## John Dickson (Studio)

In the late 2nd century, Tatian of Assyria - who had converted to Christianity while in Rome - began a significant project. He was going to weave the four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, into one. A *super-gospel.*

It's called the *Diatessaron*, which literally means "through the four"--it was an attempt to harmonize the four first-century Gospels.

We can pause right there and ponder the fact that in the middle of the second century, only four Gospels were seen as authoritative enough to be part of this harmonization project.

Anyway, Tatian worked meticulously to match up the four gospel accounts, placing them in the order in which he reckoned all of the events or teachings really happened.

So, the Diatessaron *begins* with a bit of John's Gospel (because that Gospel starts in eternity), and, then, just one paragraph in, we're suddenly into Luke's Gospel - but it's told as a continuous narrative.

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## READING

*1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word itself is God. All things were made by him; and without him not even one existing thing has been made. There was in the days of Herod the king a certain priest named Zacharias of the family of Abijah: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.*

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## John Dickson (studio)

And if there were significant differences between, say, a story in John's Gospel and the same story in Mark's Gospel, Tatian either smoothed out the differences, left out the differences, or he recorded all the differences within the one unified story.

I'm looking at his account of Jesus clearing the Temple - which in John's Gospel happens at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and in Matthew, Mark, and Luke happens at the end. As Tatian tells it, it's about two-thirds through the life of Jesus and it's a wonderful mishmash of lines from all four accounts: a line from Matthew's version, followed by a line from John's version, then Matthew again, then John, then Matthew, then a line from Mark, then John, John, Mark, LUKE gets a look-in, then Mark, Luke again … You get the idea.

Tatian is trying to solve a problem that has been with Christians from the beginning. There are four accounts of the life of Jesus. All of them are regarded as authoritative. And all of them differ - significantly at points.

Sometimes, this caused a headache for Christians, especially as critics of the faith started to notice the differences and claim this undermined the whole story.

That problem remains.

Contemporary scholars like Bart Ehrman make a huge deal of these differences. In fact, he says that the apparent contradictions in the gospels were part of what undermined the fundamentalist faith of his youth – he eventually threw any semblance of Christian faith away, and now identifies as an agnostic.

In 2010, he wrote a New York Times bestselling book called *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and why we don't know about them).* It's a popularized - somewhat strident - version of his more measured academic work.

**Season 11: Jesus Contradicted**

My guest today - who we'll get to in a moment - reckons that Bart Ehrman has "turned more churchgoers away from Christianity than perhaps anyone else in the Western world."

In his animated way, Ehrman chips away at the confidence of believers (and interested doubters!) by throwing up difference after difference in the gospel accounts which he claims disqualify the Gospels as reliable historical sources about Jesus.

But these were hardly *hidden* contradictions. It's a very old, well-known problem. It's what Tatian was trying to smooth over in the second century. And his work became pretty popular for a while. Many Christians thought this was an excellent answer to a real problem.

But … it's to the credit of the early Christians that, despite Tatian's cool solution to the problem of Gospel differences, the greatest thinkers of the period - whether Irenaeus or Origen – said "No way!" "We have four apostolic Gospels. And that's we're going to stick with - whatever headaches that gives us with our sceptical neighbours!"

And that's the argument that won.

Christians could easily have chosen the easy way of a giant Gospel harmony … But they chose the difficult path of four significantly different Gospels.

Good on them!!

But it still leaves the question - for believers and doubters alike: What on earth are we to make of these differences (some would say contradictions) in the four New Testament Gospels?

I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

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## INTRODUCTION

This season of Undeceptions is sponsored by Zondervan Academic. Get discounts on MasterLectures video courses and exclusive samples of their books at zondervanacademic.com/undeceptions.

Each episode we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, philosophy, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to 'undeceive ourselves', and let the truth 'out'.

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## READING

*"You will all fall away," Jesus told [his disciples], "for it is written:*

*"'I will strike the shepherd,*
*and the sheep will be scattered.'*

*But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."*

*Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."*

*"Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."*

*But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.*

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**John Dickson (studio)**

That's from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 14.

The other three gospels - Matthew, Luke and John - recount this same conversation but don't mention a specific number of crows.

**Season 11: Jesus Contradicted**

The number of times the rooster really crowed before Peter denies Jesus has taken up a surprising number of research pages over the years. Because Matthew, Luke, and John have three denials from Peter before just one crow, and yet Mark has one denial from Peter, then one crow, then two more denials, then another crow. To harmonize that, we have to imagine three denials before Mark's first crow, then another three before the crow recorded in Matthew, Luke, and John. We need six denials. And that's how some Christians see this.

Others are just confused. And still others say it's what you'd expect in mere faulty human records!

My guest today is Dr Michael Licona and he says his first encounter with the differences in the Gospels *was* right here in the varied accounts of Peter's denial and how many times the rooster crowed. He was challenged – he hadn't looked carefully enough. He hadn't noticed.

Now, as Professor of New Testament studies at Houston Christian University, he's someone who's taken note of Gospel differences more than just about anyone else in the world. His recent book with Zondervan Academic is *Jesus, Contradicted: Why the Gospels tell the same story differently.*

He's obviously in a bit of a publishing conversation with Bart Ehrman's *Jesus, Interrupted.* In fact, after a few debates Mike and Bart have become friends, despite ongoing disagreements.

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**Mike Licona:** So, when Jesus tells Peter that before the rooster crows, uh, before the rooster crows twice, Peter's, Peter will deny him three times. And then the other gospels say, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.

Now, it doesn't seem like that'd be a problem right off, but then you, you read, and it's, in Mark's gospel it says, Peter denied Jesus the first time, and the rooster crowed. And then after he denied him the third time, then the rooster crowed again.

