

CRITIQUE OF DEBATE BETWEEN  
MICHAEL LICONA AND ALI ATAIE

Donald Ray Hargrove  
Resurrection of Jesus AP518  
August 25, 2011

## **CRITIQUE OF DEBATE BETWEEN MICHAEL LICONA AND ALI ATAIE**

On November 30, 2006, Michael Licona debated Ali Ataie at the University of California, Davis. The full title of the debate (shown at the opening of the video) is “*Rescued or Resurrected? That is the question . . . A debate on the Muslim and Christian views on Jesus’ fate and resurrection with Ali Ataie and Mike Licona.*”<sup>1</sup> This paper tracks and critiques the main arguments of the debaters as well as their responses and interactions to following questions from the audience. This is followed by concluding thoughts on the overall debate and the ramifications of the question of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Has God left us with enough trustworthy *historical* evidence to demonstrate the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as the most plausible fact of history, or does the resurrection of Jesus Christ *solely* rest on faith in the supernatural revelation of the New Testament Scriptures?

### **Introduction to the Debate**

The debate is introduced by a representative<sup>2</sup> of the Muslims Students’ Association who notes that the debate is the outcome of the cooperation between the Muslim Association, Campus Crusade for Christ, and College Life of University of California, Davis. He notes that true “interfaith” dialogue is often confused with merely focusing on similarities between religions (e.g., ecumenical unity movements). He explains that there is a real need to understand the

---

<sup>1</sup>For the audio and video of the debate, see “What Was the 1st Century Fate of Jesus?” 4Truth.Net Jesus. <http://www.4truth.net/fourtruthpbjesus.aspx?pageid=8589952847> (accessed August 11, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>I was unable to understand his name.

differences in order to build bridges and engage in interfaith work. Furthermore, he remarks that “debate” often conjures up negative images, but it need not be that way. He points out that “understanding our differences” can have just the opposite effect on people. He expresses his desire to see more of these types of debates. The alternative, he points out, is that “people will remain ignorant.” He closes with an important point about how profound the topic of “the fate of Jesus” is in contradistinction to issues in our current “trivial” culture.

This is an excellent way to start the debate, even if it is a bit idealistic to think that everyone will remain calm and rational with open minds ready to understand each other and build bridges. After all, this is a *debate* between two religions which make mutually exclusive claims about something as personal and consequential as religion. Nevertheless, it is very important to remind the audience of the lofty goal of understanding and respecting each other.

Following these prefatory remarks, the moderator Jay Hahn Matthew from College Life introduces the Muslim apologist Ali Ataie and the Christian apologist Mike Licona with their credentials.<sup>3</sup> He covers the rules and format of the debate: the three twenty-minute rounds followed by rebuttals and concluding with questions from the audience. Matthew closes with the much-needed admonition to the audience to refrain from outbursts or applause because, among other things, it shows disrespect for the other side. This was a great introduction as it outlined the benefits of the debate, the need for respect, and the ground rules.

### **Michael Licona’s Opening Statement**

Michael Licona opens with a clear focus on the issue of the debate and proceeds to lay out his case in a very explicit manner. He provides an overview of first-century history

---

<sup>3</sup>Both men are accomplished apologists. Ali Ataie is former president of Muslim Student Association, and the founder and president of the Muslim interfaith council. Mike Licona currently serves as director of apologetics at interfaith evangelism the North American Mission Board and holds a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies (University of Pretoria).

concerning the historicity of Jesus and restates the question for the debate: “Did Christ die or was He rescued from the cross?” Licona makes no *apology* for his personal belief that the Christian Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. However, he is quick to point out that the debate and the case for the resurrection of Christ does not rest on accepting the inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture. Licona declares that the question of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ must be done on historical grounds apart from giving the Qur’an or the Bible “a privileged place.” He zeroes in on the importance of using *historical* criteria; the issue is history not theology. What an excellent way to frame the debate and preempt Muslim attacks (and sidetracks) on Christian theological issues (e.g., the Trinity, deity of Jesus, inerrancy of Scripture)!

