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## S5E7 - Apostolic Fathers

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Several early church fathers wrote on the Resurrection of Christ. What can we learn from these apostolic fathers? Are their writings reliable?

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## Transcript

Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Mike LeCona. Dr. LeCona is Associate Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University and he's a frequent speaker on university campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs. Mike is the president of Risen Jesus, a non-profit

organization.

My name is Kurt Cherus, your host. On today's program we're talking about the Apostolic Fathers and the evidence that they have for the fate of Jesus, specifically the death and resurrection of Jesus. But before we begin our conversation with Dr. LeCona, be sure to subscribe to the channel and follow us on the Apple Podcast app or Google Play Store.

However, you may be listening to this program. That way you can get notifications about when new episodes are coming out. Well Mike, on today's program we're going to be talking about the Apostolic Fathers and this is an area that I've enjoyed looking at for different reasons.

I've read the Apostolic Fathers looking for material on some theological beliefs they had. But you were looking at some of them for different reasons. What were those reasons specifically? Well I wanted to see what we could learn historically if there was anything that would go back to Jesus' disciples, his apostles.

Now first of all, let's just say the name Apostolic Fathers can be somewhat confusing. We would think that would be referring to the apostles themselves but it's not. It's referring to those who came after the apostles, the leaders of the church who came after the apostles.

So they call them the Apostolic Fathers and some of them are believed to have had direct ties to the apostles. So what they say about Jesus can, look, if Mark is getting his information from Peter, then we should find it interesting if we got some valuable, if we have an apostolic father that got their information from one of the apostles or at least knew one of the apostles and was affiliated with them and heard them speak. So that's what makes them interesting to me.

Yeah, yeah that's great. You're right. I mean if Peter, tradition says Peter was at Rome, I know some Protestants disagree with that, but if Peter had been at Rome then there was some leader at the church of Rome that took over after Peter and who was that and you know, there must have been some connection there historically and we can begin to look for the trails that go out throughout time.

And so yeah, so you looked at a number of these Christian leaders and there's some debate over authenticity of the documents and we'll get into that and you'll talk about that with some of the early Christian writings. First why don't we talk about Clement of Rome and what he may or may not provide for your project? Sure. Well, Clement is, there are two letters that have been attributed to him.

First Clement and second Clement. It's scholars say that second Clement was not written by that that's pseudonymously attributed to Clement of Rome. So the question we start off with is who was this Clement to whom the first Clement was attributed? Philippians

chapter four verse three mentions a Clement by Paul and Eusebius in the fourth century says that this Clement became Bishop of Rome.

Now whether Eusebius was correct, we can't say, but we can see that Eusebius was saying that this Clement that Paul mentioned in Philippians became a Bishop of Rome. And then later on you've got Irenaeus again, he's writing somewhere between 174 and 189. He mentions a Clement who became the third Bishop of Rome and he said that this Clement had conversed with and had seen the apostles.

And then, Irenaeus also says that first Clement was written by the church in Rome while Clement was the Bishop there and that he wrote this to the church or that church wrote it to the church in Corinth. So that's pretty interesting you know to have that. So we've got Eusebius and Irenaeus that's talking about this Clement who was a Bishop in Rome and Eusebius says that this is the same Clement that Paul mentions in Philippians chapter four and you've got Irenaeus who says that this Clement was there in the church of Rome.

He was Bishop there when first Clement was written by that church. And then you have Dionysius who was the Bishop of Corinth and he wrote a letter to the Bishop of the church at Rome whose name was Sotear. Sotear means Savior.

So he wrote a letter to the Bishop there in Rome somewhere between the years 166 and 174. And he acknowledges in that letter he acknowledges receiving a letter from Sotear that he had written to the church at Corinth. So the Bishop of the church at Rome writing to the Bishop of the church at Corinth is saying this and he says it was just read at one of their worship services.

And he says, tells Sotear that he believes that this letter that he wrote will be as helpful to them there in Corinth as the earlier letter that was written through Clement was that was also written to the church at Corinth. So and Eusebius is the one who mentions this letter by Dionysius. So this is pretty cool.

