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S1E2 - Mike's Interest in Gospel Studies

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

Mike has given talks on a variety of apologetic issues, but he's a true scholar of history and the Gospels. Be sure to subscribe to catch every episode of the podcast.

Transcript

[Music] Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Mike Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University and he is 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 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

My name is Kurt Gerris, your host. On today's episode we're talking about Mike's interest in gospel studies. Mike, you used to speak on a large variety of topics related to Christian apologetics as we talked about in the previous episode, but now you've really geared in and focused on historical issues.

A senior editor at a major Christian publisher has said that you're the go-to guy in the evangelical world when it comes to the philosophy of history. How did your interest in that area develop? Well, that would have been during my doctoral studies and probably two years into it, I submitted my first two chapters for my dissertation. The first was on the philosophy of history historical method and the second was pertain to miracles and historians, canned historians within their rights, professional rights as historians, are they able to investigate miracle claims? He really liked my second chapter, but he said my first chapter, well, he didn't like it.

He said all it was was a chapter that had a bunch of opinions in it, my opinion, but it wasn't really backed up on solid research, such as what other philosophers of history historians were saying. So he said, "Mike, this is going to need a lot more work to it." So, okay, I went about it and I started to look in different places like history and philosophy or history and theory, which is a journal for philosophers of history. And I looked at other journals, I purchased books written by philosophers of history on how history is done and

what is history and the postmodern approach versus realist approaches.

And so I would look at these things and I would just, you know, I spent a couple of more years putting that together. In fact, I remember saying, hey, I found another 125 articles about the philosophy of history and I want to be able to read these and read a few more books, would you give me an extra year to do this? And he said, sure. So that really got me excited and interested in the philosophy of history and when I really started to focus on that and I was like, man, I got so interested and I felt like, you know, I could spend a lifetime in this and be satisfied just determining or answering questions like, what is history and how do we learn it? So you went from looking at the philosophy of history and then sort of incorporating that or focusing that specifically on gospel studies.

So how did you come to be interested in gospel studies? Well, I guess shortly after my dissertation, after I finished my doctoral studies and I was debating on the resurrection of Jesus, I would debate people like Bart Erman and Erman during his debates with me on the resurrection, he spent a significant amount of time, most of his time putting down the gospels, criticizing the gospels. He says we had no idea who wrote them, the gospel authors were all biased, the gospels contain tons of contradictions, differences in them. They were written too long after the events they purported to describe and they don't contain eyewitness testimony.

And this really confused a lot of evangelicals who watched the debates and, you know, for me it got to the point where, look, Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true, period, even if the gospels had all these problems in it that Erman would cite. I didn't think they did, but even if they did, Jesus still rose from the dead, Christianity is true. But it bothered a lot of evangelicals and so I decided that I would look into these matters with the gospels and so I developed a lecture called the ABCs, these and ease of defending the gospels and there I dealt with these five issues, authorship, bias, contradictions, dating and eyewitness.

And then, you know, the contradiction stuff, I decided I would really focus on that. And so my interest in gospel studies, that's how it started and then really focusing on the gospels, on the gospel differences, I spent eight years on that issue alone and that resulted in what is now my most recent book at this time. Yeah, and the book on gospel differences, what's that book called again? Well, it, again, it tries to answer the question, why are there differences in the gospels? And the title of that book is, "Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?" What we can learn from ancient biography.

Yeah, so gospel differences is one of the areas within gospel studies that is of interest to you. What other issues are intriguing? Oh, boy, you know, right now and for the last couple of years it's been historical reliability. You know, there's a lot written, well, not a ton, but there's, you know, great books written on the historical reliability of the gospels, the primary one, primary one would be the one by Craig Blomberg, the historical

reliability of the gospels.

It's an excellent book, I think the best one out there on it right now. And I don't disagree with that book in any sense. I just wanted to approach the question in a different manner.

So understanding that the gospels are ancient biographies and the majority, the overwhelming majority of New Testament scholars today, think that the gospels, they would say at least that the gospels share much in common with the genre of ancient biography. So if that's a case, what was ancient biography like? What were the literary conventions in play when writing ancient biography? And if we read the gospels in view of those conventions, what kind of things might we learn about the gospels? That would be fresh. And also, when you're dealing with the concept of reliability, you're looking, not only are you looking back at that ancient, literature, but you're asking still today, what would it constitute for us to understand what they understood as reliability? So there's a sort of-- That's correct.

