

A Brief Apology Concerning the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Apologia = a verbal defense, a speech in defense (from *apo* = from + *lego* = to speak); literally ‘to talk oneself off from, to answer by way of making a defense for oneself.’ Several verses in the NT in which this word (or a form of the word) is used: “And they drew Alexander out of the multitude, the Jews putting him forward. And Alexander beckoned with the hand, and would have made his defence unto the people. But when they knew that he was a Jew, all with one voice about the space of two hours cried out, Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” (Acts 19:33,34 KJV) “Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defence which I make now unto you.” (Acts 22:1 KJV)

Background Information

“The New Testament witnesses were fully aware of the background against which the resurrection took place. The body of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish burial custom, was wrapped in a linen cloth. About 100 pounds of aromatic spices, mixed together to form a gummy substance, were applied to the wrappings of cloth about the body. After the body was placed in a solid rock tomb, an extremely large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb. Large stones weighing approximately two tons were normally rolled (by means of levers) against a tomb entrance. A Roman guard of strictly disciplined fighting men was stationed to guard the tomb. This guard affixed on the tomb the Roman seal, which was meant to ‘prevent any attempt at vandalizing the sepulcher.’ Anyone trying to move the stone from the tomb’s entrance would have broken the seal and thus incurred the wrath of Roman law. But three days later the tomb was empty. The followers of Jesus said He had risen from the dead. They reported that He appeared to them during a period of 40 days, showing Himself to them by many ‘infallible proofs.’ Paul the apostle recounted that Jesus appeared to more than 500 of His followers at one time, the majority of whom were still alive and who could confirm what Paul wrote. So many security precautions were taken with the trial, crucifixion, burial, entombment, sealing, and guarding of Christ’s tomb that it becomes very difficult for critics to defend their position that Christ did not rise from the dead.” [Josh McDowell; *Evidence for the Resurrection*]

Evidence Supporting a Literal Bodily Resurrection

THE STONE WAS ROLLED AWAY — Each of the gospel writers mention the moving of the 1½ to 2 ton stone which had been placed at the entrance of the tomb. “Those who observed the stone after the resurrection describe its position as having been rolled up a slope away not just from the entrance of the tomb, but from the entire massive sepulcher. It was in such a position that it looked as if it had been picked up and carried away. Now, I ask you, if the disciples had wanted to come in, tiptoe around the sleeping guards, and then roll the stone over and steal Jesus’ body, how could they have done that without the guards’ awareness?” [Josh McDowell; *Evidence for the Resurrection*]

THE ROMAN SEAL WAS BROKEN — Those caught breaking a seal such as placed around the tombstone was automatically executed by being crucified upside-down. The disciples who had ran in fear would never had attempted such an act. “Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.” (Matthew 27:62-66 KJV)

THE ROMAN GUARDS RAN AWAY — The Roman military was the best at that time, with harsh penalties to maintain discipline. “The fear of their superiors’ wrath and the possibility of death meant that they paid close attention to the minutest details of their jobs. One way a guard was put to death was by being stripped of his clothes and then burned alive in a fire started with his garments. If it was not apparent which soldier had failed in his duty, then lots were drawn to see which one would be punished with death for the guard unit’s failure. Certainly the entire unit would not have fallen asleep with that kind of threat over their heads. Dr. George Currie, a student of Roman military discipline, wrote that fear of punishment ‘produced flawless attention to duty, especially in the night watches.’ ” [Josh McDowell; *Evidence for the Resurrection*]

THE TOMB WAS EMPTY — This cannot be denied by any but the most skeptical, and only by denying the historical records of the event. Not only was this the testimony of the surprised disciples, but even the enemies of Christ could not deny the tomb was empty. The transformed disciples began their preaching ministry in the very city where Jesus was crucified, emphasizing the fact of the resurrection — why didn’t the Jewish leaders merely lead a group to the tombs and disprove all the statements of the disciples? The first attempt to discredit the Christian movement was not a denial of the empty tomb but rather an attempt to explain *why* it was empty (Matt 28: 11-15).