It seems to be some decent evidence that Clement was the Bishop of Rome and that this letter written while he was Bishop there while Clement was written to the church at Corinth that seems to corroborate the story that's mentioned by Erenaeus. Later on you've got Tertullian. I'm guessing around the year 200 and he says Clement was ordained by Peter for the church in Rome.

And then you've got Clement of Alexandria, another Clement but a later one also around the year 200 says that first Clement was written by the Apostle Clement. You have in the letters of Ignatius specifically his letter to the Trelians, you have what's called a longer recension and it's probably not part of the original Ignatius letter to the Trelians. It came later.

But in that longer recension it says that Clement was a helper of Peter. So you've got all these early church fathers and even if this longer recension isn't part of Ignatius' the authentic letter of Ignatius to the Trelians, it does show that there was a tradition going around whenever it was written that linked Peter to Peter, linked Peter in Clement of Rome. So you've got this unanimous testimony that kind of links this Clement of Rome who was Bishop of Rome to first Clement.

And one of these links it to the Clement mentioned in Philippians by Paul and yeah and others say that this Clement was linked associated with Peter. So that's pretty strong. Of course it's not airtight because it comes from later sources but it does show that there was a widespread long standing tradition that links the author of first Clement to be affiliated with Peter.

Yeah. So tell us about the evidence, the data here then in first Clement. What does Clement say about the fate of Jesus? Yeah.

Well first you have I think it's chapter five where he talks about Peter and Paul and it's either five or forty two. Sometimes I get these mixed up but let's just call it chapter five. He places Paul on par with his mentor Peter and he says that both of these, he's using some language where he says they suffered I believe unto death.

Heos Thanato Than. Heos Thanatu. They struggled unto death and so were they being persecuted to the point of dying but not dying but you know where they martyred and it's hard to tell but heos Thanatu doesn't necessarily mean martyred him because Jesus suffered unto death while in the garden and he didn't die at that point.

So I see. But it seems that the language that Clement uses there in chapter five would seem to suggest that that Peter and Paul were martyred for their belief. So here we've got an early testimony from first Clement that Peter was martyred that Paul was martyred.

You also have John chapter twenty one of course that alludes to the martyrdom of Peter. John's written in the first century and would be after the event of course. So even if you deny that John wrote the gospel attributed to him we still have this tradition of Peter being martyred by crucifixion in John chapter twenty one which is pretty interesting still first first century testimony.

So that's what you have and then I believe it's chapter forty two it says that the disciples were encouraged when they saw Jesus risen from the dead and when he spent time with them. So yeah it becomes important in that way. And what I like about first Clement as well not only does it seem more probable than not that the author was Clement the Bishop of Rome who was associated who knew the apostle Peter but there are various dates of composition here you've got a later dating which is somewhere between the years ninety five and ninety seven and then you have an early dating which is in the

sixties and it's hard to choose between these these two.

So I kind of lean toward the late sixties but it could be there in the mid nineties but if it's the late sixties that'd be pretty cool. I mean you've got first Clement chapters forty and forty one that speak of the Jerusalem temple is still standing and that ritual practices are still going on it's the present tense which would place this prior to the destruction of Jerusalem of the Jerusalem temple. But then in just a couple chapters after that it mentions leaders in the church who were twice removed from the apostles.

So you can still get there if some of them died or were imprisoned that's possible but it's still a decent argument for a later dating a first Clement. So it's kind of hard to tell but even if it's a late dating you still have Clement who appears to have been the Bishop of the church in Rome at that point and he had known the apostle Peter that seems more probable than not in my estimation and so therefore what first Clement includes in it would be compatible or at least some of it with the death and resurrection of Jesus would seem to be compatible with what was known would Clement would have received from Peter. Yeah yeah in your book you give it a possible plus rating so there's it's not merely possible to hear you saying man the evidence is good that this is you know this is valuable material here to be weighed and of course in the forthcoming seasons we'll be getting into the specifics and sort of coming back to these ideas that we find in these historical sources but first we need to figure out the lay of the land on what sources are good and valuable and fit within the framework of your project here.