So in Mark's gospel, the rooster crows once after, the rooster crows after Peter denies him once, not three times. So I think what we're probably having is the other gospels are just simplifying what's going on here.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

I asked Mike to give me a few of the more compelling differences in the gospel accounts to get our heads around.

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**Mike Licona:** Well, I'd say the best ones, uh, the most difficult ones for me would be, um, uh, how Judas hanged himself or, or how Judas died. That'd be one of them. So Matthew says he hung himself and Acts said that he fell headlong and burst open, um, uh, and the gut and his intestines came out.

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**READING**

*“(With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out.)*

The Book of Acts, Chapter 1

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*“When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. ‘I have sinned,” he said, ‘for I have betrayed innocent blood.’*

*‘What is that to us?’ they replied. ‘That’s your responsibility.’*

*So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself."*

Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27

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**Mike Licona:** And then the other would be from the infancy narratives, where did Jesus go? So in Matthew, he goes to, they flee Bethlehem and they go to Egypt. And then it's probably, you know, maybe two years later that Herod dies and then he, he can come back to, um, to, uh, Judea. Uh, but in Luke's gospel, after Jesus is born, Then the days of purification happen, which I think are 40 days.

They go to Jerusalem, Jesus is dedicated in the temple, and then they go and settle in Nazareth. So I think these are probably the two most difficult discrepancies, contradictions, differences in the gospels, however you want to put them. Um, the, the more difficult ones in order to resolve.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

We're going to come back to see if there is any resolution to be had about the different accounts of how Judas died and where Jesus and his family went after he was born. You'll have to hang around to the end for that!

But I think it's fair to say right up front: these differences don't trouble people like Mike as much as some think it should.

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**John Dickson:** What view of the Bible do those contradictions worry or undermine?

**Mike Licona:** Well, divine inspiration and inerrancy. So I don't think that it refutes divine inspiration and inerrancy, but it will certainly call into question and maybe refute certain concepts of, uh, inspiration and inerrancy. Take for example, you know, a very literal, wooden understanding of what it means to say the Bible is God-breathed, *theopneustos,* in 2 Timothy 3:16.

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**READING**

> *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*
>
> *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

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**Mike Licona:** Now that would seem to suggest, that very word, *theopneustos*, God breathed, literally, would seem to, to, we get in our minds a picture of divine dictation. But divine dictation is not going on, because if most scholars are correct that Mark wrote first, Matthew and Luke are using Mark as their primary source in supplementing it, right?

Well, we can see that Mark has some awkward grammar that Matthew and Luke tend to improve. So, we'd have to think of Mark, uh, the Holy Spirit reading Mark at a later time and saying, you know, um, I can do better than that. Let's say it this way-in Matthew and in Luke, or how about Paul's memory lapse in 1 Corinthians 1:16 when he says, you know, I don't remember if I baptized anyone outside the household of Stephanus.

Well, if it's divine dictation, then we have to imagine the Holy Spirit telling Paul to take a writing break while he checks his heavenly records only to find a relevant item missing. So …

**John Dickson:** yeah, he actually corrects himself mid sentence. it's awesome.

**Mike Licona:** Yeah, it's, …So it's, um, it's not a divine dictation. So what does *theopneustos* mean? And when you look at, do a word study, there's only between, I think it's 9 and 13 or 8 and 13 uses of the term prior to Origen in the early third century. And it's not crystal clear what the word means. I mean, it's even used by non-Christian sources. At minimum, the word *theopneustos* means it has its ultimate origin in God.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

We'll post a link in the show notes to some articles explaining some of the debates about the inerrancy of the Bible, and what it actually means for the Bible to be "without error".

But for our purposes, we just need to see that there's a distinction here between divine *dictation* and divine *inspiration*.

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**Mike Licona:** Um, and so what this does is it throws off certain views of inerrancy because they'll say, well, the, you know, the Bible is the word of God, but it's looking at in a sense of, you know… Those who hold to a very wooden view of inerrancy, people like Norman Geisler and some others, um, they, they will not say it's divine dictation, but it comes awfully close to it.

**John Dickson:** divine dictation. I think that's a, that's a really nice way of putting it because that is the view of Islamic orthodoxy, right?

**Mike Licona:** Yes. With the Quran. Yes.

**John Dickson:** The Quran is a divine dictation. And sometimes, um, scholars like yourself can run into trouble, when you come in with your history mumbo jumbo and talk about the Bible, um, and you tell a story in

your book about, uh, speaking in an Islamic university, where this point came up. Can you, um, can you give us a sense of that account?

**Mike Licona:** Yeah, I don't want to mention what university it was or what country it was in, but I visited a country that was largely Muslim. I was lecturing, and one of the universities, an Islamic university, a dean there, learned that I was in country, and he actually invited me to come speak at the university. It was a university that some ISIS fighters had actually been, um, Uh, initiated that day. Um, I was welcomed on campus. I was told I was the first Christian ever to lecture on that campus. And, uh, I was treated well. Um, and respectfully, and um, uh, I, I built a historical case for the resurrection of Jesus. I didn't presuppose the inspiration of Scripture in any sense, or even its general reliability of the Gospels.

I just used historical arguments, and addressed some, uh, objections that came from the students on, um, you know, the, against the resurrection of Jesus. And then the Dean gets up and he said, he really appreciated me because I was willing to look objectively at our scriptures. And he said, if he had done that, if he were ever to do that with the Quran, and then he did this.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

At this point, Mike ran his finger across his neck, as if he would be beheaded.

It’s hyperbolic, perhaps, but not entirely off the mark. The Islamic view of Scripture - the Quran - is that every single word was dictated by the angel Gabriel to Muhammad. There is no human element. You don’t hear the man Muhammad in the Quran. You simply hear the voice of God.

