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S3E5 - Methods of Approaching Ancient Text

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode, Dr. Licona discusses various ways we can approach ancient texts when studying history. Is history classified as "science"? How does probability factor into our view of history?

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 Lacona. Dr. Lacona 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 501c3 non-profit organization.

My name is Kurt Joris, your host. On today's episode, we continue our discussion looking at certainty and fact and the methods by which historians come to claim certain things are facts, although on last week's episode you talked about that's a contested term itself. But on our episode today, I want to first ask you about how a historian approaches a text.

There are a number of different ways they can approach the text. In your book you talk about methodological credulity, neutrality, and skepticism, and I'm just wondering if you could explain those terms to me. Yeah, okay.

Well, methodological credulity would be I am coming to the text assuming that it is reliable, that it is reporting truth until I'm shown otherwise. Okay. Methodological skepticism is I am approaching the text and saying you've got to convince me that this text is true.

And so I'm not going to believe it. My default position is this text is false. It's reporting things falsely, but you've got to show me it's true.

The burden of proof is on you to show me it's true. And methodological neutrality is I'm coming to the text neutral and I'm not assuming it's true, I'm not assuming it's false. Yeah.

So you're open. I'm open. Right.

Yeah. All right. Now, wouldn't how we approach the text even depend upon what the text is trying to convey to us? So let's say we come across a book written by a fellow named Tolkien and there's a story in there about a Hobbit and a ring.

That story doesn't strike us as intending to be historical, even though even though Tolkien has this vast timeline and all that, but it's still not intended to be historical. So would that dictate even how we approach it with those three options? Yes, it would. That's a great question you ask because when I'm saying these three different approaches, I'm not just talking about the New Testament or the Christian literature.

I'm talking about all literature, right, if we're making historical assessments on these. So if I'm coming to Plutarch, Plutarch's lives, Plutarch is considered to be the greatest of all ancient biographers. And if I'm coming to Plutarch's lives, how am I to do it? My credulity, skepticism or neutrality? Well he's writing in the genre of ancient biography, which is, generally speaking, is trying to report truth.

But they took some liberties and the way they reported things in antiquity in ancient biography. It's not the same genre as modern biography. So you've got a mixture of some things.

Some of the things that Plutarch does, he plays with the details a little bit. So we can talk about this in future episodes, but Plutarch will do things like he compresses accounts so that they are narrated to occur over a shorter period of time than they had actually occurred. The Gospel authors do it too.

Or you can be involved in conflation, where you take elements from different stories and you conflate it into a single story. Usually done to simplify, or you're not going to tell two stories, but you want to bring some elements from this other story because you think it's important and you want people to know about something that actually happened. But you don't want to tell two separate stories, so you take it from that story and you join it with this story.

So there's all kinds of things that they would do in antiquity. Plutarch does these kinds of things. So you have to judge them by a different standard.

And then you've got Suetonius, who, even though Plutarch is the greatest of all ancient biographers, Suetonius is considered the greatest of all Roman historians and biographers. And he's not so discriminate as Plutarch and others in his use of sources. So Suetonius has great sources, but then he uses some questionable anecdotes.

And so what do you do with that? Or like a lotion of Samusada in his book, *How to Write History*, tells about how Aristobulus was writing a biography of Alexander the Great. And he mentioned about a battle in which Alexander took on an elephant single-handedly and defeated it. And Alexander read it and he threw the book overboard and he said, "I ought to do the same to you because people won't believe the good stuff I've done when you mix it with this fictional things." And so we find this.

We got this in the biography of Apollonius of Tiana, written in the early part of the third century. Not all of it is historical. So yes, it becomes a very difficult thorny manner when we're looking at ancient literature.

And if we're going to remember here, this is not a faith journey we are talking about when we're looking at the resurrection historically. We are approaching it as a historian. We're not making any kind of theological assumptions such as the divine inspiration of

the Bible or its infallibility or its inerrancy, anything like this.