THE EMPTY GRAVE CLOTHES — “In a literal sense, against all statements to the contrary, the tomb was not totally empty — because of an amazing phenomenon. John, a disciple of Jesus, looked over to the place where the body of Jesus had lain, and there were the grave clothes, in the form of the body, slightly caved in and empty — like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar’s cocoon. That’s enough to make a believer out of anybody. John never did get over it. The first thing that stuck in the minds of

the disciples was not the empty tomb, but rather the empty grave clothes — undisturbed in form and position.” [Josh McDowell; *Evidence for the Resurrection*]

POST-RESURRECTIONS APPEARANCES OF JESUS — There are records of Jesus appearing over two dozen times after His death, burial and resurrection. The size of the group ranged from an individual to a small gathering of the disciples to an entire crowd of over 500 people at once. “What gives a special authority to the list (of witnesses) as historical evidence is the reference to most of the five hundred brethren being still alive. St. Paul says in effect, ‘If you do not believe me, you can ask them.’ Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written within thirty years of the event is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly two thousand years ago.” [Dr. Edwin M. Yamauchi, associate professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio; q.v. Josh McDowell]

POST-RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS TO ‘HOSTILE WITNESSES’ — It might be argued that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus was manipulated due to His appearing only to those favorable to Christianity, but that is not the case. No one honest with history could state Saul of Tarsus was a Christian ally yet Saul’s life was transformed by the meeting on the road to Damascus. Further evidence might be given by the conversion of James, the skeptical half-brother of Jesus who became a great leader in Jerusalem.

THE TRANSFORMATION WITHIN THE LIVES OF THE DISCIPLES — The question to those denying the resurrection is “*how do you explain the change in the disciples?*” The disciples scattered in fear on the night of His betrayal. Most of them were absent during the trial of Jesus, with Peter and John being the only exceptions, and Peter even there denied Him with cursing. After the death of Jesus, the disciples hid behind locked doors while discussing their futures. Yet days later they boldly proclaimed the resurrection of Christ in the presence of those who put Him to death! “How their lives changed after they had seen the risen Jesus is another mark of the story’s truthfulness. The disciples became the forerunners of a new movement that swept the world. They spoke out for the message. They were persecuted for the message and they ultimately gave their lives for this message: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Reliable historical sources tell us that all twelve of the disciples except John died as martyrs. Peter was crucified in Rome. Paul was beheaded. And James was stoned to death, to name a few. This is of crucial importance. If they had pulled off a hoax, why would they go to their graves proclaiming that it actually happened? ... Is it plausible to believe that not one of them, under the threat of death would have admitted, ‘we made the whole thing up?’ ” [Christopher L. Lang; *Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ*]

THE GROWTH OF THE NT CHURCHES (BEGINNING IN JERUSALEM) — “Not only were they now bold spokesmen, but of a fundamentally different religion than Judaism. For a Jew of the first century to change his religion or preach some heretical doctrine would be to risk eternal damnation. For us in the twentieth century, we are not surprised by new religions, but this kind of hoax is almost unthinkable in first century Judaism whose culture and beliefs changed slowly. They were convinced that what they saw and experienced was true.” [Christopher L. Lang; *Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ*] It must again be pointed out that this all occurred within the city of the crucifixion of Christ — if Jesus was still in the grave, it would have been easy to deny the truth of the disciples’ teachings.

THE CHANGE IN WORSHIP FROM SATURDAY (THE SABBATH) TO SUNDAY (THE RESURRECTION DAY) — The first disciples were almost without exception Jewish converts, yet the day of worship changed from the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) to Sunday, the first day of the week and the day of the resurrection. There is no reasonable explanation for this change other than the celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

Theories Attempting to Explain the Resurrection

“THE DISCIPLES WENT TO THE WRONG TOMB” — To accept that Jesus was buried but later the women and disciples all went to the wrong tomb and therefore came to the wrong conclusion assumes that everyone in Jerusalem knowing of the circumstances of the death of Christ also went to the wrong tomb. The Jewish leaders who asked for the Roman guards would not have gone to the wrong tomb. Nor would the Roman guards make such a mistake for they were at the tomb! If the resurrection was merely a mistaken grave site, the Jewish leaders would have lost no time producing the body from the proper tomb.

