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## S4E1 - The Historian and Miracles

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### Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In the introductory episode of season 4, Dr. Mike Licona lays out various definitions and instances of what a miracle could be and addresses whether or not historians are allowed to investigate miracle claims.

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 Dr. 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 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Jarrus, your host. Welcome to season 4 of the Risen Jesus podcast where we will be talking about the historian and miracles.

On today's episode, we'll be introducing the topic, but also spending some time recapping last season, as it has been a while since we've come to you with content. And there's some good explanation for that, isn't there, Mike? There sure is, and I want to be one of the first to congratulate you on getting your PhD. It's a huge, huge

accomplishment, Dr. Jarrus.

Thank you. I appreciate that. Yes, I've been busy finishing up the PhD, and so needed to just designate time toward that.

But hey, I'm glad to be here with you. And we're coming back now with some great content from this book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, a new historiographical approach. We started last season going through the material in this book, and we are going to spend this season talking about the historian and miracles.

And I've already used a loaded term. I mean, I've used the loaded term historian last season where we talked about what a historian is, what is history, these sorts of questions, horizons and biases. And of course, that will continue to play into our discussions.

And we looked at a number of topics, Mike. We even looked at the postmodern historian and the difficulties that he or she may have in their methods of history. But I've used another loaded term already, miracles.

For some of us, we might just think, oh, it's divine intervention or something like that. The term miracle is complicated, but I'll let you explain why that is and the different perspectives on what a miracle is. Well, as you said, miracle, there's a lot of different definitions for it.

So we would call it an essentially contested concept. There's no consensus on how to define miracle. In fact, just in my study, I found nearly two dozen different definitions of miracle.

I suppose not all of them were mutually exclusive, but some were. So most of us think of a miracle as a divine act. That could be a simple way of putting it.

The way I defined it was a miracle is an event for which a natural explanation is implausible. And it's not that we would expect one or wait for one in the future. It is the event is of such nature that a natural explanation will not work for it.

So I suppose in that sense, you could say it. We're not saying it's an act of we're not going with monotheism. It could be polytheism.

It could be a supernatural being, a being that's not an omni-being, but has some sense of divinity, some degree of divinity. So that would be that way we're not biasing the definition of miracle to the Christian worldview. So it's broad enough that you're referring to an immaterial agent or agents performing some act in the natural world.

Is that broad enough and safe enough? Yeah, I would say so. I don't know that I would necessarily say it is an immaterial being. I suppose you could.

I hadn't thought about that, but I would just say of a divine being of some sort and just not qualify it further. Right, right. So your definition is that there is a no natural explanation.

Let me play. That's right. And the event is such a nature that a natural explanation would never do for it.

I see. Based on what we know about our universe. Let me pose as a devil's advocate here, if I may.

I've heard William Lane Craig use this example before about the Israelites crossing the Jordan River on dry ground. He's posited. Well, maybe there was a rock slide upstream at that time.

Would that still pose as a miracle then or not because there's a natural explanation? Yeah, that's a good question. So, you know, we talk about the definition of a miracle and then how to identify a miracle. And these are two separate matters, okay, and they shouldn't be confused.

But sometimes you've got to, you know, look at the one to help define the other. So, the way I would identify a miracle, I think I'm borrowing this from the Intelligent Design Movement. My friend Bill Dempsky, when he was doing his second PhD, he was doing this one in philosophy.

And he came up with the idea of Intelligent Design. And it was, well, how do you identify when something has been designed? And up until that point, a lot of folks were given the, you know, well, it's extremely unlikely by natural causes. So, you know, you would look at this as extremely unlikely to have happened.

Let's say it that way, extremely unlikely to have happened. But that just talks about, you know, if you have something like a full house, well, that's extremely unlikely. Or someone winning the lottery, that's extremely unlikely.

It's even more unlikely that you will win the lottery if you're playing, then someone will win it. Because there's a whole lot more people playing. So there's a whole lot more chances someone will win the lottery than you will win the lottery, which your chances would be whatever, one in 300 million, or whatever it is for that particular state lottery.

So, Bill Dempsky added another component to that. So it's very extremely improbable. But the second thing is that it has signs of intelligent causation.

Okay. And I think if I remember correctly, it's been years since I've looked at this, but I think he calls that specified complexity. So, that would be, so it's extremely unlikely to occur.

And it exhibits patterns that we normally affiliate with intelligent causation. So, you know, you walk on the beach in the morning and you see some ripples from the tide as it went out. You see ripples in the sand.

Well, that's a pattern. Okay. And that pattern is every bit as unlikely that than any other pattern.

