

## Peer Review

# Review of: "Square Pegs for Round Holes? Applying Michael Licona's Historical Method to Jesus' Resurrection"

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My academic work focuses on the philosophy of the sciences of the past. I dealt with topics related to the historiography of the Old Testament[i]. Most of the works about the historicity of the NT mentioned in the article were unknown to me. Therefore, I can offer only some general comments.

I was struck by the difference between the debates concerning the historiography of the OT and that of the NT. At least since the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even scholars who held deep religious beliefs[ii] held that the content of the OT texts needs to be corroborated, and can be put in question, by *external* evidence (such as Egyptian or Mesopotamian sources, archaeological findings, analogies to past or present situations, etc.). This did not eliminate biases and loaded controversies, but it sometimes facilitated convergence toward partial consensuses and pointed towards novel research topics. Today, most scholars of OT historiography – whether religious or atheist, Christian or Jewish – accept that some events and circumstances related to in the Bible reflect past realia and some do not, and their job is (partly at least) to discern between the two.

Scholars of the history of the NT, on the other hand, tend to consider the content of the scripture, including reports about miraculous events like the resurrection, as evidence for what they narrate. To me, this borders on cyclical reasoning.

Analyzing the work of Licona and others, the author does a fine job in showing that the argumentations about the historicity of the resurrection are, in essence, debates about faith. One who (1) believes in God operating in the world, who can at will make extremely extraordinary events happen, and (2) accepts the content of past texts as sufficiently reliable evidence, can maintain that the historicity of the resurrection is the best, or the most plausible, explanation of the narrations in the scriptures. (Much the same, of

course, can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about the Yamakaprāṭihārya and many other accounts). Anyone who does not share (1) will not assign RH a non-negligible probability (the knowledge base of taphonomy being so extensive). Someone who embraces (1) but thinks (like most OT historians) that humans are gullible and what they told requires corroboration (with extraordinary claims needing extraordinary support) will consider RH as speculative. Casting the argument in terms of Bayesian theory or Inference to the Best Explanation does not alter the above, as the author clearly demonstrates.

A note about Bayesian reasoning: I disagree with the author's remark that "BT is what you make it. The data submitted is selected, sometimes arbitrarily, by the individual scholar with his or her own axe to grind." This is true only when the methodology is applied sloppily. The many applications of BT, sometimes in matters of life and death[iii], attest otherwise.

One recognized weakness of the Bayesian formalism is the dependence on prior probabilities, the estimation of which can be very subjective. To avoid this pitfall, several scholars recommend [iv][v] a likelihoodist approach. Instead of asking about the absolute probability of RH or HH, one compares the likelihoods of evidence E under both hypotheses. E favors RH over HH just in case  $\Pr(E|RH) > \Pr(E|HH)$  (and vice versa), and the amount of confirmation (or disconfirmation) the evidence lends to RH is the ratio  $\Pr(E|RH)/\Pr(E|HH)$ . The procedure is repeated for all relevant evidence, and if we are lucky, it can be shown that one hypothesis emerges as distinctly more plausible than the other.

The problem is, what will serve as evidence? While there is some support for the historical existence of Jesus and John the Baptist, for many other details in the NT – such as the resurrection – we have only messages written by believers for believers, the reliability of which is a matter of subjective estimation. With no evidentiary material to work with, neither BT nor IFA can do much good.

To conclude, I think the article is persuasive and well-written. Some streamlining of the presentation may be helpful, but a previous commentator has already addressed this point, and I don't have much to add.

One minor note: It seems to me that the following sentence

By way of establishing that a highly improbable event does not necessarily require extraordinary evidence, and plenty of it, to explain it, Craig illustrates by means of an example from the lottery (page 5) is not clear enough as it stands.

[i] e.g., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-016-1224-8>, DOI 10.13140RG.2.2.27118.23363

[ii] e.g., Albright, W. F. (1939). The Israelite conquest of Canaan in the light of archaeology. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental research*, 74(1), 11-23.

[iii] e.g., <https://www.fda.gov/regulatory-information/search-fda-guidance-documents/guidance-use-bayesian-statistics-medical-device-clinical-trials>.

[iv] Salmon, W. C. (1990). Rationality and objectivity in science, or Tom Kuhn meets Tom Bayes. In C. W. Savage (Ed.), *Scientific Theories. Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science* (Vol. 14, pp. 175–204). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[v] Forster, M., & Sober, E. (2004). Why likelihood. *The nature of scientific evidence: Statistical, philosophical, and empirical considerations*, 153-190.

## Declarations

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.