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S5E3 - Paul of Tarsus

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this episode, we explore the testimony, conversion, and letters of Paul of Tarsus as historical sources.

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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 campuses, churches, retreats, and has appeared on dozens of radio and television programs.

Mike is the President of Risen Jesus, a nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Jares, your host. On today's episode, we're looking at the letters of Paul of Tarsis.

And he's an intriguing figure in the history of Christianity. Interesting enough, a lot of Christians read sadly more of Paul's letters in the gospels, which is an interesting exercise in thinking about hermeneutics, interpreting the Bible, and the theology that comes from the scriptures of the New Testament and even the old. But we're looking specifically at the content that Paul provides regarding the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.

And Mike, last week we sort of left things on a cliff hanger. We talked about the canonical gospels and some of the best material about Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. And yet, and I'm going to be interested to hear your take here.

And yet you rate them on your system as possible, only possible. I'm curious to know why that is. Why is it only possible that these are of value in pertaining to the apostolic teaching? Go ahead and maybe flesh that out a little bit for us.

Yeah, well, and it's a fair question. So, as we mentioned in the previous episode, there are a lot of challenges to the gospels, such as, you know, knowing that their ancient biographies only takes us so far, it tells us that they were interested in history. They were going to report historically, but it doesn't tell us about the degree of integrity of their reporting.

So, historically speaking, you know, if you're not coming at it with any kind of operarii assumptions. So, you've got the challenge of not knowing ahead of time how committed they were to writing history. And it doesn't really help to appeal to, let's say, oblivious, oblivious and Thucydides and Lucian in terms of the standards of good historical writing, because number one, we don't know that they, the gospel authors embraced that.

They could have been more like Philistratis or Aristobulus and some others who weren't as committed to that kind of accuracy. Plus, even Polybius and Thucydides were willing to do things like invent speeches and supplement and put things in there for very similitude. And Lucian of Samusada said you could improve speeches.

So, you got those things. You've got the fact that many scholars will dispute who, you know, the traditional authorship of the gospels. And then you've got the major area of gospel differences, which Gary Habermas has said in his studies, massive studies of the resurrection over the years, that the number one objection against the resurrection, not presently, but if you take, you know, over the centuries into consideration, the number one objection has been gospel differences.

So, how much does that impact the reliability of the account? It's also the case of because there are so many challenges like this that to get into a very involved

discussion on the gospels at that point would really take us away from the major issue here. And that is, you know, what happened to Jesus. So, and also there's going to be such a disparity between conclusions of scholars on the matter.

And I just didn't want to get bogged down in that. So, you know, there are other sources for which we can have the, there's far less disputes over, such as the letters of Paul. And I just didn't want to get pulled off track into a very, very in-depth discussion on the gospels.

So, I personally think that the gospels report a lot that's historically reliable, okay? But I didn't want to get bogged down in such a discussion. So, I just said possible. So, that's a tentative conclusion that you're stating there in the book.

It's not your final end-all conclusion is sort of like that you're an agnostic on the gospels. Correct. And, and you know, even I think a number of readers understood that.

In the summer of 2012, the Southeastern Theological Review did an issue. The whole thing was, was devote, except for the book reviews section, the entire issue was devoted to addressing my book. And there were, I think, three reviewers in it.

You had Gary Habermas, Bihan Makala, who is a professional, a general historian, a philosopher of history. And then you had Tim McGrew. And McGrew addressed that issue about why I said possible.

And, and he guessed correctly why I, I put possible there. There's just too much to get into with the gospels and I just wanted to move on. Hmm.

Okay. Well, in the name of moving on, let's talk about Paul. Why is it that someone should pay attention to Paul's writings? Well, there's some great reasons.

So, um, for, for one, Paul claims to be an eyewitness. So, we have 13 letters that have been attributed to Paul in our New Testaments. And of those 13 letters, scholars, and I'm saying, you know, that's the whole gamut of scholarship on the spectrum, from conservative to atheist, etc.

And, um, it's virtually unanimous that Paul wrote seven of those letters. And then there are two that are hotly disputed, uh, Colossians and, um, um, second Thessalonians with probably a slight majority saying Colossians and second Thessalonians are Pauline that he actually wrote those. And then you have some others like first, second Timothy, Titus, Ephesians that, uh, the majority of scholars would say Paul did not write those.

So, um, but we can take just those seven undisputed letters of Paul and, and just based on those, you know, we can build a pretty good case. We can get a lot, mine them for a lot of excellent data, uh, that can go back to what the original apostles were preaching. Plus, Paul does claim to be an eyewitness of the risen Jesus and he wasn't a disciple at

the time.

Paul was an enemy of Christianity. He was out persecuting the church. He believed Jesus was a false prophet and a failed Messiah.