But the Christian view has always been that there’s a human element. We can just as happily say ‘Mark says’ or ‘Paul says’ as we can say

‘God says’. And anyone who reads Greek can tell that Mark, Paul, John, and James have very different writing styles – actually, you can probably tell that from the English translations as well. The personal grammatical style, and the personalities of the authors, shine through the text of the NT in way that could not be said - or, at least, should not be said - of the Quran.

Does that humanity in the text of the NT lead to flat out contradictions? Many think so. Stay with us .

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**BREAK 1**

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**MEDIA - Titanic news footage**

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**John Dickson (studio)**

That’s some archival tape of CBS Evening News with Dan Rather from September 1, 1985, after deep sea explorer Robert Ballard discovered the wreck of the Titanic about 400 miles off the coast of **New**foundland, Canada.

After the tragedy in 1912, surviving passengers recounted their experience of the sinking in news reports and government enquiries. At least 15 of them said that they had witnessed the Titanic breaking apart while still on the ocean’s surface, before taking its final plunge.

But the Titanic’s most senior surviving officer, Charles Herbert Lightoller was adamant - he had seen everything. The ship did not split in two. He told the British Wreck Commissioner’s Inquiry so, and they believed him.

73 years later, the discovery of the Titanic wreckage in two large pieces at the bottom of the ocean changed that conclusion. The ship *did* split in two.

In his new book, Mike uses the differing eyewitness accounts of the sinking of the Titanic as an example of contradictory reports of the same event. Yet no one - at least no one legitimate - suggested that the reports of *how* the Titanic sank meant that it didn't actually sink.

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**John Dickson:** I want to ask you about some Christian strategies in responding to the kind of information that you reveal about potential contradictions in the Gospels. Um, you, you describe them delightfully as the ostrich view, the peacemaker view, and so on. Can, can you, can you run through them? Just like, just rapid fire. Give me, give me

**Mike Licona:** **The ostrich view** is, is like, I'm just gonna stick my head in the ground and ignore these things. I can't deal with them. I don't want to deal with them. Um, maybe they've got some way to be reconciled, but I, I just can't deal with them. I can't handle this now. That's the ostrich view. And then there's the **peacemaker view.** Peace, man. Um, and, um, hey, we can reconcile all of these and harmonize them. Can't we all just get along? And then there's the **cruel interrogator.** It'd be like people like, um, oh, I can't, uh, um, I can't remember his, his name right now, but he was like president of Fuller back in the seventies. Um, and, and he tried to reconcile these things about how many times the rooster crowed when, when, you know, and it's like, there were six times, six times that Peter, uh, denied Jesus.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

Mike's talking there about Harold Lindsell, who was indeed one of the founders of Fuller Theological Seminary in California. His approach to

those pesky roosters is what Mike calls “a classic example of harmonisation efforts going awry.”

As I said earlier, to make Matthew, Luke, and John match up to Mark’s Gospel - to *harmonise* them - Lindsall proposed that the rooster crowed once after Peter had denied Jesus three times then crowed a second time after Peter had denied Jesus another three times. In all, that’s Peter denying Jesus six times.

I’ve got to admit, that kind of gymnastics, if I had to believe it, would cause me deep psychological worries. My inner voice would be whispering: Why do we have to go to such desperate lengths to make these texts say the same thing?

There’s got to be a more responsible way forward.

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**Mike Licona:** And that's, that's. doing violence to the text. It's like, I like to say, um, the, the person's doing, uh, subjecting the gospels to hermeneutical waterboarding until they tell the person what they want to hear. So I just think that there's a better way. And that way is to look at how ancient biographers wrote.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

“hermeneutical waterboarding”! Whoa! That’s funny! And disturbing. I like Mike’s style!!

But Mike makes a crucial comment here. The Gospels are biographies. So, if we’re going to read the Gospels as they present themselves, let’s look at the other biographies of the time period. Let’s see what kind of rules of writing applied when the Gospels were written.

Surely, to take the Gospels seriously is to read them as their authors intended them to be read. And it's pretty clear they didn't intend them to be read the way our Muslim neighbours read the Quran - as entirely the first-person voice of God. They intended them to be read as historical biographies composed by humans who had experienced or investigated the events personally.

I mean, take the opening of Luke's Gospel. Even though I regard Luke as the authoritative word of God (so does Mike), it is plainly the result of a human process:

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**READING**

> *Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Luke chapter 1.*

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**John Dickson:** So, mate, What are the gospels?

**Mike Licona:** Well, you know, Richard Burrage was the one that really took this to a new level. Some people were claimed, some scholars were claiming like Charles Talbert and David Ani that, uh, they were Greco Roman biographies and Burrage set out to disprove that. And he ended up coming to the conclusion that they are Greco Roman biographies.

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## John Dickson (studio)

Mike drops scholar names like the rest of us cite sporting personalities or hollywood stars. The one you should really know about is Richard Burridge. Burridge was a professor at Kings College London, and in 1992 he wrote this ground-breaking volume titled *What are the Gospels?* It's pure nerdiery. He analyzes dozens of ancient biographies in weird detail. He even does things like count up the number of third-person verbs with the key figure as sentence subject, and then compares the stats with each of the Gospels. And he concludes that the Gospels fit extremely well within the ancient literary category of *Bioi*, Lives or Biographies. And once you know the genre of the Gospels, you can then assess them on their own terms. His work has convinced a lot of people.

Back to Mike …

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**Mike Licona:** And, um, and since then, the majority of New Testament scholars by a large margin think that they're either Greco Roman biographies or that they share much in common with that genre.