Licona lays out the foundation of his historical case for Jesus Christ with four “minimal facts” that are accepted by the majority of historical scholars (even skeptical ones): 1) Jesus’ death by crucifixion, 2) the empty tomb as testified to by unsympathetic sources (cf. Matt. 28:13), 3) Jesus friends’ belief that Jesus appeared to them, and 4) Jesus’ skeptics (like Paul and James) who were so convinced that they saw the resurrected Jesus that they were willing to suffer martyrdom.<sup>4</sup> Licona drives the issue home by making two points. First, there is sufficient reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Second, there is no evidence for the Muslim position that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Then Licona challenges Ataie to provide a plausible historical account of these four facts without appealing to something like “the Qur’an says it and that settles it.” He tells Ataie that he must provide a methodology to deal with the four

---

<sup>4</sup>For details on Mike Licona’s historical approach, see Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: a New Historiographical Approach* (Joplin: IVP Academic, 2010). For details on the minimal facts approach, see Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case For the Resurrection of Jesus* (Joplin: Kregel, 2004), 36-77. For similar approaches among Christian apologetics along with critiques of these facts, see William Lane. Craig, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?: a Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan*, ed. Paul Copan (Joplin: Baker Academic, 1999); Paul Copan and Ronald K. Tacelli, eds., *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?: a Debate between William Lane Craig & Gerd Lüdemann* (Joplin: IVP Academic, 2000).

minimal *historical* facts. Mike adds, “unless and until he does, there is only one plausible explanation: Jesus rose from the dead.” Licona does an outstanding job of laying out the evidence of the four minimal historical facts and inviting Ataie to debate him on the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the historical evidence.

### **Ali Ataie’s Opening**

After Ataie opens with an Arabic recitation, he proceeds with a quotation from the Qur’an that Jesus was, in fact, not *really* killed:

That they said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’—but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they kill him not—nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is exalted in power, wise.” (Surah 4:157-158).

Ataie not only completely sidesteps Licona’s challenge to stay with the historical evidence, he remarks that God is outside of time and “it is our duty is to recognize truth whenever it comes to us and submit to it.” What an incredible dodge of Licona’s evidence and the topic of the debate itself! Following this, he moves to discredit the apostle Paul as one who abrogates the Law and who never even quoted Jesus. He also attacks Licona’s book on Paul and Muhammad by saying, “Why didn’t Mike call his book *Jesus meets Muhammad*?” The implication here is that Jesus (not Paul) and Muhammad agree with each other.<sup>5</sup> Then Ataie attacks the validity of Paul’s ministry because he brought “a different gospel.” What a misunderstanding of Paul and his confrontation with Peter! The confrontation between Paul and Peter was over Peter’s hypocrisy in giving into legalistic Judaizers (cf. Gal. 2:12-14). Ataie’s attempt to separate Paul from the disciples of the Lord fails when one considers that prominent disciples fully accepted Paul (Gal. 1:18-19; 2:6, 9).

---

<sup>5</sup>Apparently, Ataie has not read Licona’s book since it actually provides the reasons for framing the debate between Muhammad and Paul rather than Muhammad and Jesus, see Michael R. Licona, *Paul Meets Muhammad: a Christian-Muslim Debate On the Resurrection* (Joplin, Mo.: Baker Books, 2006), 14.

Furthermore, we have very early testimony that Paul preached the same gospel as the apostles of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-7).

Following this, Ataie moves into a litany of theological objections and caricatures (e.g., Why was Jesus cursed? Why does God need to sacrifice Himself? Why would God forsake and murder His obedient Son?).” Throughout this barrage of theological objections, Ataie never deals with any credible relevant historical data. Instead, his whole reply was but a *theological polemic* about “problems” with Christian theology. As far as the Christian Bible, he discounts the gospels as unreliable by claiming that they were written decades after the life of Jesus in a foreign language unknown to the disciples and that they are actually nothing but forgeries. He cites non-canonical writings to “show” that the claim that Jesus was not killed did not originate with the Qur’an. Ataie concludes with saying that Muslims love the true Christ and that the problems Muslims have are with the canonical gospels, not Jesus Christ.