And so he admits in his own undisputed letters that he was out to destroy the church, to persecute the church and was zealous in in doing so. So Jesus would have been the last person in the universe that Paul would have expected to see or wanted to see. And yet he says he had this experience that he interpreted as the risen Jesus appearing to him and it radically transformed his life from being a persecutor of the church to one of its most able defenders.

So it distinguishes him from other sources, like let's say the gospels, the authorship of at least those seven letters are more easily established, argued for, and as well as accepted by virtually all critical scholars today, we can, through Galatians and 1 Corinthians, we can get back to some at least an outline of what Jesus apostles, the Jerusalem apostles who actually knew Jesus were proclaiming. And to think about it, Paul actually knew, had met with, spent time with and spoken with some of Jesus disciples like Peter and John the son of Zebedee and James the brother of Jesus. That gives me chills when I think about that.

He actually spoke with them and ran his gospel message past them according to Galatians chapter two. And he's, he gets feedback from them and he's reporting what they said. That's just amazing.

Let me, let me ask you about the, the testimonial experience that, that Paul had of the resurrected Christ. Isn't there some discussion amongst scholars about this Damascus road experience? What do you think happened there? Well, I, I, I think the book of Acts, which it's not Paul talking, now we're talking what Luke is relaying about what happened. Okay.

And according to my friend Craig Keener, who has written this massive commentary on a book of Acts that's well over 4,000 pages. He says that the majority of critical scholars today do think that the author of Acts was a traveling companion of Paul. At some point, he argues for this and he says, this is what the majority of critical scholars today think.

Now, not all critical scholars think that, but the majority think that doesn't mean they're correct, but Keener will give all these arguments for why the author was a traveling companion of Paul and even why it was Luke, the beloved physician. But he says the majority, even the majority of scholars are convinced by these arguments. So Luke presents these arguments.

And if he was a traveling con, the accounts of Paul, and if he's a traveling companion of Paul, then you most likely receive this information from Paul. And I think it can be

considered trustworthy. And Paul meant, I'm sorry, Luke mentions how Paul is on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus and somewhere along that journey from Jerusalem to Damascus.

He has this experience where a bright light shines from heaven, he falls to the ground, his traveling companions are also experienced the light, and they hear the voice, they just don't understand what it's saying. But Paul says, the voice said, Paul, why are you persecuting me? And Paul says, who are you Lord? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. It is useless for you to kick against the goats, the thorn bushes.

So get up and I will show you what you must suffer for my namesake. And Paul's blinded at that point by the bright light, he gets to Damascus, a guy named Anannus, who's a believer, he has a vision where God appears to him and tells him about Paul. And that Paul is now a believer.

And Anannus goes to him and restores Paul's eyesight. So that appears to be the, at least the, the accounts given in the book of Acts, Acts chapters 9, 22 and 26 of Paul's conversion experience. Now is this maybe just a sort of vision that Paul had? I mean, why would we think that this was something that, you know, actually really happened? Maybe Paul was just imagining it.

And he, it was just a personal subjective experience that he had. Well, we have to, we do have to consider that. I mean, after all, the, the nature of the appearance to Paul is significantly different than the nature of the appearances described in the gospels.

In the gospels, it's a bodily resurrected Jesus. They can touch him. He's standing there before them.

He can fix food. He can eat food. Where as the appearance to Paul, as described in Acts, Jesus is in heaven at that point.

He's in a glorified state. Of course, I think this is easily accounted for by the fact that this is a post-essential appearance of Jesus. In the book of Acts, Jesus is already ascended to heaven.

And so the nature of the appearance is different for that reason. But here's another reason. According to the book of Acts, if you're, if you're going to take the book of Acts seriously and this appearance seriously and say, okay, well, it could be a vision because the nature of it was so different.

Well, you don't want to be arbitrarily selective of the details discussed in that account. And the details say that Paul's traveling companions likewise saw the light and they heard the voice. They just didn't understand the voice.

But they saw the light, the blinding light, and they heard the voice. So this was a group

phenomenon, a group experienced this simultaneously, which would seem to militate against this being a subjective vision of some sort. A hallucinogen.

Okay. All right. But maybe it's just a spiritual resurrection.

So, you know, the, there was a hymn writer named Alan Jackson. He wrote a Christian hymn called He Lives. And the best line in this hymn, I just struggle with.

The best line is, you ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. Maybe the resurrection of Jesus is just this spiritual thing.

There's nothing physical about it. Well, Paul talks about Christ within us, right? Christ in you, the hope of glory and things like this. But he still thinks that he had an appearance of the risen Jesus.