So if I'm going to approach this as objectively as I can as a historian, I'm not going to privilege the biblical literature. And so I have to be open to the Gospels and every Paul and all of these doing the same kind of stuff that ancient biographers and historians did. So here in America, we have the saying that a person is innocent until proven guilty.

And so in other cultures, ancient cultures, sometimes you were viewed guilty until proven innocent. And so it's about the burden of proof. So when we approach a text, the neutrality position sort of says, "Well, you're open either way." But should we just think that a text like the Gospels are innocent until proven guilty? Well, some do.

I mean, I know some New Testament scholars. I know of a professional historian of antiquity who does that. He approached the text of the Gospels and they do methodological credulity.

They say the Gospels are, we ought to come to them and trust what they say until we have reason to believe otherwise. I don't take that view. I think things are quite complicated.

I take the methodical neutrality. Now the way neutrality differs from methodological skepticism, of course, is methodological skepticism assumes they are unreliable and that you got to show otherwise methodological neutrality says they may or may not be reliable. The one making the claim we should believe this or not believe it bears the burden of proof.

So I still would have to show that the New Testament literature is reliable just like the methodological skeptic is requiring. But the difference is I'm not assuming it's unreliable when I come to it. The methodological skeptic seems like they're really digging themselves in a hole at the outset and that there's a lot of climbing out that they have to do before they can really say, "Yeah, okay, it's good to go.

It's safe to trust. It's reliable." Yeah, I think so and it reveals the horizon, doesn't it? Now there is something about methodological credulity that I think we could say to clear up. If a person comes to the text and says, "Well, I am just going to trust this text unless you can show me otherwise." That's pure credulity, methodological credulity.

But some of these, like the New Testament scholar I know of and the classicist I know of who comes to it saying, "This is good until proven otherwise," they do have a lot of background knowledge behind it. They've done a lot of study so they know about how good the manuscripts are and how it can get us back to a text which is nearly 100% close to what the original said. They've done stuff on the reliability, the historical reliability.

You could come to the text and say, "Well, look, I've already done a lot of work on it." I

do think that these gospels are historically reliable. Here are numerous reasons for thinking so. In that case, I'm going to trust what I cannot establish as historical.

Then I think the things I cannot establish as historical gets the nod. What do you say? It's alluding me at the moment. It gets the benefit of the doubt until you can show otherwise.

I think that's a rational way to go. The challenge, of course, is going to be the various ways of writing ancient biography. Do we have legend that is crept into the text? We have to ask this if we're going to be honest historians.

We cannot assume that it didn't. If we just say, "Well, these are divinely inspired texts. There's not going to be any legend in it." That's not doing history.

It's doing theology. What we're doing here is we're doing history apart from theology. Interesting.

Let me ask you this. Some people might say there are other ancient people that were believed to have been divine or certainly claimed to have been divine. Alexander the Great, certain Roman emperors, even pharaohs going that far back.

Some people might say, "Well, we should just approach the gospels in the same way we approach those other texts which credit, say, Alexander the Great as being divine." What's your take on that? Yeah. Well, I think it's a fair objection. I think that, again, if we're going to come to the biblical text purely as historians, and I think we have to do that, if we're going to say in the end, if we're going to have any integrity and say, "I've looked at the evidence objectively and the historical case for Jesus' resurrection is quite strong, it's better than any other hypothesis, and therefore I think we can establish historically that it occurred." Then we have to, if we're going to do that with integrity, then we have to be open from the outset to say if there are stories of dying and rising figures, heroes, deities, and antiquity and other accounts, we have to be open to the possibility at the get-go that this is what is going on with the resurrection.

If there are phenomenal birth accounts of people like Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Dionysus and others in these writings, then we have to be open from the get-go from the outset to say that that may be what's going on with the virgin birth accounts in Matthew and Luke. Now we may look at the evidence and do an investigation and say, "Well, no, that's not what's happening here and give numerous reasons why." But if we're going to answer it in integrity and do an investigation, claim to have done an investigation historically and do it with integrity, then at least we have to be open to this possibility from the very beginning. Just briefly, I want to cover this idea of history as a science.

It's frequently put in the arts category in academia, but does it really belong properly to

that category? No, I don't think so. It's usually in the humanities. I would call it a science.

