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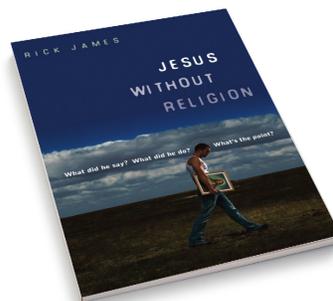
SCAPEGOAT—JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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SCAPEGOAT

The Death of Innocence

The Western world runs on time; comprehension is contingent on the establishment of chronology. You can't watch an episode of *24* or *Lost* without knowing the hour of the day or the number of days on the island. The Eastern world has never paid such homage to time and would be appalled, I'm sure, by how many times a day we turn our prayer mats in the direction of the clock. The Gospels employ an assortment of organizing themes other than chronology, never reading, for example, "Day 17: Jesus walks on water." And yet, as Jesus' ministry comes down to the final week, the Gospels become extremely time-conscious.

On Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem a celebrity, the crowds lauding him with praise and palm branches as Israel's Messiah. This only confirmed to the religious leaders the necessity of their assassination plot and the need for haste. On Monday and Tuesday, verbal gunfire erupted between Jesus and the religious leaders. Wednesday there was apparently a ceasefire, as the day is passed over in silence by the Gospels. On Thursday evening, Jesus celebrated Passover as the Last Supper with his disciples and then went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It was here that Jesus was taken into custody. Through Thursday night and into Friday morning, Jesus was dragged through three mock trials: one before the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin, another before Herod the Jewish king of Israel (the region of Galilee, specifi-

cally), and then finally a third before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Friday afternoon, Jesus was crucified. His body was taken down and laid in a tomb early Friday evening. On Sunday came the first reports that the tomb was empty and that many had seen Jesus resurrected.

The Gospels are organized biographies compiled several decades after the events, drawing from the memorized teachings of Jesus, sermons and interviews by the original disciples, and written vignettes of events like the Last Supper or Crucifixion. While all of the key teachings of Jesus would have been memorized by the disciples, there is no reason not to conclude that at some point the most literate of their number, someone such as Matthew, wrote them down. In fact, someone probably did. The recorded “traditions,” however (the arrival in Jerusalem, the trial before Pilate, etc.), were not memorized “teachings” but historic descriptions of key events. As such they were probably the first to be written down, perhaps within months and certainly within a couple of years of the events. As the final week, recorded in the Gospels, is primarily a series of these early historical vignettes, they are filled with the wonderful hallmarks of eyewitness details written down hurriedly after the event.

Here’s a good example: “So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first” (John 20:3, 4). Apparently John (“the other disciple”) felt that future generations should know that in a 100-yard sprint he could easily beat Peter. “Whatever else I tell you concerning the life of Jesus, just know this: I am twice as fast as my lethargic friend Peter. And don’t you ever forget it.” We can almost hear their “trash talk” echoing down through the ages, “I smoked you, man, I smoked you.” So read these “last week” vignettes and appreciate them as eyewitness accounts of the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, for that is assuredly what they are.

Peter's Nervous Breakdown

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."

When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "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."

"I tell you the truth," 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. (Mark 14:22-31)

While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him.

"You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus," she said.

But he denied it. "I don't know or understand what you're talking about," he said, and went out into the entryway.

When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those

standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” Again he denied it.

After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.”

He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”

Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept. (Mark 14:66-72)

I’m guessing that in the history of Christendom a million sermons have been preached on Peter’s indiscretion (I like to guess at things when there is no way to validate my accuracy). So we will begin by looking at a different point altogether.

I’m sure we’ve all heard of skeptics who accuse the Gospels of containing all manner of fabrications, placed there in blinded zeal by the disciples or other church leaders in order to strengthen the growing church or propagate the Christian faith. If this were true, you’d have to step back and ask, “Why would the Gospel writers make up damaging and humiliating facts such as Peter’s denial?” Peter became the leading figure of the early church, to whom all turned for strength and direction. How, exactly, would it have been helpful to portray him in this way: “All hail Peter, denier of the Christ, disciple with neither spine nor backbone, friend to the weak and cowardly, traitor to the Most High”?

In fact, one of the major ways historians evaluate the accuracy of ancient documents is to look for counterproductive features; these are the hallmark not of myth or propaganda but of history. In other words, if you’re reading an ancient Roman document and it describes Caligula as a compassionate, folksy, down-to-earth leader of the community, it’s

propaganda. If it describes him as a depraved, inbred, masochistic sociopath, then it's history. If the Gospels were anything but historical documents, you would never find this scandalous account of Peter's denial, nor would you find mention of any of the following:

- Jesus' last words are recorded as "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). If you were fabricating material and could create any last words for Jesus, is this really what you would choose?
- After Jesus' death, two women were the first to discover that his tomb was empty and to testify of this fact (Luke 23:55—24:11). But in patriarchal first-century Israel, a woman's testimony was not even admissible in court. Not very compelling.
- The disciples are portrayed in the Gospels as competitive, petty, status-seeking and generally dense (Luke 9:46-56). How does it help to characterize the leaders of the church this way?
- At one point, one of the Gospels mentions that Jesus' family members came to take hold of him, for they thought he had lost his mind (Mark 3:21). That's not very reassuring!

If you read through the Gospels with an eye for this particular feature, you'd be amazed by the shameless disclosure of unflattering and counterproductive details that are clearly the mark of history. Having noted Peter's denial the second detail of significance in this story is that Jesus seems to have known this history before it happened.