Ataie is mute with regard to Licona’s four minimal facts and the point of the debate: the *historical* evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I found myself wondering if he knew what the debate was about or listened to Licona’s opening case. The only historical evidence he even alludes to is the non-canonical gospels, which most scholars agree to be written after the canonical gospels. Surely, he is aware that these documents are dated over one hundred years after the death (and resurrection) of Jesus Christ and were written by sects who were not part of the original disciples. Ataie is clearly off-topic. Perhaps he is attempting to get Licona to go after the “bait” of theological controversies. Perhaps he is just throwing out red meat for sympathizers in the audience. Perhaps he is attempting to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of Christians in the audience. Ataie ends this round with claiming that Muslims truly love Christ too much to see

him as cursed of God and that the Qur'an corrects and confirms this historical record. However, he offers no historical evidence. His authority is the Qur'an; everything must fit it.

### **Michael Licona's Fifteen Minute Response**

Licona reminds the audience of the four uncontested historical facts and how the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation. He also points out that Ataie did not respond to a single argument. He drives home the point that “for all practical purposes the debate is over and Ali has lost.” What a great statement to bring the historical to the forefront and to point out Ataie's failure even to enter this debate! I love the way Licona tells the audience that even though the debate is over, he would answer some of Ataie's objections with the *leftover time*. He proceeds to show that Paul did, in fact, quote Jesus (in 1 Corinthians 11) and that Paul was accepted by the apostles as per the testimony in Galatians and disciples of the apostles—the early church fathers. As to Jesus wanting the cup to pass, Mike does a great job of illustrating just how historical this is because of its embarrassment on theological grounds. He adds, that one needs to look at Christ's whole prayer which ends with Christ saying, “Thy will be done.” Mike points out once again that theological issues are not the topic; this is a debate about history. He also does a fine job of pointing out that Ataie is involved in taking what fits his viewpoint (based on the Qur'an) and rejecting what does not line up.

I appreciate the way Mike continues to make the issue the historical data *and* takes the time to answer some of the most serious charges against Christianity. This is important not so much for Ataie but for those in the audience who may have doubts about the validity of Christian doctrine. After reminding the audience that the debate is about the first-century fate of Jesus and not about theological controversies, he invites Ataie to get back to the topic by quoting Ataie's advice (in one of his books) about the importance of staying on topic. What a brilliant stroke!

After Licona shows that Ataie has lost the debate on historical grounds, he turns his guns on the Qur'an and confidently states that "there is no reason to believe the Qur'an." He introduces what is known as the "Islamic Catch-22" regarding Christ. This "catch" is that if Jesus was a great prophet (as the Qur'an declares), and Jesus predicted his death by crucifixion (yet, he was not crucified), then he must have been a false prophet (in contrast to claims of Qur'an). On the other hand, if Jesus did accurately predict his death, then the Qur'an is wrong in teaching that he did not die by crucifixion. The only weakness of this argument would be in Ataie's rejection of those prophetic passages in the gospels. However, such rejection would have to deal with the fact that even liberal atheistic scholars accept these prophetic passages. It is very telling that Ataie never responded to the Catch-22 charge of Licona. Perhaps he is aware that even the liberals of the Jesus Seminar (whose authority he uses against Christianity) would admit to the historicity of these predictive passages of Jesus regarding his death on the cross.

Licona gladly accepts Ataie's challenge regarding the Qur'an's claim of superiority over all other writings by showing that the Qur'an flunks its own test. Licona notes that Psalm 19 is one writing that matches or surpasses a Surah. Furthermore, Licona cites an Ivy League scholar of Arabic Dialects who read the True Furqan and noted, "It seems to me that the Arabic in the True Furqan is good. It does not have any obscure terms like the Qur'an. And in some places it seems more beautiful to me than anything I have seen in the Qur'an." Another great round with Licona showing that the only thing Ataie had was the Qur'an, and it has flunked its own test.

### **Ali Ataie's Fifteen Minute Response**

Ataie continues to sidestep Licona's historical arguments and asserts that the resurrection of Jesus is, in reality, a faith conviction and not one of history. He insists that this "is a theological debate." Does he really believe this, or is he saying this because he has no historical

evidence that Jesus was rescued? Instead of engaging Licona on the historical evidence, Ataie continues to lash out at the doctrines and writings of Christianity (e.g., Jesus did not fulfill the prophecies Isaiah 53 or Psalm 22, the gospels are filled with discrepancies, and the original writings of the disciples were destroyed). As to the martyrdom of the disciples, he claimed that they did not die for the resurrection because they did not believe in the “passion” of Christ. For this he offers no evidence.