Yeah it's like with first Clement it based on the data that we have it's a little bit stronger than saying it's possible it's a little the probabilities it's a little more probable than just saying it's possible that's how I would rate it. Yeah yeah good alright let's move along to Polycarp tell me about I mean that's kind of kind of a fun name Polycarp. It is I like that name Polycarp but it's something I've been to Indonesia twice and there's a guy that was in Indonesia in the past he's dead now and I never met him I mean this was I don't even know when this was but but he was a villain over there a bad guy named Polycarp so when you mentioned Polycarp you know I figured this was just an ancient name but no there's someone far more recent named Polycarp who has a very bad reputation in Indonesia but Polycarp you've got more Barnerman has said that there's been more written about Polycarp than any other of the apostolic fathers we have a letter that was written to him by Ignatius who's probably writing in the first decade of the second century you have a letter written about Polycarp specifically is martyrdom it's called the martyrdom of Polycarp written probably around you know the middle of the second century and then you have a letter written by Polycarp that he wrote to the church at Philippi.

So from these we can learn quite a bit about it. Irenaeus says that Polycarp had been instructed by the apostles especially John the son of Zebedee and he had spoke with others who had seen Jesus. Irenaeus also says that when he was younger when Irenaeus

was younger he actually saw and heard Polycarp speak about Jesus' miracles and his teachings and what he had heard from Polycarp he remembered, Polycarp was sharing what he had learned from the apostles and those who had handed down the traditions about Jesus.

So that's pretty cool. The problem is that what we know about Polycarp in this way we only get from Irenaeus so was Irenaeus given us trustworthy information. Well we don't have good reasons for doubting Irenaeus but we don't necessarily have positive reasons for it.

So it's a matter of whether we trust Irenaeus on this and yeah of course as Christians we may be inclined to want to trust him but just because we want to trust him doesn't mean that we should. So I just listed Polycarp as a source as a letter to the church at Philippi as possible but he also mentions Jesus' resurrection in here. So if he's getting this, if he had known about this from the apostle John or from other apostles or eyewitnesses that he had met then that's pretty valuable information it would seem.

He's just one removed from the apostles so that's pretty cool if that's the case the problem, the challenges that we can only have so much confidence in that so that's why I just rated him as possible. Alright now the next one is a possible minus and it's about the letter of Barnabas so tell me about the letter of Barnabas. Well the letter of Barnabas this is not to be confused with the gospel of Barnabas which the one that we have today was almost certainly a medieval forgery probably written in the 15th century.

I've got a video of that on my YouTube channel if anybody's interested what are we to think about the gospel of Barnabas. There was another gospel of Barnabas though I think you have what's called the jealousy and decree. I don't remember when that was 5th or 6th or 7th century and that mentions the gospel of Barnabas which is no doubt different than the gospel of Barnabas that was the Muslim forgery.

But even then the jealousy and decree says it's a spurious document, it's a spurious piece of literature not written by the actual Barnabas the apostle. But the letter of Barnabas is different and that's part of the apostolic fathers. It mentions the destruction of the temple and that plans were presently in place to build a new one.

And so that places this letter dates it sometime after the year 70 and perhaps before the year 130 but we're not certain it's just certain after the year 70. But interestingly is that Clement of Alexandria didn't miss the blind in the mid 4th century, you have Oregon a little before then sometime in the 3rd century and even Jerome in the late 4th sometime between the late 4th and early 5th century they attribute this letter to the apostle Barnabas who had been the traveling companion of Paul. But today it's virtually universally rejected by scholars.

Then Eusebius in the 4th century said it was spurious. So it wasn't unanimous that this

was written by Barnabas. But most scholars today are rejected as being written by Barnabas because the content regarding the Jewish law in it differs from Paul's for one.

And according to Galatians chapter 2 verses 13 and 14 what you have is Barnabas there in Galatians at that time around the early 50s Barnabas had a tendency to keep the Jewish law. Whereas in the letter you have Barnabas, he had a hostile attitude toward the law's literal interpretation. So we have a different Barnabas sounding Barnabas in the letter of Barnabas than we have in the Barnabas in the Galatians letter that Paul wrote.