But that's kind of, you know, it doesn't really show any kind of intelligent causation behind it. But if you look at a cornfield and you see all these straight rows of corn, and it's all corn without a lot of weeds growing in between, well, that exhibits a pattern we normally affiliate with intelligent causation. Or let's say that you're on a train ride into Atlanta.

And just before you, or as you're entering the Atlanta area, you see some flowers on the side and they are arranged to form a message that says welcome to Atlanta. Well, that would be very unlikely, you know, just as an arbitrary kind of pattern. But it's also the kind of pattern we normally affiliate with an intelligent cause because it communicates information.

So with that in mind, I think the way we identify a miracle is it's extremely unlikely to have occurred by natural causes. And second, it occurs in a context that's charged with religious significance. Or you could say it occurs in a context in which we might expect a God to act.

Now, saying that they're like, I ask my students every year, right now I'm in the midst of teaching and, of course, at Houston Baptist University where I teach, called a scripture and apologetics implications. And one of the first weeks, I asked the students, as we begin talking about miracles, we distinguish between a class A and a class B miracle. A class B miracle would be something like I prayed and I got an answer to prayer.

Well, is that really a miracle or did that happen by, you know, coincidence? Well, we may never know. Of course, the more unlikely the coincidence, you know, the more likely that becomes a stronger case for a miracle. A class A miracle would be such that it's almost it's virtually undeniable that this is a miracle, that God intervened in this kind of a situation.

My friend, Lloyd Reed, he back in June of 1987, he was involved in a car crash that put him in a coma for a few weeks. And on July 4th, 1987, his church was out on a picnic and they were praying for Lloyd at four o'clock in the afternoon, they got together to pray for him. And miles away in the hospital at four o'clock, Lloyd came out of his coma.

So I look at that and I'd say, well, that's a class A miracle. Now you could try to come up with some naturalistic explanation, but that would seem extremely unlikely. The fact that it occurred in a context charged with the religious significance and the timing of it would

suggest that this is indeed a miracle.

So I ask students if they've ever had a type A miracle, a few have, but you've got to look at it and you say, well, you know, how strong is it as an A? And sometimes it can border between an A and a B. So there's the spectrum that's going on. And we have to keep that in mind. So with regard to the Israelites crossing the dry ground, even if there were a natural explanation upstream of a rock slide, it's not merely a natural explanation that there is a significant aspect of the timing involved there that suggests that it's not a particular time.

Especially given the religious context or however you phrase that there, that this is a miracle. In fact, that God was providing for the Israelites in a special way for a special time for a special purpose. So that's right, because the river was going and then it wasn't right.

Right. Yeah. It wasn't at that particular time.

It was the timing involved. Right. Yes, exactly.

I'll give you a personal story here. Back in, it must have been 1988 or '89, probably 1989. It was the summer.

And I was a martial arts instructor at the time. And I had some students, most of whom were black belts, and we formed an exhibition team and we performed at a bunch of different events. We performed in nursing homes.

We did a half time show for the Baltimore Blast. It was a professional indoor soccer team at that point in big civic centers. Pretty cool.

Well, that summer, I think, yeah, I'm pretty sure it was '89. We got to perform. I sent a letter and requested to the mayor's office in Ocean City, Maryland that we could perform on the boardwalk at Ocean City, Maryland.

And so we got permission. And so for a couple of days, we would perform in the afternoon, we'd perform in the evening. And at the end of each exhibition, I would give a gospel presentation.

So on a particular day, it was raining. It was pouring and they were calling for rain all day. And we were standing at a church.

It was a Mennonite church, actually, which was really cool. They allowed us all to stay there. And they're pacifists.

They don't believe even in self-defense. But they allowed us to stay in their church. In fact, on a Sunday morning, they asked me to give a lesson on why I believed self-defense was biblically justifiable.

It was pretty cool. So anyway, this one day, I don't remember what day it was, but it was pouring down rain. And they were calling for rain all day.

And it's like, we're not going to be able to do something. And the afternoon came, it's still pouring. And they say, you know, well, what do we do, Mike? And I said, well, let's just pray about it and let's just go down and see what happens.

We'll drive down to the beach, which was maybe a 10-minute drive. So we all got in a van and we went down to the beach. It's pouring all the way.

And we got there in the parking lot right by the boardwalk. And I said, all right, let's pray. This is God's thing.

If he want, you know, we're going to give the message of Jesus afterward. If he wants us to do it, we can do it. He can work it out.

Let's just see. So we prayed. Now, this is 1989.

So we're talking about 31 years ago. So I can't remember exact timing here, but my recollection is that when we prayed that if God wanted us to do it, that to do the exhibition, that he would stop the rain, it seemed like it stopped immediately. And when I say immediately, you know, I'm saying within three minutes.