After dismissing the Scriptures and doctrines of the early Christians, he declares that the Qur’an was designed by God to restore the Truth. However, if the Qur’an was designed to restore the original Word of God, why did Allah allow six centuries of mankind to live by the deception that Jesus died on the cross instead of giving the Qur’an and correcting the record immediately? If there is a question as to which is true, the Bible or the Qur’an, the investigation must be open to historical investigation. Ataie has not even entered in the debate of Licona’s four minimal historical facts. Out of nowhere he asserts that the resurrection of Jesus is the least plausible explanation, but he provides no criteria for plausibility. Of course, since Ataie is a Muslim, he could not rule out miracles a priori. Clearly, Ataie came to argue against the resurrection on theological grounds rather than on historical grounds. For him, “the Qur’an says it so he believes it, and that settles it.” Nothing else really matters.

### **Michael Licona’s Closing**

In his closing Licona introduces a quote from Ataie’s online book: “I hope you can see the differences between the logical lucid Muslim argument and the ignorant Christian ramblings.”<sup>6</sup> Mike points out that it is crystal clear in this debate that “precisely the opposite is true.” He points out once again that Ataie is off-topic with his theological objections and that this

---

<sup>6</sup>Ali Ataie, “In Defense of Islam: Confronting the Christians with their own Scriptures,” [http://www.onthewing.org/user/Islam%20-%20In\\_Defense\\_Of.pdf](http://www.onthewing.org/user/Islam%20-%20In_Defense_Of.pdf) (accessed August 20, 2011).

debate is about the historical case. He challenges him to get back to the historical facts. Once again, Licona reminds the audience how Ali never responded to the four historical facts or provided a single shred of evidence against these minimal facts. I love the way Mike brought up the fact that millions of Muslims are coming to Jesus Christ every year because of disenchantment with Islam. Licona invites Muslims to accept Jesus Christ by seeking the Truth. Licona closes with an offer of a free DVD to any Muslim and an invitation to Muslims to accept Jesus by seeking the Truth. What an excellent closing!

### **Ali Ataie's Closing**

Ataie responds to Licona's attack on the textual reliability of the Qur'an by claiming that the original Qur'an is in Turkey splattered with the blood of Uthman, one of Muhammad's chief companions. He claims that Islam is the fastest growing religion in America, and he says jokingly "it must be because we can have many wives or because of the sword." This played well for his supporters though it had no relevance to the debate. On the implausibility of the historicity of Christ, Ataie appeals to the testimony of *late* Albert Schweitzer (instead of *any* of today's recognized historians). He adds, "Which is more plausible? Jesus rises from dead as God, or he was substituted and seen alive by people?" There are at least two problems with what is implied by these questions. First, Ataie has not provided any canons to adjudicate the plausibility issues. Second, even if Jesus was rescued from the cross, it is extremely implausible that he would have been able to convince others of a new resurrected body—one which would provide grounding of ultimate hope connected with Christians receiving a similar body (cf. 1 John 3:2). It is very unlikely that a beaten and battered body of Jesus would be mistaken for the resurrected renewed body of Jesus.

### Questions from the Audience

Following the debate, questions are taken from the audience, and this provides more opportunities for the debaters to continue their exchange with each other. When Ataie is asked for a historical account of what happened to Jesus, he notes that the Qur'an does not go into details. There are no answers, only theories. Mike points out that he has proven that the Qur'an is not written by God and is untrustworthy. When Mike is pressed with a question on why he avoids "theology" since the term means "logic of divinity," he is quick to point out that theology means "study of God." Mike adds, "you have to look at historical evidence." He notes that one of the reasons Christianity is so great is because it is supported by the historical facts. When Ataie brings up Apollonius of Tyana as a parallel of Christ, Licona is quick to note that Apollonius was never resurrected. Rather, he was seen in a dream and taught that people became disembodied spirits—not resurrected persons.