And of course, someone would say, well, why Greco Roman rather than Jewish biography? Well, as Lewis Feldman, uh, the leading Josephus scholar until about 20 years ago when he died, um, as he said, uh, After the first century and only four biographies were even written by Jews in the first century three by Philo and an autobiography By Josephus, but before after that we don't find any Jewish biographies of their sages until recently. So at that point, Greco Roman biography is pretty much the only game in town.

And two of those four biographies written by Philo, uh, or one biography written by Philo and the autobiography by Josephus, closely resemble that of Greco Roman biographies.

**John Dickson:** Can you give us some details about other biographies? Give me two of your favorite Greco Roman biographies.And, and what are their approach, what's their approach to storytelling, or to history telling?

**Mike Licona:** Yeah, well, I think Plutarch, you know, he's considered to be, widely considered to be the greatest ancient biographer. He was born shortly after 40. He wrote somewhere between the 90s and shortly after 120, and his, uh, biography of, um, Alexander the Great, chapter one, is the most quoted text in Plutarch's lives, or of all of Plutarch's writings, and in there he says, look, I'm distinguishing biography which they call “Lives” back then. 'm distinguishing “Lives” from history.

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**READING**

> *For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.”*

*Plutarchs’ Life of Alexander*

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**Mike Licona:** History can talk about a lengthy period of time, like of a government, a war, like in Thucydides history of the Peloponnesian war, an era, something like that. Um, but a biography is going to focus on a single person. All right. So far, same as today. But he said in a history, you could get into two different things.

These battles where thousands fall and great events, but in a biography, in a life, Plutarch says, I'm only going to focus on those deeds and things the person said that illuminate their character, who they were, the kind of person they were so that their moral, um, elements can be either embraced or rejected.

And so that was the purpose of ancient biography. And so when we, And, and there are other texts in Plutarch and other biographers who make similar statements. So he isn't coming up with this. And so when we come to the Gospels, it, it's to our advantage to recognize that this is the benefit of ancient biography and it illuminates so much for us.

Like for example, in Mark's Gospel, you have a lot of skeptics, as you know, John, because you're a great New Testament scholar. A lot of skeptics say, well, Mark doesn't present the deity of Jesus, that doesn't come until later. But when you read Mark in view of its Greco Roman biographical genre, Whoa. So it starts off by saying, as Isaiah the prophet said, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Well, here we're expecting the biography to be about Jesus preparing the way for God, but instead it's John the Baptist preparing the way for God. Jesus.

Well, what does that say from the very outset who Jesus is being presented as? God. Chapter two, Jesus forgives sins and the Jewish leaders say, well, um, you know, that, uh, that's blasphemy because only God forgives sins. Chapter three, I think he calms the wind and the waves, something the Old Testament says only God does.

Chapter four,um, Jesus, Um, is, uh, casting out demons. And they, uh, the Jewish critics say, well, he's Satan casting out Satan. And then Jesus says, you know, about the strong man and, um, you, you have to

go bind him first and then you can plunder it. Well, he's saying that his exorcisms, he's binding Satan and now is plundering his kingdom of souls.

And then he walks on water. Something only God does. He raises the dead, something God does. So all these things in Mark, Mark is illuminating things that Jesus says and does to illuminate the character of Jesus. He's God's uniquely divine son. He's deity. And this becomes crystal clear when you read Mark in view of its biographical genre.

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**READING**

> *“Erasure is as important as writing. Prune what is turgid, elevate what is commonplace, arrange what is disorderly, introduce rhythm where the language is harsh, modify where it is too absolute. . . . The best method of correction is to put aside for a time what we have written, so that when we come to it again it may have an aspect of novelty, as of being another man's work; in this way we may preserve ourselves from regarding our writings with the affection that we lavish upon a newborn child.”*

— Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*

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**John Dickson (studio)**

That is awesome. The key to good writing, I’ve always told my kids, is rewriting. Editing is a superpower.

Anyway … Quintilian was a Roman rhetorician who wrote his twelve-volume textbook on the theory of persuasion around the AD 95. He opened a public school of rhetoric - the art of persuasive speaking and writing - in Rome in the mid-first century. His students included Pliny the Younger, maybe even Tacitus!

Just before him, Aelius Theon was putting together his writing exercises - called *progym**nas**mata* in Greek.

In it, we can learn a huge amount about the techniques and devices writers in the 1st century were taught to use.

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**TAPE**

**Mike Licona:** You start off with the compositional textbooks, which we have many of those that have existed from antiquity, but the earliest two come from Theon in the first century, and then Quintilian in the first century.

Quintilian wrote in Latin, Theon wrote in Greek, and they had these Compositional textbooks called progymnasmata, or preliminary exercises. These were for people who knew how to write, but now they were being, in their mid teens, taught how to write well. And so they would do things like they would have these exercises where you had to paraphrase an ancient text in a variety of ways.

And then Theon goes on to say, that, uh, these exercises are beneficial for every form of writing, and he mentions history here. And he says that these, you know, all ancient authors use these exercises to paraphrase their own writings and also the writings of others. So we would expect them, the gospel authors, or the secretaries, amanuenses, to be able who assisted them to use these things.

And then there's Plutarch and he uses a bunch of different ones. In addition to those mentioned by Theon and Quintilian, uh, such as compression, conflation, trans displacement, transferal, um, as a, as a rapid

**John Dickson:** fire round. Give me, give me the definitions of those. Uh, let's go. Transferral. What's transferral?

**Mike Licona:** **Transferral** is when you transfer the actions or words that were uttered or, or, or conducted by one person to the lips of another or, uh, the recipient. So just forexample, at Jesus baptism, God's voice says to Jesus, you are my beloved son. That's in Mark and in Luke. But in Matthew, he says, this is my beloved son.