So we're going, well, that's kind of interesting. And we got out of the van. We walked up to the boardwalk to the stage where we were going to perform.

And of course, it's just all, it's rainy. I mean, it's just soaked. And we're thinking there's just no way we can do this.

All the jumping kicks and things like this would be too dangerous. Well, as we're examining the stage, the manager from the store right on the other side of the boardwalk came up and said, could you guys use some towels to wipe off the stage? And we said, yeah. And they just gave us all the towels we wanted.

We wiped the stage off. But then I looked at it and it was still damp. And again, you could do some things, but there's no way we could do any kind of jumping kicks and things like this.

It was still too dangerous. So I prayed. And my recollection is immediately a wind breeze came off the ocean and blew the platform dry.

And we gave our exhibition. I gave the gospel presentation at the end. And just as I was winding up, I'm talking like the last minute of it, we could start to feel the rain, little drops starting to come again.

And I finished up. We loaded the van up. And by the time we were closing the door, it

was raining again.

So we'll look at that and say, well, we have, you know, the weather, the clouds were going in such a direction. It could have been that it was going to have that law and the rain and the wind was going to come anyway. That's possible.

But the fact that it occurred in a context charged with religious significance would, would in my view border on that being a class A miracle. I was going to say, well, maybe you guys just so happened to have picked that pocket of time when it wasn't going to rain in that particular area. But yeah, there's something, yeah, it makes you sit in ponder for a moment.

You're like, huh? So, but now my most important question about this entire episode here, this is 1989. Does Mike Lacona sport a mustache or not in this year? I think I did back in 1989. I could totally see a... I'm not positive, but I think I did.

People have to have Debbie verify, but I could totally see 1989 Mike Lacona martial arts instructor with a mustache. That man, for a picture of that, that would have been great. Okay, I want to talk about, if you can enlighten us about the different perspectives on miracles, because you work in a field where many scholars are not sympathetic to your view, even on what a miracle is.

So we're not even yet contesting whether some miracle happened, but just on the definition of what a miracle is. Could you help us understand what are some other views out there on the term miracle? Oh, well, I'd have to look those up in my book, but I would say, you know, of course, most people think of a miracle as a divine act. Some of the definitions of miracle, I think, confuse the definition of a miracle with how to identify one.

So for example, I think the prominent historian of Jesus, John Meyer at Notre Dame, I think he confuses it. If I remember correctly, he says something like he defines miracle as an event that in principle must be... I've got it. I've got it.

Well, why would that be the case? You know, if I'm... Let's say I'm the only one around and I'm falling off a cliff and as I'm fallen, I say, "God, help me." And all of a sudden I find myself in a safe place back at the top. If no one else viewed that, it would still be a miracle, right? It's just we wouldn't be able to prove that it was a miracle. So I think here, Meyer is confusing, the definition of a miracle.

I guess not... Yeah, with the identification and co-mingling how to prove it. Actually, yes, that's right. So I have here... The claim you just made is the exact claim you made on footnote three of page 135 here that Meyer confuses the distinction between the miracle and the identification of the miracle.

So that's what you had said here. So that's impressive. When did you write this book? Well, I guess we finished it in 2010.

Okay. Yeah. So 10 years later, you can still remember that fine point.

That's good. All right, now you tell a nice little tale here, which I think I'd like for you to share with people about the use of what I call a loaded term. You call it a contested... Essentially contested concept? Essentially contested concept.

Yeah, that's not my... That's not a term I came up with. I forgot who came up with it. I think he came up with it in the 1950s or early 1960s, but it just means a concept for which there's no consensus in terms of how to define it.

Right, right. I think it's important for Christians to take a step back and think about definitions and terms because sometimes in our conversations we'll use a term miracle and we're going to have a very different view than the other person, especially like an atheist. If we say, "Hey, that was a miracle," they're going to be like, "This here we go again, crazy religious fundamentalist." So it's important to think about these considerations.

And you have a nice anecdote here about the time that your wife got in a car accident. And you had to... I guess you were an eyewitness. Tell me about that story.

Yeah. Actually, I was not an eyewitness. I wasn't in the car at that time.

But she was rear-ended by a pretty large truck. And the insurance company did not want to... I mean, that the car was really messed up. The insurance company of that company, of the corporation that owned the truck, they didn't want to help at all.

They didn't want to give us a rental car. They were just playing hardball. And we said, "Hey, if you're going to do that, if you don't want to do anything like this, we're going to have to take you to court." We did.

But my wife was in pain for a long time. I think she required some surgery as a result of that. But it impacted our lives.

