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S6E2 - Jesus, Eschatological Agent

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

What does it mean that Jesus believed he was God's eschatological agent? What do people have to say about his identity as a miracle worker or exorcist? Are these ideas connected? Find about these things and more as Dr. Licona unpacks these topics in this episode.

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Transcript

Hello and welcome to the Risen Jesus Podcast with Dr. Michael Lacona. Dr. Lacona is associate professor in theology at Houston Baptist University and he's the president of Risen Jesus, a 501c3 nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Jairus, your host.

In last week's episode, we looked at what historical bedrock was and how it pertained to the minimal facts argument and we're going to be looking through some of the data now moving forward on what those facts are or may be as we explore the different points of Jesus's life, ministry, death and thereafter and very much looking forward to the star of our program. Dr. Michael Lacona helping us sift through some of this data. Mike, it's great to be with you this week.

Thanks Kurt, good to be back. So on today's program, we're going to be looking at the historical bedrock for the life of Jesus but in particular, certain claims about the miraculous. Jesus as a miracle worker, as an exorcist and also as an eschatological agent.

Now eschatological, that's a big term. What does that refer to? Well eschatos means the end. It's the last.

So we're talking about the end times, the last times, the final day. So it would be when we talk about an eschatological agent, it would be the person who ushers in God's kingdom on the final day. Okay, great.

So before we get to the eschatological agent, let's talk about Jesus as a miracle worker and as an exorcist. So this is something that in particular non-Christian sources kind of refer to Jesus as. And I think that's really intriguing.

But you're the expert here, so tell me more. Well you're right. You mentioned about a non-Christian source.

You do have Josephus who is writing toward the end of the first century. Josephus as we mentioned in a previous season, he was not a Christian. He was born into a Jewish family of where his father was Matthias, who was a popular priest, Jewish priest in Jerusalem.

So this place is Josephus geologically, geographically in the region where the church was headquartered. And where Jesus did a lot of, had done a lot of his work. He's born around the 37, just a few years after Jesus' crucifixion.

So he would have been there while the apostles are out proclaiming their message about Jesus. And Josephus mentions a few things about Jesus. Now you've got one of the two texts in which Josephus mentions Jesus.

There are some disputed items in it, rightly so, justifiably so, because it appears that a Christian at some point doctored up the text a little bit. But most scholars, Josephus scholars who studied this text agree that Josephus mentions Jesus as a miracle worker, one who performed astonishing deeds. He doesn't use the typical word "dunimus" for miracles.

He uses, I think it's a parodic word, which means like astonishing deeds, amazing deeds. So it's not the typical Christian word that's used, the word used by the Christians for miracle, but he's still using a term for that. So you have Josephus who mentions Jesus as a worker of astonishing or amazing deeds.

That doesn't mean that he believed Jesus did those things, but it shows that Jesus was known as a miracle worker. So you do have it at least one non-Christian source who mentions Jesus as a miracle worker. You also have, in the Christian sources, the earliest Christian source would be Mark, who's writing around somewhere between 20 and 40 years after Jesus' crucifixion.

I had a student at Houston Baptist University, I supervised his thesis, and he did it on some pro-legama, some preliminary matters related to the Gospel of Mark. And he found that he surveyed over 200 critical scholars writing in English since 1965. And those who are commenting on the Gospel of Mark, they're writing articles about Mark journal articles, or they're writing books, commentaries, or New Testament introductions on the Gospel of Mark, commenting on it.

And those that comment, the majority of them, not a substantial, but certainly a majority of them were saying that Mark wrote between the years 50 and 70, which was a surprise to both of us. And then that can be narrowed further to between the years 65 and 70. And you don't have many scholars at all, maybe 10%, who put it after 70.

There's a thought that's going around that most scholars would place it after 70 or a significant substantial percentage, but that's not the case. It's a very small minority that date Mark after the year 70. But even at the latest, let's say if you say 70, and you date

Jesus' crucifixion at the earliest, which would be the year 30, you're looking at it only 40 years.

And Mark certainly mentions Jesus as a miracle worker. Now you contrast that with other miracle workers, such as Hennina Bendosa, Honi the Circle drawer, you know, some of these others, I'm trying to think who else there would have been, Apollonius of Tiana. You know, those miracles are being reported more than 125 years after the person had lived.

But with Jesus, within 40 years at most with the Gospel of Mark and perhaps even sooner. So it's early, it's reported by an unsympathetic source, Josephus, and it's reported in every layer of the gospel tradition. So it's in Mark.

It's in the so-called Q source, which is as we looked at in our second season of this podcast with the synoptic problem. The Q source is the hypothetical source used by Matthew and Luke. So if you have common tradition, a lot, you know, with verbal parallels between Matthew and Luke, but it's absent from Mark.

Well, they could have used Mark as a source. And because of the verbal similarities, it seems that they were either using a common source, could have been oral tradition, or either Luke was using Matthew or Matthew was using Luke. And the common source, again, could have been oral tradition or a written document, which that's what most scholars who go with the Q source think it was written.