He says, last of all, as to one and timely born, he appeared also to me. So whatever the nature of Paul's experience, he regarded as different in nature from, you know, when he talks to others saying Christ in you, the hope of glory. He doesn't regard ecstatic experiences like speaking in tongues and prophetic utterances.

Those are never regarded as an appearance of the risen Jesus. So, and you have other appearances of Jesus to others, but they're not of the same kind of nature as what we find with Paul. And Paul, as we'll be looking at in future seasons, I believe the next season, we'll be looking at it about what Paul believed about the nature of Jesus' resurrection.

He believed that it was a transformed physical corpse, that the corpse that had been buried, the corpse of Jesus that had been buried, is the same corpse that had been raised and transformed into an immortal, glorious body, and that it was a physical body as well. So to say that this was just that he lives within our heart, an inward experience that Christ is in us, that's not what Paul is talking about. Now you rate the letters of Paul as highly probable, and that's in stark contrast to the gospels, which are just possible for the purposes of your project here.

Why rate them as highly probable? Okay. So again, let's revisit the thing with the gospels. The reason I put possible was just because I needed to move on.

I didn't want to get bogged down, and personally, I would put probable for at least some of the accounts, like the account of Mark, the account in John, you have multiple independent sources. In fact, the accounts in Matthew and Luke, as NT Wright have pointed out, the verbal correspondence between the resurrection narratives in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there may be more, some similarities there between Mark and Matthew with verbal correspondences, but not a lot, and certainly not with Luke. And Luke contains the appearance to the Emmaus disciples.

Matthew has appearances that aren't like the appearance to the women, and the appearance in Galilee. That's not mentioned in Mark. So you've got Mark, you've got Matthew, you've got Luke, you've got John, and you've got Paul testing to these, but you've got these four gospels.

So I do think, I mean, if you look in what I'm thinking, I'd say probable, but I'm saying possible because I don't want to get bogged down in it, and I don't want someone else to dismiss me because I say probable, or give it a very high, it's not what I believe it's what I can prove with this kind of stuff. And I can't get as much proof for the gospels as I can for Paul, because the authorship of those seven letters is virtually certain. It's really strong.

So that's, that's why now the reason I give Paul such a high rating is because here you got a guy who claims to be an eyewitness. That's one. But second, then when you look at what he says in Galatians, he says that three years after his conversion, he goes up to Jerusalem and he visits, meets with Peter for 15 days.

And he actually saw James, the brother of Jesus at that time. So he's, I'm sure he's not mentioning that he just saw him at a distance walk by. He sat down and talk with him some as well, but he spent a lot of time with Peter.

And you know, Peter's, Peter's pretty busy about the ministry. You better believe they're not just sitting down and talking about chariot races or what's going on in the amphitheater at that time, the plays that are going on. They're talking about some serious stuff.

Paul's asking Peter about his experience with Jesus, more about Jesus' teachings. Hey, Peter, did he actually walk on water? I mean, what was that like? I hear you try to walk on water too. And what was that like? And what have you learned through this? I mean, can you imagine the kind of conversations they had and be able to hear that? And then 14 years later, Paul says he goes up to Jerusalem and he meets with the pillars of the church, what he, what are called the pillars of the church.

And he names them, Peter, James, and John. And he runs the gospel message past him to ensure that he, he wanted to make sure he, he was on message with what they were preaching. And he says they certified that he was preaching what they were preaching.

Now, that doesn't mean that everything Paul preached was in alignment with what they preached, but when it came to the gospel message, which he outlines is the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus, that he's preaching what they're preaching. They certify this. And, you know, of course, we can say, well, maybe Paul was lying.

How do we know he's telling the truth? And that's where we look at people will be

discussing in the Epistolical Fathers Clement of Rome and Polycarp who are believed to have pretty close affiliations with some of the apostles like Peter and John respectively. And if that's the case, and they're writing after Paul's death, which they both are, we would be interested to see what they say about Paul. And they speak of Paul in very laudatory terms.

Clement places Paul on par with his mentor Peter. And you've got Polycarp who says that Paul accurately and reliably taught the message of truth. That's a virtual verbatim quote.

And then he alludes to one of Paul's letters quotes from it and refers to it as part of the sacred scriptures. These are precisely the kinds of things you would say about Paul. If he was being truthful that the Jerusalem apostles, the pillars of the church, had certified that he was preaching the same gospel message they're preaching.

And then later on in 1 Corinthians 15, I think it's verse 17, he says, whether I am they, this, maybe it's verse 11, verse 11 or 17, whether I or they, that is the apostles, this is what we preach. And this is what you believed. And he also gives on tradition that they've talked about with the death, burial, resurrection and appearances of Jesus to others.