One of the things I'm working through right now, and honestly, Kurt, I don't have the answer as of the time, as we're talking now, which is October 2018. I'm still looking at this and trying to look at it as objectively as I can. I acknowledge, of course, I want to be able to show that the gospels are historically reliable.

But writing ancient biography and ancient history, they had different rules than we have today. There was a lot more flexibility in how they could report things. And they would say, you have to report things exactly as they happened, but none of them did that.

So what exactly were the rules? What did they mean? How far off reporting things with precision did they go? And can we consider that reliable by our standards? These are difficult questions, and they require a lot of thought. So when we say historically reliable, what exactly do we mean? We don't mean an errant. We don't mean infallible.

We don't mean divinely inspired. Certainly we could say of the Psalms, we think that they are divinely inspired. We think they're an errant or infallible.

But we don't think that they are historically reliable. It's not that they're not historically reliable. They're poetry.

They're hymns. So it's not the genre that we would say is reliable. Same thing about Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, Revelation.

We would not say those things are historically reliable, but we would say they are divinely inspired. In the same way, we could look at some of the most accurate ancient literature, like maybe Asconius, perhaps Tacitus in some ways, and say they're historically reliable. They wouldn't be historically reliable in the same sense as today.

Maybe Asconius would. But a lot of them are going to take, you know, flexibilities in the way that they report those things that we would be uncomfortable with today. So even if we say they're historically reliable, we would not say that they are divinely inspired and errant or infallible.

The principle here is you can have something that's historically reliable without it being divinely inspired. You can have something that's divinely inspired without it being historically reliable, or in principle, you can have something that is both divinely inspired and historically reliable. So when we talk about the gospels, we're specifically asking if they're historically reliable.

That's what I'm doing right now. I'm not asking if they're divinely inspired and errant or infallible. I'm asking, do they meet that standard of historical reliability? So are we going to define historically reliable according to the conventions in play that day or of our day that's going to influence how we answer that question? Now it seems from studying this that there is a spectrum in ancient history of, you know, say straight reportage, you know, unfiltered versus large embellishments and exaggerations and there's a spectrum.

And we think the gospels, you know, are not straight reportage, but they're also not on the other end of the spectrum where there are these vast exaggerations which, you know, lend to the view that they're historically unreliable. Today, you mentioned we've got standards today. Even today though, there's a variety in the spectrum.

Maybe we push or tend more toward the straight reportage aspect, but when some writers write biographies, they're not per se giving straight reportage today, are they? No. In fact, no one at any time gives straight reportage. Okay, straight reportage that's unfiltered.

Nobody does that because everybody has objectives, what they're trying to accomplish in writing, and even if they're trying to be as fair-minded as possible, they're still going to be select in the material that they report. You can't report everything. I mean, if we were to write, if your mom or dad were to write, a biography of Kurt Jarrus, how much information would that be? Well, you can't include it all, right? Yeah.

I don't know how old you are if you're in your 20s, 30s, whatever, but let's just say a person is 40 years old. Well, it would take 40 years to read a biography of a 40-year old if we're going to include everything, right? So the person is going to take, the historian, the biographer is going to take only those things that a person said and the events that tell us who that person was, and the most important or the most interesting things in that person's life. They're going to get rid of a lot of the mundane things.

They're not going to include those. So every historian, biographer, is select in what they do. There's always going to be a filter.

There's always going to be the person's objective and the lenses through which they understand that person. Yeah, there are always edits, it seems. And that's part of the challenge.

It seems in gospel studies is trying to discover how or why certain edits were changed. So there's good debate over that. Okay, so you talked about how gospel differences were one of your areas of interest and more recently reliability.

Any other interests that have intrigued you within the field of gospel studies? Within field of gospel studies and not historical Jesus studies like, let's say, the deity of Christ, that did Jesus really believe he was divine? Yeah, that has interested me and I've spent time with that, but in terms of just pure gospel studies, I'd say, no, I've focused on gospel differences and now I'm focusing on are the gospels historically reliable? At this very moment, I am comparing or really looking at Suetonius. So you have Plutarch, for whom I spent a whole lot of time in the gospel differences, and Plutarch is considered the best of all ancient biographers. Suetonius is considered the finest of all Roman biographers.