A question that really unsettles Ataie was in regard to the sacred law of apostasy of Islam. He is asked if he believes that people should be killed if they leave Islam. Ataie wants to know why such a question like that would ever be asked. He attempts to downplay Islam's death penalty for apostasy by saying that the same kind of principle is found in the Old Testament. He even parallels the Islamic death penalty with the sword of Jesus (which is obviously figurative, cf. Matt. 10:34, 35; 26:52). Licona does not let him off the hook. He points out that he would be executed in a Muslim country for this very debate. Ataie responds by noting how offended he is at the name "Campus *Crusade* for Christ." Licona certainly gets the best of this exchange. Ataie not only lacks good arguments, he increasingly appears to be getting nervous. On the contrary, Licona remains calm and focused throughout the debate.

Licona does a great job of turning the table on the questioner who claims that Licona was being selective in rejecting passages that seem to teach that Jesus was rescued. Licona does this by pointing out that one must interpret the ambiguous with the clear, otherwise one could take a couple of passages in the Qur'an to show that Jesus did, in fact, die. In response to a question about Mormonism which also claims to be a restoration, Licona takes the opportunity to discuss the lack of historical evidence for Mormonism and how both Mormonism and Islam are to be rejected on historical grounds. On a question of the dead saints raised in Matthew, Ataie ridicules the whole notion. Mike responds by saying that this may have been a literary device not uncommon in the ancient world. While I do not agree, it was a great way to take that issue off the table in this debate.

When Licona is asked a rhetorical question about biases of those who hold to the Qur'an as well as the Christian Bible, he takes the opportunity to review his "six speed bumps," which he uses to help manage personal biases. He turns to Ataie and asks him how he manages his biases. Ataie responds with "by having five translations." Licona points out that this does nothing to manage biases. Clearly, Ataie has no clue about principles of historicity—which was the key issue of the debate. His "case" against the resurrection of Jesus Christ is based on his theology from the Qur'an. He has no *historical* arguments against the death and resurrection of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

The debate provides an excellent opportunity to see how powerful the principles of historiography are in demonstrating the historicity of the Christian teachings on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ against the claims of Islam. Islam is unable to provide any historical evidence for its claim that Jesus was rescued. With this in mind it should be no surprise that this

turned out to be a rather one-sided debate with Ataie totally unable to defend Islam's position on historical grounds. Licona provided a strong historical case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ while Ataie primarily engaged in *theological* polemics against Christianity. Licona demonstrated (with four minimal facts accepted by the majority of secular historians) that the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most plausible on historical grounds. It was Ataie's responsibility to present the negative case against the resurrection and rebut the affirmative case that Licona presents. He did neither. All the "weapons" that this accomplished Muslim could muster against the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ proved futile; his arguments were irrelevant and inert. This demonstrates just how powerful the historical case is for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The God who controls history has seen fit to provide Christians with substantial historical evidence for the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. We have far less evidence for other historical events in the Bible (e.g., the massive exodus of the Jews from Egypt recorded in Exodus 14; the instant execution of 185,000 Assyrians by the angel of the Lord, 2 Kings 19:35) for which we must accept by faith apart from substantial historical confirmation. What a testimony to God's grace that He has left us with such historical evidence for the most momentous physical historical event ever to take place in human history: the defeat of physical death! What a blessing on a personal level. What a blessing to use in reaching others for Christ. Evidence for the resurrection of Christ is not limited to the special revelation of the Bible. However, its significance cannot be understood without it.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Copan, Paul, ed. *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?: a Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan*. Joplin: Baker Academic, 1999.
- Copan, Paul, and Ronald K. Tacelli, eds. *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment?: a Debate between William Lane Craig & Gerd Lüdemann*. Joplin: IVP Academic, 2000.
- Habermas, Gary R. *The Historical Jesus, Ancient Evidence for the Life of Christ*. Joplin: College Press, 2009.
- Habermas, Gary R., and Michael R. Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004.
- Licona, Michael R. *Paul Meets Muhammad, A Christian-Muslim Debate on the Resurrection*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Resurrection of Jesus: a New Historiographical Approach*. Joplin: IVP, 2010.