In Mark and in Luke, he's addressing Jesus and Matthew is addressing the crowd. Now, you can try to harmonize them and say, well, God said both. Well, the Gospel of the Ebionites in the 2nd century tried to do that. Or you can go with Augustine, who I think is probably correct here, and say, Matthew changed God's, uh, words to address the crowd so that the readers would see that he's addressing *them* in affirming his son. That's transferral.

**Displacement**. Displacement, where you displace an event that took place in one historical context and you transplant it in another.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

Fun fact. We do this with the show actually. We often transfer one part of an interview to a different point, in order to make things clearer or more dramatic or just for stylistic reasons!

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**Mike Licona:** it might happen with the cleansing of the temple and John who puts it at the beginning, whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke place it at the end even the cleansing of the temple, you [00:21:30] have Mark have it occur in on Monday after Palm Sunday Whereas Matthew places it on Palm Sunday Um too and he conflates it with the first visit to the temple mark has two temple visits and matthew conflates them into

**John Dickson:** And that's another technique, right? **Conflation**, where two stories are just brought together in one, just for simplicity's sake, so

that the reader doesn't get more distracted. And this is related to compression. Yeah. What do you mean by **compression**?

**Mike Licona:** You're just compressing and limiting the time. You're making it occur over a shorter period of time.

So for example, the cursing of the fig tree, um, you have… In mark, he curses it on Monday and they see it withered and dead on Tuesday But matthew they go Monday he curses it and immediately it withers and dies. So it's like boom right on the spot.

**John Dickson:** And would you would you include in that something like the the healing of the um centurion's son,you know in one It's quite a convoluted story An embassy is sent to jesus in another it's the centurion himself, right?

**Mike Licona:** Yeah you're right Um, and same thing with Jairus's daughter, right? Mm hmm. Yeah, yeah.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

In the gospel of Luke, a centurion sent some Jewish elders to ask Jesus to heal his beloved servant. And the story goes on from there. In Matthew's version, the centurion himself makes the request. This isn't two different stories. Matthew has just compressed the story.

Or take the account of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. In Mark and Luke Jairus comes to Jesus and says his daughter is *about to die*. And on their way to the home, the servants appear with the news that the daughter has just died. They all go to the home and Jesus raises the daughter from the dead.

But Matthew again simplifies this. He just records Jairus coming to Jesus to say his daughter *has just died.* The rest of the account is the same:

Jesus restores the girl. But there are no servants midway. The girl is dead at the beginning of the story.

This is totally normal for ancient biographies. It's expected.

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**John Dickson:** Okay, so what does all of that mean for the way The gospel writers tell their story or for how we are to read the gospel writer's story, because I'm pretty sure you're not saying, ah, don't read them as, um, in any way reliable.

They're just making stuff up. That's not what you're saying. So what are you saying?

**Mike Licona:** We use many of these same techniques today in our everyday ordinary conversations. And the degree of accuracy we want it to be. I remember having an attorney come up to me and says, you know, the problem I have with this is I want it to be, I want Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to read with a precision of a legal, a transcript of a legal deposition.

And I said, well, yeah, but this isn't a-legal depositions. We're reading modern biographies and histories don't even read with that kind of precision. We have to judge the gospels according to the, the literary conventions in play at the time of writing instead of imposing our ideas of modern precision upon them. And with ancient biography, a lot of times, all we're really concerned about, we want to make sure that we are reading an *essentially faithful representation* of what occurred, not necessarily requiring the precision involved in the transcript of a legal, uh, legal deposition.

**John Dickson:** Some may interpret all this as, um, just, oh, so all you're saying is the gospel writers were just much slacker than our modern, uh, tastes and that's exactly the point. They were slack. They were careless. They were just into this, you know, they just weren't into accuracy. Um, but what do you think might be the *benefit* for the way they did it?

What did, because I mean, they knew that there could be such a thing as accuracy. Uh, I mean, they had no problem memorizing material, uh, you know, sort of, there was a tradition of verbally memorizing. Uh, through mnemonics and so on. So they could do it. Can you see any benefit for the way they've chosen to give us the account of Jesus Christ?

**Mike Licona:** Yeah, now we might not so much like some of the benefits, but for those in antiquity, there's, there certainly was. So as you already know, John, Matthew is very artistic in its writing. You know, the genealogy, um, a lot of people tried to, um, over the years I've tried to harmonize and reconcile the differences in the genealogies.

But Matthew is arranging his genealogy in an artistic manner using gematria. Um,

**John Dickson:** uh, 14, 14, 14

**Mike Licona:**exactly right. And, and why? Because they're, uh, the numerical value of the name David is 14. So through his artistic. Three sets of 14, he is saying Jesus is the son of David, and then

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**John Dickson (studio)**

Okay, that might sound weird. Hebrew letters (and Greek ones) have numerical value. D or dalet is 4. V or vav is 6. So, David's name, which is spelt dalet vav dalet adds up to 14: 4+6+4.

That is why Matthew designs his genealogy of Jesus in three sets of fourteen generations and he mentions David three times in the genealogy. And then adds an interpretative conclusion "Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah."

The point of emphasizing 14 is that it's the number of David's name. Jesus is thus the promised messianic descendent of David.

And, by the way, to achieve this 14, 14, 14 symmetry, Matthew deliberately leaves out a bunch of Jesus' ancestors. Matthew isn't tricking us. Anyone who knew their Old Testament will have spotted the absences immediately. But it's a further example of the Gospel writers shaping the data to make strong teaching points.

Luke has his own vibe going on in his genealogy. And we'll put a link to all that fun in the shownotes.

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**John Dickson**: So, artistry, yep, I'll give you that one, cause, yeah. I love how the Gospels are artistic.