So if you just look at Rome, rather than those things written in Greek, you're looking at the Roman ones, those written in Latin, then Suetonius is considered the finest. And he is regarded as writing biography closer to how we write today in biography than the other ancient biographers. He's still not like us today writing biography, but he's the closest to us.

So that's why I'm spending a lot of time with him when we talk about historical reliability, and which sense, senses, can we say that Suetonius is historically reliable, especially if we take into consideration judging them by the literary conventions in play when he wrote. And it's a challenge. It's a lot of stuff to look at, and it's a challenge.

Yeah, so now I don't think I've heard you lecture on theological issues that consume many discussions of evangelicals, myself included, such as, say, Calvinism, Arminianism, the Soteriology Debates, Atonement, and other theological discussions. Why is that? Why haven't you spoken on those topics? And do you think that they're important enough to really go out and speak on and address? Yeah, I think they're very important. That's why I'm glad folks like you were doing it.

You know, people like Jerry Walls on Calvinism and Layton Flowers, Braxton Hunter, so many people that are dealing, you know, talking about Calvinism and sovereignty, and William Lane Craig, you know, talking about Molinism versus Calvinism, and William Lane Craig focusing on Atonement. I think all of these are very important topics. However, I don't have keen interest to really get in them.

I don't think that I'll be able to resolve the Calvinism, Arminian, Molinism, Debate. I'd want to just say, you know, if Bill Craig believes it, that settles it for me, because he's really researched these things. But, you know, I guess they just don't interest me as

much.

They, I don't want to focus on them. I don't have the bandwidth in my brain. You know, all of us have, there are some people who just have amazing IQs.

They can think quickly, clearly, and they have the ability to take in so much. I don't have that, and I have ADD, so I have to, I have to spend my time focusing on just a few issues, and I can laser focus on those. It's like Calvinism, Atonement, all those are very important, but I just don't have the bandwidth for them.

I don't have the interest in them, and I'm just focusing on the things, just a few topics, like resurrection, gospel studies, historical Jesus studies. Those are the things for which I have a passion. Yeah, and the philosophy of history, historical reliability, it seems that there aren't as many people researching, thinking about writing about that field as opposed to the more, you know, theological, proper discussions.

Well, that's true. You know, when you come to historical reliability, if you talk to evangelical scholars, even most of them, I would say, might respond, "Oh, yeah, the gospels are historically reliable." Well, what do you mean by that? They might be hard-pressed to come up with some sort of answers that could really carry on an in-depth conversation. Well, you know, we can show that a lot of things in the gospels actually occurred.

Okay, how do you do that? Well, there are certain criteria of authenticity, like multiple independent sources, unsympathetic sources, earlier eyewitness sources, embarrassing sources, things like that. Okay, I'll go with that. And you're aware of the several New Testament scholars, historians of Jesus who focus on this and the hermeneutics who are saying that the criteria, they're not as useful as you think they are.

Yep, I'm aware of those, and, you know, I can respond to those kind of things, but, well, so even if we can verify that certain things happened, did they happen exactly as the gospels reported them? If they took some sort of liberties in the way they reported things, how close to it, the actual event is it, and if they want to insist that it's, well, it's very little like that. Well, how do you know that? Well, they're divinely inspired, okay? Well, how does that really justify the conclusion that they report with the kind of accuracy that we use in the 21st century, if that's not what they were using in the 1st century? Why do you say that? It would have to be that way rather than a different way. There you start to get into it, and it's like, well, then they're just making assumptions.

It's not any kind of arguments. It's just based on assumptions. Well, this is the way I think God would have done it.

Well, why do you think that? Why do you have to take this top-down view? Why not do a bottom-up view? As I say to my students, whatever view of the gospels we have must be

in concert with what we observe in the gospels. And then we must accept them as God has given them to us rather than forcing them to fit in a frame of how we think he should have. And those are the kind of things we have to be careful about.

And it's just some tough questions that we have to spend a lot of reflection on. Well, I'm certainly looking forward to hearing more of your lectures on this. And I'm sure your forthcoming works.

You're probably going to write a book, but it'll maybe come out in seven or eight years, you know? Yeah, probably not that long, but it's going to be several years from now. Mike, thanks again for talking to us about your interest in gospel studies. And I definitely look forward to your learning more about your current and forthcoming work on reliability, historical reliability.

Great. Thanks, Kurt. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, please visit RisenJesus.com where you can find authentic answers to questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the gospels.

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