So this is pretty really good stuff. And we know that from a number of ancient sources, including Paul, that he suffered continuously, even to the point death that he almost died that that he was willing to go through imprisonment, willing to be martyred and persecuted for the sake of the gospel. And we know from later sources that he actually was martyred just outside of Rome.

So this is a test to the sincerity. So he's really strong as a witness. I mean, through him, we can get to an outline of what the Jerusalem apostles were preaching with a greater certainty than we can with some of the gospels.

He claims to be an eyewitness. He was hostile at the time of his conversion. And he's writing what may be the earliest literature in our New Testament.

It's a fantastic source. Yeah, great. So that's why he's highly probable on the writing chart for confirming the testimony of what allegedly happened there back in that first century.

All right, let's take a question from one of your listeners, Mike, his name is Brian. He's asking for tips for those looking to do a PhD later in life when your own kids are in high school and college. I know Dr. LaCona did his PhD out of South Africa.

What are the pros cons to the foreign school slash pure research model? Yeah, it's a good question. So I started my PhD later in life. I think I was well, it was 2003 when I started it right before my 40, 40 second birthday.

So I was 41 and a half at the time when I started. And yeah, so I had a family, I had two kids. They were close.

One, let's see, one would have been in her, my daughter would have been in her teens. My son would have been just about ready to enter his teens. He'd been a tweenager at that point.

And I traveled a lot. I was on the road 130 to 140 days a year. So I had a busy schedule and I couldn't just get up and move and go full time out of what I didn't have the funds to be able to do that.

So I was looking for something where I could do my research, be committed to it, that I wouldn't necessarily have to do it full time. It's something that would be not only convenient fit in with my schedule, but also would be doable financially. So Gary Habermas had encouraged me to look into some of the South African universities because he knew some people who had done their PhD through South Africa because they allowed you to complete it at a distance.

And it's very convenient to do it that way because the British schools, the way that they do it overseas and in Germany, you don't attend classes, it's pretty much a research only degree. And you do sit down and you do talk and spend time with your doctoral supervisor and you do that with the South African schools too. You can do it on campus in South Africa, but they also offered where you could do it at a distance.

And research only just like the European schools, they just expect more out of your dissertation and you may have to read a bunch and write reviews and papers and things like that, but it's an independent kind of study. And I really liked it that way. You don't go the US form of a PhD, you go broader, but not as deep.

In the other kind of model like South Africa, Europe, you go deeper, but not quite as broad. But it was really good. The South African rand exchanged right between the rand and the US dollar is very favorable for US students.

So I think my entire PhD cost tuition was like under 2,500. It's gone up since then, but you can probably get your PhD for under five grand now through a South African school and be able to do most of it all. But perhaps your oral defense, you could do it all by skype talking to your supervisor, meeting up with them at the annual meeting in the Society of Biblical Literature and getting feedback on your stuff.

So was it the best scenario? No, if you can be in person that works better, but you do what you can. And I think mine worked out really good. I would do it again.

I don't regret it at all. And I felt like I got an outstanding education, but that's because I had a fantastic doctoral supervisor as well. Yeah, I had my experience was through University of Aberdeen in partnership with Highland Theological College.

And of course, I'm sympathetic to a lot of the pros that you said there, Mike. It's a lot of flexibility with the program. I did my distance.

That was one of the, while it was a pro, it was also a con. I didn't have that community every day of being on campus somewhere. Mine was research based.

I've had young kids too. So that was a challenge there. A lot of my writing I got done between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m. I'm a night owl.

So the world went to sleep. I went to work. So it's flexible in that it can afford that scenario.

You don't have to be meeting for a class at 2 p.m. or something. So a lot of flexibility there. Pros and cons though.

Pros and cons. You're right. Nicely pointed out.

Yeah. You know, unfortunately, I did neglect my family some during that period. And my my kids suffered for that.

And I regret that. I wish I would have been a little more balanced during that time. But you do have to make some sacrifices.

No doubt about it. I just probably made too much sacrifices. But you know, even the European schools are opening to this up to this now.

My friend Mike DeVito, he's doing his PhD at Birmingham over in the UK where William Lane Craig got his first PhD under John Hick. And DeVito's doing it at a distance. The difference between the European schools and the South African schools, as you know, since you did a European, the difference is probably 70 grand for a European school versus a five grand or less at a South African school.

And given the funds that I had, I had to go South African. And like I said, I don't regret it. Yeah, mine wasn't that much, but certainly not as good of a price figure as yours.

All right. Well, hey, I'm glad we were able to talk about Paul as a as a figure as a witness and his letters, the value that they have for looking at the historical and when analyzing the historical case for the resurrection of Jesus, Paul is a great source for what we can know about what happened then in that first century. If you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike LeCona, you can visit risenjesus.com. It's there that you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels.

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