**Mike Licona:** It's like, um, also the Sermon on the Mount. Where does Jesus deliver it in Matthew? At the top of the Mount. Whereas it's in the, at the, at the, uh, valley, uh, down on the plain in Luke. And many scholars have said, well that's because he, uh, Matthew is also presenting Jesus as the new Moses. As Moses received God's law at the top of the mountain, Jesus is nterpreting Jesus as God's log, um, at the top of the mountain.

**John Dickson:** So, it's a device so that you can see, um, a truth that is there. Like, I mean, Mark almost certainly saw Jesus, or Luke rather, who, who has a version of the same sermon, almost certainly saw Jesus as a new Moses. Uh, but it's Matthew who chooses to bring it to the fore and you, and so the way he's placed that narrative brings it to the reader's mind. Um, That is, that is pretty powerful.

**Mike Licona:** I think so. You know, and you know, maybe some of us aren't so keen on artistic things, but others are.-We think differently So for the more artistic minded person Matthew may appeal to them a little more if they under, if they learn what's going on with Matthew. Whereas Luke, you know, is going to give us more of a straightforward. Yeah,

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**John Dickson (studio)**

One obvious observation, of course, is that Jesus preached this material over-and-over during his three years–on hills, in flat plains, from boats, in the temple courts, and so on. So, it doesn't really matter where the Sermon on the Mount (or Plain) is set.

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**John Dickson:** and um, I mean the same can be said with the placement of the temple. cleansing story in John's gospel, um, help my listeners understand what's going on there by, by taking that story, which clearly happened at the end of Jesus life, but placing it at the front of the whole story.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke place Jesus' cleansing of the temple in the final week of his life. For Mark, that's around Chapter 11. John places it much earlier in his account, in chapter 2. Here's what the Gospel of John says:

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**READING**

> *The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."*

*Gospel of John, chapter 2*

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**Mike Licona:** What's going on? What's Craig Keener, I think he's right where he says that, um, by placing that at the beginning, John is framing Jesus whole ministry as a Passover.

Jesus is the Passover lamb. And, and so it begins. Uh, where Jesus cleanses the temple during Passover and his life, his ministry starts there and his ministry ends and his life ends at the Passover. So it's all framed as a Passover. Yeah. And, and

**John Dickson:** obviously sets up a kind of temple theology, uh, for the whole story of Jesus, um, which is absolutely powerful.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

Each of the four gospels, while having massive overlap in content, has a particular angle to present about Jesus.

Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the davidic Messiah, Mark presents Jesus as the suffering servant king. Luke widens our scope to see Jesus as saviour of all nations, and John deepens the picture by highlight Jesus as the eternal logos that took on flesh for us.

It’s the one Jesus, viewed from different, important angles. And the material is arranged to make these points.

The church from the beginning liked these different angles. They did sometimes struggle with the tensions this created between the accounts–and so Tatian, as I said, tried to smooth things out–but overall the Christians of the first centuries chose to put up with charges of ‘contradictions’ in order to view their Lord from the four dramatic perspectives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

And after the break, we're going to hear how some of the early church thinkers – who didn't like Tatian's harmonization approach – came to grips with the differences they saw in the gospels. There are lessons here for sceptics and believers today.

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**BREAK 2**

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**READING**

> *[The differences in the Gospels are] a great proof of their truth. For if they accurately agreed in all things, including time, place, and wording, no enemies would believe them but would rather suppose that they came together by some human agreement to write what they did. For such agreement could not stem from sincerity. But as it is now, even the discord in minor matters removes them from all suspicion and clearly defends the character of the writers."*

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**John Dickson (Studio)**

That's a little section of the writings of John Chrysostom, who served as the archbishop of Constantinople in the late 4th to early 5th century. We have about 600 sermons and 200 letters from this guy - he is considered one of the greatest of the early Eastern church fathers. I have his works right opposite me here in my studio/office. His sermons are like detailed commentaries (with additional practical application). And I often find myself turning to him to find out what he thought of certain hard-to-interpret passages in the NT, especially the letters of Paul. After all, the language of the NT was his native language, so he's got an edge on even the most learned scholar today.

Anyway, Chyrstostom seems pretty chilled about the tensions between the Gospels. Slightly less chilled, but still acknowledging the differences, Justin Martyr in the second century preferred to just plead ignorance: “If a Scripture appears to be contrary to some other Scripture,” he writes, since I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another, I shall admit rather that I do not understand what is recorded.” Justin, Dialogue with Trypho, 65.

I like both insights, to be honest. The historian in me appreciates Chrystostom’s point. The differences between the Gospels are exactly what you’d expect from independent reporting of the same material. When I’m doing my history work, that’s about where I’ll leave it. But Justin Martyr has a point, too. If there really is an apparent flat contradiction in some detail, maybe I’m the dummy–maybe there’s some other detail I don’t know about. I’m not a fan of harmonizing – I can’t stand the approach that ends up saying Peter denied Jesus 6 times before the second rooster crow!! I prefer to just say: Well, I don’t know. Given the relative scarcity of data, I’m willing to accept there’s stuff I don’t know. That doesn’t trouble me, because I have grown increasingly aware that the more I know … the more aware I am of what I don’t know.

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**John Dickson:** Ancient church leaders. I mean, revered church leaders, weren't so creeped out by this, these tensions in the gospel stories. Uh, explain that for us.

**Mike Licona:** Clement of Alexandria wasn't, Origen wasn't. Um, Origen basically said, hey, it, uh, yes, the gospels do have surface discrepancies, but that's, that doesn't matter. Um, God worked through the human authors in that way. Um, what would matter is if there are contradictions in the message. Uh, between that the gospels are presenting. So yeah, they didn't have, some of them didn't have problems with them. Now, some of them did. Like Augustine, uh, you know, Augustine wanted to, uh, he wanted to harmonize and sometimes he went to extremes in harmonizing. Um, in the end, he, and

**John Dickson:** And yet he, he would often say, oh, but I might be wrong here. And even, and even if these are in contradiction, the message is the same.