And they give various reasons for that. And Q is just simply an abbreviation for the German word *quella*, which means source. So that's all it is.

It's just a hypothetical source used by Matthew and Luke. And the majority of critical scholars today go with that. Was there a Q or did Luke use Matthew? We don't know for sure, but it's not a big deal.

But you know, it's in every layer of the gospel tradition. It's in Mark. It's either in Q or Luke used Matthew, Matthew used Luke.

It is in what's called special M material. That would be material content in Matthew that's unique to Matthew. It's not found in the other gospels.

It's in the special L material. So that's material that's unique to Luke, but not found in any other. And it's also in John.

You have miracles of Jesus and John, which is, you know, you've got some independent miracles there that aren't mentioned anywhere else. So it's in Mark, you, M L John, and Josephus mentions it. So you certainly have multiple independent sources.

It's in, like I said, every layer of the gospel tradition. So Jesus was a miracle worker is

granted by virtually every historian of Jesus, regardless of their theological persuasions. Now, Mike, you said that this happened 40 years.

Mark's writing the earliest happened 40 years after the events themselves. You know, 40 years is a long time. And maybe there's a chance for the message to get diluted and embellished.

Maybe we shouldn't really believe this stuff after all, because such a long time has passed. Well, you can argue that. And of course, there's, we have to acknowledge our limits as historians.

You know, we, a theologian or just, you know, someone who is reading scripture and, you know, they want to be a skeptic, you can go ahead and deny that Jesus performed deeds, that astonished crowds and that he regarded as divine miracles and exorcisms. But, you know, you do have this multiple independent source. You do have Josephus.

Why would he, you know, why would he get that from a Christian source? If he's not a Christian, why would he even care what the Christians say about that? But you could do that. I mean, there's just a sense in which we can only go so far with the evidence. But if you're that skeptical about 40 years, and remember, it might even be as soon as 20 years or even less.

But if you want to, you know, be that skeptical about 40 years, I mean, that's not that long ago. Right now we're recording this in the year 2021. So, you know, we're looking at 1981, which would be 40 years.

And, you know, well, if you go back just a few years before that, six years before that, you have the end of the Vietnam War. And there are many Vietnam vets who are still alive today, who can tell you about the Vietnam War. Lots of documentaries being made.

Apparently, historians don't think 45 years, 46 years is too long ago for eyewitness testimony. They're still interviewing the World War II vets, the few that are still alive. And that war was over what 55 76 years ago here in 2021, 76 years ago.

And yet they're still interviewing World War II vets. You know, when you are involved in something, you tend to recall it a little better. You tend to recall things better if it emotionally impacts you.

So take for example, 9/11. That was 20 years ago, 20 years ago that 9/11 happened. And yet if you talk to just about anyone who was an adult during that time, you can ask them what the weather was like that day.

And they'll tell you what the weather was like. But then you go and you say, well, what was the weather like on 9/11 last year? And they won't be able to tell you. Well, why do they remember it from 20 years ago? Because they were emotionally impacted by it.

The weather in that day was burned into their memory. You just don't forget those kinds of things. So it's like, if you saw Jesus walk on water, I don't care if it was 80 years ago, you would remember it.

You might get some of the peripheral details confused, but you're going to remember the general, the gist of what happened. I remember for 9/11, I was an eighth grade applied arts and technology course when I learned of what happened. I didn't quite, you know, I was just a kid.

I was in middle school. I didn't quite know the gravity of the situation yet. I maybe had heard of the world trade centers before, but you know, when you're just a child, you don't realize that impact until maybe you turn on the TV and realize what's happened.

Well, I remember it was a cool, but very nice September morning where we were living in Virginia Beach. And I decided that before I started work that day, I was going to or take a break or whatever, I was going to just walk around the block in our neighborhood and just spend a little time in prayer. And so I walked around the block and when I came up to the front door and opened the door, my wife yelled for me to come in to the living room where she had the TV on and you know, the one plane had already hit the world trade center, the Twin Towers.

Maybe both had at that point. I don't know. But so see, there's something I don't remember.

I don't remember if one or both had hit it at that point, but I do remember that they had been hit. I remember that they neither of them had collapsed at that point because when the one did collapse and there was a lot of dust flying around, my wife said, I think one just fell and I said, no, that's not even possible. And then sure enough, it had.

So yeah, I mean, most of us remember those kind of things and how emotionally impacted we were. And I was thinking, boy, I had just been in that building with a colleague one year before. And my wife and I, when we were dating, I've got a picture of me atop that building just standing outside the little gate up top.

And I had my hands like this. And I mean, it's just way up there. So yeah.

So 40 years is not too is by no means too long. All right. All right.