I would just call it a soft science. I would put it in the same category as, say, archaeology, though. Geology, I would put as a soft science.

You say, "Well, how can you know you can test these things?" You're still making a whole lot of different assumptions, especially in geology. There's various tests and they've got these margin of errors. Sometimes in some tests, the margin of error here is completely different.

If you line up the two tests, they're different. It's like, "Wait a minute. What's going on here?" I remember having a conversation with a geologist and an elevator one time.

Elevators have their ups and downs. We're talking to him and I said to him, "Let me ask you a question. I've heard something about the margin of errors and what I've just described here." He said, "Yeah, that's right." I said, "So how do you determine the age of these rocks and the fossils and stuff?" He says, "Well, we determine the age of the fossils by the age of the rocks." I said, "Okay, but if you've got all these tests of the rocks and they're not exactly accurate, how do you determine the ages of the rocks? Get inaccurate." He says, "Well, then we determine the age of the rocks by the fossils that are in them.

I kid you not." I said, "Well, that seems to me you're arguing in a circle." I said, "Yeah, it is actually, but that's how many of us do it." I said, "Whoa." It's a soft science. A hard science like astronomy, cosmology, that has a whole lot of raw data that you can go with and you can apply mathematics in. Even evolutionary biology, you could even call that a soft science because you've got data and there are so many different ways of interpreting.

You had Stephen J. Gould and Niles Eldridge come up with punctuated equilibrium and that is one that says that there wasn't this gradual evolution that was going on because that's not what we see in the fossil record. I know I'm speaking out of my discipline, but I'm quoting these guys. They said, "No, punctuated equilibrium was where you have this huge changes, quick and massive changes that's going on.

Like an alligator give birth to a bird, something along those lines, something massive change." That's the kind of stuff we often see in the fossil record they said. My point here is even evolutionists, paleontologists don't have the same view of evolution. They have radically different views because the science isn't so secure.

I think history is a soft science. It's interesting with archeology as you referenced, they might dig up a pottery shard and run tests on it. In the same way, you might discover a manuscript and you run tests on it and you want to say, "Hey, when does the paper date to? What does the text itself say?" For running those tests, historians are trying to

evaluate these features and then they begin to form their conclusions.

They first have to make sense of the data and then you have the facts and from those facts you begin to draw conclusions. Fascinating. With the time that we have left here on this episode, I want to just briefly cover quickly the arguments to the best explanation.

I think we'll talk more about that. What is an argument to the best explanation and what's an argument from statistical inference? An argument from statistical inference would be trying to calculate mathematically the probability of a hypothesis being true. There's different ways of doing it.

A way that a few have done in more recent years is the use-based theorem. That'd be statistical inference. Then you have arguments of inference to the best explanation.

This is where you use various criteria to assess hypotheses. They're usually common-sense criteria, nothing magical about them. The hypothesis that best fulfills those criteria is regarded as what probably occurred.

We'll talk more about the argument to best explanation in that criteria on the next episode. Let's talk about statistical inference and Bayes' theorem. Bayes' theorem was invented by a Presbyterian minister.

Believe it or not. It gets kind of complex. A friend of mine, Tim McGrew, showed me how it worked.

He's an expert in it. Basically you've got a couple of different components in it. I'm going to really oversimplify this.

You have what's called your prior probability. Then you have your posterior probability, your likelihoods. Let me just give a practical example.

Someone comes, let's say you're working on the job somewhere, you're working for a mortgage company. One of your colleagues comes in and says, "Someone comes in, you were out to lunch and you met this person at lunch." He said, "Man, a former roommate maybe from college. What's going on with you? You won't believe this.

I just won the lottery." Is it really? Yeah, I want it big. The prior probability is, I know it's different for every lottery, but let's just say it's 300 million to one. You only have one chance and 300 million to win.

The prior probability that your former roommate, your former roommate is telling the truth is one chance and 300 million. That's the prior probability. That's what you look at prior to looking at any evidence.