**Mike Licona:** That's right. And, and he would agree with origin in that way, but it was a means of last resort for Augustine.

**John Dickson:** He still went there, right? And Augustine's, Augustine's, you know, like a friend of this pod. So I had, I had to get him in, uh, at least once.

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**John Dickson (Studio)**

Here's a bit of what Augustine wrote, when looking at how Mark and Luke use different words to recall Jesus' warning against blaspheming the Holy Spirit. The message, rather than the words, is what ultimately matters.

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**READING**

*For indeed there is no other reason why the Authors of the Gospels do not relate the same things in the same way, but that we may learn thereby to prefer things to words, not words to things, and to seek for nothing else in the speaker, but for his intention, to convey which only the words are used. For what real difference is there whether it is said, "Blasphemy of the Spirit shall not be forgiven;" or "He that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him."*

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**John Dickson:** Hey, um, so let's circle back to some of those, um, scary contradictions we started with. What does, what does all this mean for how we read those contradictions?

**Mike Licona:** Well, I don't know how to, to, um, at least with the, um, The thing with the infancy, where did Jesus go? You know, is Luke's account chronologically more accurate than Matthew's? I don't know how to reconcile those. I don't know what's going on, to be honest with you.

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**John Dickson (studio)**

At this point, Mike sounds like Justin Martyr. I don't know. It's perhaps my understanding that is faulty.

To some, that sounds like a cop-out. But in other disciplines - whether mainstream history, literary studies, even science - you can acknowledge the limits of your knowledge without shame. You don't ditch all your data just because there are bits you can't yet fit together. If a broad hypothesis is firmly established by multiple lines of evidence, that hypothesis can bear the strain of the pieces of evidence that don't seem to fit.

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**Mike Licona:** Um, with the death of Judas, uh, a former student of mine and a friend of mine, Sharon Elender, you know, she said, well, you know, it could be that when Acts, is just talking about, The, um, uh, Judas's gut bursting open, his intestines coming out.

That might have been well after his death. And they found him, they took him down from being hung, they put him on a cart, wheeling him. Um, as kind of like, um, Papias reports. And then he just maybe falls off and his gut's split open. And that's what, what Luke is focusing on. So I think that might be a possibility. Ultimately all we can do is speculate on that. But when it comes to

**John Dickson:** But a historian working with normal materials. You know, like outside of a sort of Gospels and theological context, wouldn't fret at

all about the difference in Matthew and Acts. I mean, they would just go, Oh, it's pretty, pretty different account of what is obviously a remembered tradition of this guy who was part of Jesus disciples who betrayed him and ended his own life, and it involves something to do with a field. Like, because, because that gets mentioned in very different ways. So, so almost the differences point to a shared, solid tradition for a, for a secular historian, historian, reading this sort of material

**Mike Licona:**. I agree with you on all we have to do is just read other, you know, ancient accounts in the Greco Roman literature becomes crystal clear. It's like, for example, the assassination of Julius Caesar. When we read the various accounts in Appian, Cicero, Dio, and Velias, we find a lot of discrepancies of details. Many of the same kind, we find it between the gospels, maybe even more of them. But they're all in the peripheral details and nobody's gonna turn around and say well all of these authors got it wrong None of them are reliable.

They're just saying they're not trying to be as precise with the details They're all giving us an essentially faithful representation of what occurred and when you read say Plutarch's lives and Suetonius's lives of the divine Caesars and all these different biographies You come to find out that they all have discrepancies in the minor details.

And when we come to the gospels, they're just most by far. I have found that way into the 90 percentile can be easily accounted for by these compositional devices that were part and parcel of writing Ancient literature. Now that doesn't mean that they all should be reconciled that way, but they certainly all can be.

And ultimately, you know, we'd have to talk to the authors to see what were going on, but I just don't see them, I don't see any of these differences in the Gospels as being major enough to cause us angst.

**John Dickson:**, so as we try and land this, um, this plane, um, what does all this mean? Firstly, for Christians, uh, for the way they think of the Bible as God's word.

**Mike Licona:** Well, I think that we just might have to recalibrate some of our thinking, you know, You, you have skeptics out there that try to say the Bible is all human, uh, completely human. There's no divine, uh, Uh element in it or fingerprint whatsoever. We we tend as christians sometimes to think that just the opposite. It's 100 % Divine with no human element in it again like dictation or quasi divine dictation I think we have to view it as both and appreciate that there is a human element in it Um, and this is the way god wanted it scripture is As we have it and our view of scripture should be consistent with our view of scripture

And and finally i'd say if we want to have a high view of scripture Which I do and and and many christians do if we want to have a high view of scripture We must accept it as god has given it to us instead of attempting to force it to fit a mold of how we think he should have And if we refuse to do this, we may claim and think we have a high view of scripture when in reality we have a high view of our view of scripture.

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## FIVE MINUTE JESUS

In some ways, Mike is just making the really obvious point that we have to read literature according to its literary genre. Legal codes should be read not for their poetic value but for their clarity and applicability. Parables or apocalyptic visions should be read not for their concrete historical details but for their moral lessons and symbolic power.