However we have to acknowledge that this letter was written at least 15 years after Galatians was written. And probably more than 20 years after the Jerusalem Council which is plenty of time that Barnabas would have had to mull over these issues. Paul is dead at this point.

He has been influenced by Paul. He's seen things like Peter having his vision, saying it when God communicates to him that it's fine for the Gentiles to become part of God's family here with the gospel. So they see some of Jesus' teachings.

They know of Peter's vision. They know Paul has been preaching to the Gentiles. So Barnabas could certainly have evolved in his views and this could, I mean it's possible that this is a letter, an authentic letter from Barnabas.

We just can't know. Most scholars don't think so. And there's really nothing in here on the resurrection of Jesus.

So it's really not useful but even it being an authentic letter, I just rated it as possible minus. Yeah. It's kind of fun to jump into early Christian history looking at, for example, if it's the letter of Barnabas, we're authentic or even first Clement or poly-carp that material to see what early Christians thought about.

They're beyond the age of the apostles, the second order, third order in the first century. It's fascinating to see where the church issues that they're dealing with. For me, I enjoy even reading on and on throughout the centuries of the first five or six centuries.

So let me ask you sort of a listener, viewer question from me then. By the way, let me just say one more thing here. We can revisit Tom Wright's observation about how some rather skeptical scholars like to see things in earlier recensions of Q or earlier editions of the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, but they don't like to talk about reconstructing Mark's lost ending or what about that pseudo-Mark ending? Where did that come from? Did that come from a lost gospel? Here they'd like to go with these things like earlier recensions of Q or these hypothetical sources like a cross-gospel, but yet we've got first Clement and poly-carp's letter to the Philippians that really the evidence that they have links to the apostles Peter and John respectively are far greater

than any kind of arguments that are being proposed for earlier recensions of Q or a cross-gospel and things like that.

And yet those same scholars who want to go with those things, they don't touch these things like first Clement or poly-carp's letter to the church at Philippi, which I think it's a lot more likely that we're going to find something good in those. Yeah, that's a good point. All right, well, let me ask you as a listener question for me this week since we've jumped into some of my territory on apostolic followers and then a little bit broader of the church fathers.

If you had to pick one church father that you enjoy reading the most, which one would it be? Well since the apostolic fathers are, you know, they belong in the writings of the early church fathers, boy, it's hard to choose. I like first Clement, I like Clement of Rome and I like poly-carp, you know, choosing between the two of them. It's hard.

That's difficult. Gosh, you know, the chances that Clement was affiliated with Peter and poly-carp affiliated with John, it's pretty cool. And then, you know, something we didn't cover here would be the fragments of Papias, who's early second century.

And you know, we didn't cover him because I don't cover him in the book because he doesn't say anything in reference to the death or resurrection of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus. But boy, if we had those lost writings of Papias for which we only have fragments that have survived, that'd be pretty cool. I mean, it's hard to choose between those.

I mean, even Ignatius, he doesn't have the ties to the apostles that Clement and poly-carp would have had, but he knew poly-carp and he wrote a letter to him. So... Yeah, he was at Antioch. Wow.

Yeah. Just it'd be awesome to have been able to sit down and talk with these guys. I wish we had more from them.

Mm. Yep. Yep.

A lot of good figures in early Christian history. And like I said, it's sort of great to explore and see what the early church was dealing with outside beyond the timeframe of the canon, if you will. So mid to late first century, maybe even early second century, the issues they're dealing with and thinking about.

It's always fun to see the state of the church that early in Christian history. Yeah. Good.

Well, Mike, thanks for cluing us in here about a few of these apostolic fathers and the evidence that they bear for the fate of Jesus. I look forward to next week's discussion as we begin looking at non-canonical Christian literature. All right.



Thanks for watching. Be sure to subscribe to the YouTube channel. Follow us on Apple Podcasts in the Google Play Store.

We look forward to seeing you next week.

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