Then you look at the evidence and you say, "Really? I mean, come on." He says, "Yeah, look." He shows you a picture. He said, "This is where I was a year ago." He moved from

a mobile home to a mansion. He went from a beater to a Bentley.

He said, "I quit my job. I retired early at the age of 30. Here's my bank statement.

Here's my investment portfolio." You see it's just got millions of dollars invested in there. Well, now you say, "What's the probability that he's telling the truth given the evidence?" Then you would say, "What's the probability that he's telling the lie given the evidence?" You kind of weigh these out against one another. The evidence, given the evidence, it can overcome the prior probability in some cases quite easily.

That's how that works. The problem with doing this with historical investigation is that the prior probability is rarely known. It's like, "What's the prior probability of the US dropping nuclear bombs on Japan in World War II? How would you calculate that?" When you're doing a hypothesis, the background knowledge that's responsible or necessary in order to get the prior probability is rarely, if ever known, in historical investigation for historical questions.

Another thing a lot of times it's very subjective. An atheist is going to say, "Part of that prior probability is God does not exist." Someone else might say, "Part of that prior probability, that background knowledge, is God exists." Or you just have to be open to it. You're just going to calculate a different prior probability based on your horizon.

Interesting. Good. Well, I'm looking forward to learning more about argument to the best explanation on our next episode.

But let's take a question from one of your followers. James Michael asks, "If you could give a succinct summary of Matthew's little apocalypse." Okay. Maybe introduce us.

What does James Michael mean there? So in Matthew 27, I think it's verses 52 and 53, Jesus has died, just died. And it said there was darkness and the temple, there was an earthquake, the temple veil split from top to bottom, the rock split, the tombs were open, many of the dead saints were raised. And after Jesus' resurrection, they came out, went into the holy city, Jerusalem, and appeared to many.

So what do we do with this? This is kind of a strange text, right? When you look in a lot of commentaries, they don't even want to comment on it. Some will, but a lot of them won't even comment on the historical question, did this really happen? So you've got pros and cons. The position that I took in the book is, I think, and I still take this position.

I think that it's probably, and I wouldn't die for this, okay? Based on the ancient Jewish literature and Greco-Roman literature, I have read, I'm inclined to think that Matthew is doing the same thing that Peter is doing in his sermon and the book of Acts at Pentecost, Acts chapter 2, that Josephus does with the, when he's talking about portents that happened prior to the destruction of the temple, that Livy does when he's talking about what happened when Julia Caesar was assassinated, similar phenomena. And I think it's

kind of similar to when we say 9/11 was an earthshaking event, or it rained cats and dogs. I think that's kind of what's going on.

And we'll get into that, of course, in some future episodes in detail and why I think that's going on. And I'm not the only one. There's a lot of scholars that think that.

And it doesn't at all threaten the resurrection or anything like that. We're just trying to read the Gospels as their authors intended. Now, you've certainly gotten some flack for it by theologians and the like, but as you say, there are other scholars that hold to your view, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I think Irenaeus, even the church father, has something to say about that passage as well.

I don't remember which church fathers say what about it, but I do know that a number of church, some of them do, but they're usually later. Ignatius says something about it. He probably says something about it.

It's not exactly clear. And he'd be their earliest one, and that's important. But a lot of them don't say anything about it.

They'll mention the darkness. They'll mention the temple veil splitting, but they don't mention the saints being raised and makes you wonder why. But there are numerous things for that.

God bless the people who have criticized me on it. I think they mean well. It's just something we disagree on.

I give a lot of reasons why I hold my opinion. Numerous New Testament scholars, like I said, I'm not alone. But it's usually not historically minded scholars who are saying it's theologically minded, and they come with their own presuppositions on what the text must say in order to get at that kind of conclusion.

Yeah, good. Well, thanks for that. And thanks for helping us consider the ways in which historians approach the text and asking whether and how history is a science of sorts, a soft science, soft science.

If you'd like 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. There you can find all sorts of great resources like ebooks, articles, videos, audio files, really some great stuff that you've put up there. If this podcast has been a blessing to you, and I know some of you are wild fans of it, thanks for your for following.

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