“MASS HALLUCINATIONS” — “Because of the strength of the evidence that something did happen that changed the disciples’ lives, some critics have suggested the idea that what they saw was an hallucination. There are two problems with this theory: it doesn’t match the what we know of the account and it doesn’t match what we know of the psychology of hallucinations. J.P. Moreland summarizes the nature of hallucinations well. First, hallucinations happen to persons who are high-strung, highly imaginative, and nervous. Second, they are linked in an individual’s subconscious to his past beliefs and experiences. Third, it is extremely unlikely that two or more people would have the same hallucination at the same time. Fourth, they usually occur at particular places (places of nostalgia which create a reminiscing mood) and they recur over a long period of time. I would add further that the idea of mass hallucinations has been disproven in modern psychology. If you hold that what the disciples saw was an hallucination, then you must acknowledge that they experienced this hallucination in groups of three, four, twelve, and even five hundred people. The hallucination theory does not fit what we know of the disciples’ expectations.... [The] disciples were not expecting Christ to rise from the dead. They had no concept in Judaism of the Messiah rising physically

from the dead with the same body, a body they could touch and interact with. Nor do the descriptions given in the gospels reflect the kind of vagueness that makes up an hallucination. What they experienced was concrete. They could recall and explain it clearly. And because many of them experienced the same thing, separately and together, they could confirm their experiences with each other. The hallucination theory also fails to explain one other fact: the empty tomb. Had the disciples, and many others, hallucinated Jesus' appearances, the commotion they were causing in Jerusalem could have been easily stopped by producing the body." [Christopher L. Lang; *Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ*]

“JESUS DID NOT REALLY DIE” (THE ‘SWOON THEORY’) — This theory conjectures that Jesus did not really die on the cross but merely fainted from exhaustion and loss of blood. Everyone thought Him dead, but later He resuscitated and the disciples thought it to be a resurrection. “Skeptic David Friedrich Strauss — certainly no believer in the resurrection — gave the deathblow to any thought that Jesus revived from a swoon: ‘It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to His sufferings, could have given to the disciples the impression that He was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could only have weakened the impression which He had made upon them in life and in death, at the most could only have given it an elegiac voice, but could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship.’ ” [Josh McDowell; *Evidence for the Resurrection*]

“THE DISCIPLES STOLE THE BODY” — “This explanation characterized the earliest Jewish anti-Christian polemic and was revived in the form of the conspiracy theory of eighteenth century Deism. The theory has been universally rejected by critical scholars and survives only in the popular press. To name only two considerations decisive against it: (1) it is morally impossible to indict the disciples of Jesus with such a crime. Whatever their imperfections, they were certainly good, earnest men and women, not impostors. No one who reads the New Testament unprejudicially can doubt the evident sincerity of these early believers. (2) It is psychologically impossible to attribute to the disciples the cunning and daring requisite for such a ruse. At the time of the crucifixion, the disciples were confused, disorganized, fearful, doubting, and burdened with mourning—not mentally motivated or equipped to engineer such a wild hoax. Hence, to explain the empty tomb and resurrection appearances by a conspiracy theory seems out of the question.” [William Lane Craig; *Contemporary Scholarship and the Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*]

“THE JEWS OR ROMANS STOLE THE BODY” — “The Jewish authorities had no motives to move the body; they would only want to produce the corpse. This would have ended any ‘resurrection’ preaching. But since no corpse had been discovered, or could be, all that could be done was to start a rumor that the disciples stole the body.... The Romans also had no motive. Why would they steal it? Why would they crucify Him and then steal His body? For what possible reason? To confuse the disciples? To agitate the Jews? They would rather Jesus stay dead and cause no more trouble.” [Howard Morgan; *The Resurrection of Jesus: Hoax or History*]

Conclusion: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3,4 KJV)

“Professor Thomas Arnold, for 14 years a headmaster of Rugby, author of the famous, *History of Rome*, and appointed to the chair of modern history at Oxford, was well acquainted with the value of evidence in determining historical facts. This great scholar said: ‘I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.’ Brooke Foss Westcott, an English scholar, said: ‘raking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no historic incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection of Christ. Nothing but the antecedent assumption that it must be false could have suggested the idea of deficiency in the proof of it.’ ” [Josh McDowell; *Evidence for the Resurrection*]