the results and apologetics. Sometimes you can't. I had one guy contact me on Facebook and he says, why are you doing this thing with the Gospel differences? Muslims are responding to this and using your work against us.

And I said, well, then don't use bad arguments that they can use. You know, look, the Gospels are what they are. Divinely inspired scripture looks like what we have.

And what we have to do is determine what we have and the way you do that is through careful, close and careful observations. So that's the difference between apologetics and academic work. The bottom line is the academic work, you do it to find truth, you do it to find what's really there.

What are the Gospels really like? And if I can use it for apologetics, great. If I can't, well, then you just can't. That's what I think the difference is.

Yeah. So, and sometimes, you know, addressing- And there's nothing wrong with both, you know, they're just two different things. Right.

And sometimes the academic work has a direct impact on the apologetic enterprise. You had mentioned that there was a person who read this, who wasn't atheist, read this book and became a follower of Jesus. I mean, you've had that a number of times, not just one person, but there are many people where that's happened with this work.

So there's been a direct causal relationship between the academic project and the kingdom work that's being done. So Tony, very good question. Sometimes they might feel like for people were up here in the sky.

But no, there are real life practical reasons for why this academic work is important. It does hit the guy on the street. It does impact influence their life and their eternal salvation.

So very good question, Tony. Well, if you want to learn more about the work of work in ministry of Dr. Michael Kona, you can go to our website, [rizngesus.com](http://rizngesus.com). It's there. You can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels.

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