And so the attorney put me on the stand to ask me questions about how that had impacted our lives. And in the midst of the question, I hadn't been coached or anything. The attorney didn't tell me what to say or what not to say.

And so in the course, I forgot how it came up. But I said that, yeah, the car was just so messed up. It was not drivable.

And the insurance company didn't even want to provide a rental force. And at that point, the defense attorney stood up and said, "Objection and the judge," all of a sudden told the jury to leave the room for a moment and then told me to leave the room. And I'm sitting out in the hall and they said, "What's going on? I'm thinking what's going on." And all of a sudden, the jurists are walking past me.



They're going home. And I said, "What happened?" And they said, "Well, you weren't allowed to say the word insurance company because that would unnecessarily bias us. And so it's a mistrial." So we had to do it all over again with a different jury.

But I didn't know that. But something similar is going on today, even today in 2020, with the matter of whether historians are allowed to investigate miracle claims. There are philosophers of history and New Testament scholars who would say that historians are not allowed within their professional capacity to investigate a miracle claim.

They simply don't have the tools to do so. And this is important because if they are correct, then that means that people like Harry Habermas, Bill Craig, myself, and many others who have contended over the years that the evidence strongly supports the resurrection of Jesus being an event that occurred in history, they would say that that is an illegitimate—the process of trying to determine whether Jesus rose from the dead is illegitimate from the get-go because historians cannot investigate a miracle claim. So this is every bit as important as investigating and knowing how to converse on this as it is to see, was Jesus the story of Jesus' resurrection? Was it a legend? Was it a myth? Was the story about Jesus' resurrection amplified over years to become something that it really wasn't that we find in the gospels? All this kind of stuff.

You'd look at these, but this is an entirely separate matter to deal with. Some historians investigate miracle claims and it's as though as soon as you say, "Hey, here's a historical case for the resurrection of Jesus." Objection, you can't do that as a historian. And so a few folks like myself, some philosophers of history and some others have said over the last couple of decades, "No, that's not true.

We can investigate miracle claims as historians." And so this is a live discussion that is going on right now amongst philosophers of history and New Testament scholars. And to that end, in future episodes of season four, we'll be looking at thinkers such as David Hume, C.B. McCullough, John Meyer, Bart Ehrman, and James Dunn and some others and the views and arguments they put forward in response, concern, or objection to the term miracle. So we'll be looking at the historians and miracles.

So okay, well, we've got a few minutes left here, Mike, and as we've done in seasons past, we take some question from one of your listeners. So this question here comes from Matthew and he says, "What's with the literary devices kick? Is everything a literary device now?" Well, everything is not a literary device. In fact, I never even claimed that it was.

In my book, "Why Are There Differences in the Gospels?" What we can learn from ancient biography, I look at 30 pericopies, stories in Plutarch's lives, 36 actually, that appear two or more times in Plutarch's lives and identify various compositional devices that account for differences between differences that appear in 30 of those stories. And then I say, "Let's go to the Gospels to see if any of these compositional devices can account for

some of the differences in the Gospels." And I appeal to 19 different stories in the Gospels and say, "Yeah, I mean, there are many, many more, but I think that in these 19, these are the clearest examples in which a compositional device is probably responsible for the difference in the accounts, the differences in the accounts." So I'm not at all claiming that there are different, or that they're everywhere and that we should account for all Gospel differences in this way. There are many different reasons for the differences.

One can appeal to differences in the oral tradition that lay behind the accounts or redaction. There's a number of different reasons for these. I mean, 200 years ago, nearly, there was a book called "Undesigned Coincidences" by J.G. Blunt that's been updated by Lydia McGrew of recent.

And I think that undesired coincidences can account for some of the differences in the Gospels. So there are various different ways. I just think that in many cases, compositional devices are going to be the best way, the most plausible way of ascertaining why there are differences between the accounts.

Good. All right. Well, I hope, Matthew, if you're listening, that's sort of a satisfactory answer.

We'll say for now, because I think Mike and I are hoping sometime in the future to have a whole season and more on your work, Mike, on Gospel differences and Plutarch and compositional devices. Yeah, it would be fun. Yeah, it would.

But in the meantime, we're focused on this book, "The Resurrection of Jesus, a New Historiographical Approach," which you can purchase on Amazon still to this day. It's very thick. Lots of great material there.

And if you, of course, have questions for Mike about this, you can submit them to me. You can email me [kurt@defendersmedia.com](mailto:kurt@defendersmedia.com) and we will begin to incorporate some of those questions into future episodes of the "Risen Jesus" podcast. Well, if you'd like to learn more about the work and ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona, please visit [risenjesus.com](http://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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This has been "The Risen Jesus" podcast, a ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona.

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