So you've convinced me 40 years is not too long. And so we've got Jesus, this miracle worker, the exorcist. How does this this data set? How is it relevant to the case that's going to be made here for the resurrection of Jesus? What's so important about him being a miracle worker? Well, it's just one of those items that we talk about with a context, the context in which all these things about Jesus occurs.

So if we get a report that let's say, you know, my mom died in 2013, my dad died a year

later. If my sister reported that my mom appeared to her risen from the dead, I would be inclined to think that she had hallucinated, okay, or she'd been on weed or something, you know. But why is that? Well, because there's no reason to think that my mom would come back from the dead.

You could say the same thing about Jesus had it not been things like he was a miracle worker and some other things that would belong in that category. These establish a context that's charged with religious significance. And it's within that context that we have claims that Jesus rose from the dead.

And that makes a difference. So, you know, if Jesus actually rose from the dead, that's the kind of thing we would expect if God actually exists and Jesus was who he claimed to be. But it's not the kind of thing we would expect, you know, of my mom to come back from the dead.

Sure, right. Okay, that makes sense. So with the impact of the context bearing on the overall case, let's move now to the concept here of the Jesus as an S-catalogical agent.

How is that important for the context and what can be known about that? Well, Jesus is talking about, you know, his purpose for coming. So this is something just like him being a miracle worker and exorcist. This is granted by virtually every scholar who studies the subject.

I mean, you could count on one hand. It wouldn't even take one hand. You'd probably get one or two fingers at the most of people who have published scholars in the relevant field who have published that said Jesus was not known as a miracle worker and exorcist during his lifetime.

I've asked this of two leading specialists on the miracles and exorcisms of Jesus in terms of studying the historicity of Jesus being known in that sense. And they said they don't know of a single scholar. I know of one, I don't want to mention a person's name, but I know of one.

That's about it. But they didn't know of a single scholar. These are experts who have studied this in depth.

They didn't know of a single critical scholar who would deny that Jesus was known as a miracle worker and exorcist during his lifetime. That's not to say that they think he was a miracle worker and exorcist is just that they are saying that he was known as one. Now, in terms of another thing, we look at him as an eschatological agent.

So that means Jesus believed himself to be chosen by God to usher in God's kingdom. And so you have Jesus making statements such as, if by the finger of God, I'm casting out demons, then the kingdom of God has come among you, something like that. And that is found in both Matthew and Luke.

And indeed, that is one of those sayings that qualifies as belonging to the Q material. So it's perhaps very early, perhaps earlier than at least Matthew and Luke if it belonged to the Q source. You have on another occasion, Jesus tells the disciples of John the Baptist.

They asked John has asked, are you the one meaning of the Messiah? Or are we to expect someone else? And they respond, Jesus responds by saying, look, you know, you've seen the miracles that I've done. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame are walking, the dead are raised, the gospel is preached to the poor. By the way, that's the same thing that is mentioned in Isaiah 61 of the common Messiah is the same thing mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls, 4 Q 5 21, that these were Messianic expectations.

And Jesus is saying, look, you know, the miracles I've done. I'm fulfilling everything from what I've done that suggests that I'm the Messiah. The Messiah was to usher in God's kingdom.

And then you look at the centrality of Jesus teaching at the central, at the central of Jesus teaching was the kingdom of God. So Jesus did view himself as God's agent that had been chosen to usher in this as a kind of logical kingdom. And this is another thing, part of historical bedrock that historians of Jesus, a heterogeneous consensus of scholars, virtually all would agree, can be known about the historical Jesus.

Again, that is not to say that he actually was God's eschatological agent. It is to say that he believed that he was and acted as such. Right, right.

And that distinction is important because it's this other data that will come to later on certain activities that, you know, the hypothesis, the best hypothesis for the explanation will help us to make that connection back to what Jesus believed about himself. So it can verify, depending on your view, your hypothesis, it can use that data set better than some other hypothesis may. And so yeah, very good.

All right, your skeptic, you can say that Jesus was a magician, an illusionist, you could say that he was a deceiver. You could say that he was deluded into thinking he was God's eschatological agent. But you know, at least look at the data.

And that's why what scholars do, they look at the data and they're able to conclude that he was known as a miracle worker in exorcist during his lifetime. He did regard himself as God's eschatological agent. Right, right.

And that's far more than just a mere magician or someone who was doing signs and wonders to use some of the biblical terminology. But because he believed himself to be someone more important than someone who merely did those things. So that is important.

And we're thinking about the best explanation here. Great. Well, thanks, Mike, for helping navigate through the ideas there of Jesus as a miracle worker and an exorcist,

what the data was there and the importance that Jesus as an eschatological agent plays out.

It's a big term, but I think we all get the gist of what you mean there and what others mean when they use that terminology. And looking forward to next week exploring some of the claims that Jesus made about his death and possible resurrection. Well, we'll get into that.

I know that can be tricky and there's arguments back and forth on that. So I look forward to hearing your thoughts next week. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, visit RisenJesus.com to find authentic answers to genuine questions about the historical reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus.

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