Ancient biographies were not legal or interview transcripts, and yet nor are they mere mytho-poetics of the spiritual life. They were genuine accounts of real figures which were designed to compel readers to follow the example of the figure, or, in the case of the Gospels, inspire loyalty and trust in the figure. And the rules for writing good ancient *bioi* included conflation, contraction, transferal, displacement and so on. Read as ancient biographies, the Gospels are excellent works. And just as an apocalyptic book like Revelation is still viewed by Christians as the word of God – revealed in a well known ancient human literary genre, apocalyptic – so the Gospels can be seen by Christians as the Word of

God (the very *centre* of the Word of God) – revealed through another well known ancient literary genre: historical biography.

Let me put it starkly, I do not believe Jesus will one day return riding a white horse and with a sword coming out of his mouth - which is what Revelation 19 says. But saying I don't believe that is not to disbelieve Rev 19 as the word of God. It is just to point out that the word of God is using acceptable ancient literary techniques at this point to emphasize the ultimate victory of Jesus through the word of his mouth, the gospel message.

In a similar way, I do not believe Peter denied Jesus 6 times, just to make the various accounts of his denying Jesus three times add up.

I do not believe Jesus overturned the tables twice in his ministry, just because John makes it one of the first events of his public career and Matthew, Mark, and Luke make it one of the last events of his career.

I do not believe Jesus healed two centurion's servants in Capernaum, just because Luke tells us the centurion sent a delegation to Jesus and Matthew tells us the centurion came to Jesus personally.

I believe what we have here are real events which are told in (sometimes very) different ways in order to emphasize different true things about Jesus. This was perfectly acceptable to ancient writers and readers of biographies, and it is a perfectly acceptable human literary genre through which the God of the universe can speak!

You can press play now.

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**John Dickson:** For my listeners who aren't sure what to make of Christianity, who reckon that the contradictions just undermine Christianity per se, can you give us some closing thoughts, what you might say to that listener?

**Mike Licona:** Well, if it undermines Christianity, then the same kinds of contradictions are present in all ancient literature, and so it would

undermine everything, and we'd have to say we know very little, if anything, about the past. And, um, only your most radical postmodern historians are willing to go there. Um, I would, and most importantly, I'd say if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true. It's game, set, match, period. Um, so even if there are some errors and contradictions in the Gospels, if Jesus rose, Christianity is true.

And I do think that we can show that Jesus probably rose from the dead. And I'm saying probability as a historian, because that's really all you can say with any kind of thing historically, that the historical evidence strongly suggests that Jesus rose from the dead. Um, and there really just are no plausible, natural explanations that, that, that work to account for data that is accepted across the board by a heterogeneous consensus of scholars.

**John Dickson:** What's your best tip? My final question. What's your best tip to, um, to the, to the person who's sort of trying to work out what they think] of Christianity as they open up a gospel. Have you, have you got like a key gospel you would urge them to read and any key tips for how to read it?

**Mike Licona:** Um, well, just keep in mind that, you know, they're not trying to be as precise as modern biographers are. Um, understand that, um, even though Matthew and Luke are using Mark for a lot of, as their source for a lot of the detail, they have independent stuff in it as well. Mark and John are largely independent of one another. And so we look at the Bible today as a single volume because they're, That's how it's purchased pretty much, but the New Testament, as you know, are 27 books and letters written by no less than nine authors. And so you do have some multiple independent sources. You have Paul in first Corinthians and some oral tradition that goes way, way, way back before any of the New Testament literature was written and is traceable to the disciples themselves.

We can show that the, um, The, uh, the earliest disciples believed, they sincerely believed Jesus rose and appeared to them, um, in individual and in group settings. And you've got to come up with a plausible

naturalistic alternative for that, if you're going to reject the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus rose from the dead, um, then he's a remarkable person. We would anticipate that his followers would report things that he said and did. Where are these writings if not contained in the gospels and New Testament itself? So, um, yeah, I just keep a couple of those things in mind as you read.

**John Dickson:** They're good tips for reading the whole New Testament. I want you to give me the one gospel that you reckon, uh, my listeners who aren't sure what to make of Christianity ought to read and why.

**Mike Licona:** Ah, well, okay. I would go with Mark and Luke and. No, that's two.

**John Dickson:** Yeah, that's two. You've got to go one. Um,

**Mike Licona:** I guess I'm going to go with Mark because we've got some really good evidence that Mark - the traditional authorship of Mark is correct and that Mark's primary source was none other than Peter, Jesus's lead Apostle and one of his three closest ones. I had a student I supervised as his master's thesis he surveyed more than 200 critical New Testament scholars writing in English since 1965 and we found that the majority of them I do think that the traditional authorship of Mark is correct, that Mark wrote between the years 65 and 70, and that his primary source was Peter. So it's like, wow, that's getting really, really good.

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## NEXT EPISODE

If you want to find out more about anything you heard on today's episode, Researcher Al has some great show notes for you - all the links to the books and shows and people we mention, and some deep dives into the more complicated stuff, too. It's a geek's paradise. Head to undeceptions.com to find them – they're way too long to put in the notes in your podcast app! Stupid podcast app!

If you have questions about this episode, or any of our other episodes, you can send it my way! You'll see the options in the shownotes - send us an audio or text message, and I'll try and answer it in this season's Q&A episode, which is coming up soon …

… so soon, in fact, it's next week!!! Yikes. A better get listening to the questions …

See ya.

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## CREDITS

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, and produced by Kaley Payne.

Sophie Hawkshaw is on socials and membership.

Alasdair Belling is a writer and researcher.

Siobhan McGuiness is our online librarian.

Lyndie Leviston remains my wonderful assistant.

Santino Dimarco is Chief Finance and Operations Consultant.

Editing by Richard Hamwi.

Our voice actors today were Dakotah Love and Yannick Lawry.

And the show is directed by Mark Hadley - you like that little 'transferal' for climatic effect!?

Special thanks to our series sponsor Zondervan for making this Undeception possible.

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