Jesus might have often known what was going to happen but simply kept such knowledge to himself. I don't struggle with bouts of omniscience, so I don't really know. But I do know why he offered a trailer of future events in this instance. In the insanity of these few days, it could seem, to the untrained eye, that all hell had broken loose and that humankind had been able to hijack the King and kingdom. Jesus'

predictions were to assure, upon later reflection, that this was God-ordered anarchy, and that no one had taken the life of the Son of God; it had been voluntarily given. Yes, it certainly could seem like the worldly powers had staged a coup, overthrown the guards and stormed the palace, but nothing could be further from the truth, and Jesus' knowledge of what was to follow was an assurance that the plot against him would succeed not because of the brilliance of his enemies' plan but because their plan also happened to be his.

Though Jesus knew of Peter's impending denial, Peter's failure was his own. In a sense, Peter failed because Peter needed to fail. He claimed that, though all others might fall away, he never would. One of the most disastrous things that could have befallen Christianity is if Peter had kept that promise. In that case, the key figure of the early church would have continued to operate under the faulty proposition that radical commitment is the key to the Christian life. It is not. Radical grace is.

Everyone who comes to Christ is in need of mercy, forgiveness, and empowerment to accomplish his will. Following Christ is something we do out of gratitude for mercy given and out of a sense that he has what we need to carry on. If Peter had gutted it out, he would have been a different person, seen Christ differently, seen himself differently. We would have found ancient scrolls from the first-century church reading "Suck it up" rather than the humbled sentiment of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us today our daily bread." Peter could have been Christianity's first motivational speaker. A Pharisee could have been leading the church. Thank God he failed. Jesus knew it all beforehand, then toasted to it.

As far as a passionate heart goes, Peter was the best of our species. Which is perhaps the strongest argument for why we needed a Messiah.

Pilate Washed His Hands and Sealed His Fate

Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him in the face.

Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!"

As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!"

But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him."

The Jews insisted, "We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

When Pilate heard this, he was even more afraid, and he went back inside the palace. "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"

Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar."

When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat at a place known as the Stone Pavement (which in Ara-

maic is Gabbatha). It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week, about the sixth hour.

“Here is your king,” Pilate said to the Jews.

But they shouted, “Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!”

“Shall I crucify your king?” Pilate asked.

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. (John 19:1-16)

The historicity of Pontius Pilate is a case study in the current trends of archaeology. It wasn't long ago that critics questioned the existence of Pilate because of little corroboration from historical documents. But in June of 1961, while excavating an ancient Roman amphitheater near Caesarea, archaeologists uncovered an enormous limestone block bearing an inscription that dedicated the structure to Tiberius Caesar. Naturally, part of the inscription named the person who had dedicated it. It read, “Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea.”¹

This stone is part of a larger archipelago of recent discoveries confirming historical pieces of the New Testament:

- In Acts 18:12-17 we read how Paul was brought before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. At Delphi, an inscription of a letter from Emperor Claudius was discovered stating, “Lucius Junius Gallio, my friend, and the proconsul of Achaia.”²
- Romans 16:23 names Erastus, a coworker of the apostle Paul, as the treasurer of the city of Corinth. Archaeologists excavating a Corinthian theater discovered an inscription that says, “Erastus in return for his aedilship [appointment to public office] laid the pavement at his own expense.” The pavement was laid in A.D. 50.³
- In John 5:1-15 we find the story of how Jesus healed a man at the Pool of Bethesda. John described the pool as having five porticoes.

This site had been in dispute until recently, forty feet under the surface of the present city, archaeologists discovered a pool with five porticoes.⁴

And the list of discoveries goes on. One prominent archaeologist examined Luke's references of thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, nine islands and key historical figures. He didn't find a single mistake.⁵

I'm not sure what my point in all this was. Perhaps it was that every person, in his or her lifetime, should go on an archaeological dig. Or maybe it was a plea to preserve our natural resources. No, I don't think that was it. Oh yes, the historicity of Pilate.

Pilate was the Roman governor in Judea. Israel was a conquered territory, and while maintaining a strong degree of indigenous leadership, it still wobbled on the puppet strings of Rome. As Rome did not want to supply arms to local vigilantes or insurrectionists, the Roman governor alone had the power to execute capital punishment, and so it was inevitable that the case of Jesus would bounce its way into Pilate's court.

The etymology of the Greek word used in the Bible for "sincerity" or "transparency" literally means "judged by the sun,"⁶ the opposite of which is duplicity: having hidden motives and agendas. It's a word picture meaning, that when you bring something out into broad daylight, all mysteries vanish, veneer is stripped away, and reality is laid bare. Pilate's encounter with Jesus seems to have had this glaring effect, and what we witness is a heart starkly divided, allegiances cubicled like office space—a lack of sincerity and integrity.

On the one hand, Pilate had a bloodthirsty mob trolling the waters like sharks awaiting a man overboard. Jesus, however, had masses of supporters, and Pilate did not want a riot or civil war, as his role in Israel was to prevent them. Add to that the political pressure exerted by the local Jewish leaders (the Sanhedrin), and a recent Roman mandate ordering

him to make all efforts to accommodate them.⁷ But there was not only pressure from below on the organizational chart; there was also pressure from above. Jesus had claimed authority (to be the King of the Jews) reserved for Caesar alone, and failure to make an example out of him would not play well in Rome, meaning Pilate's next job might be janitor at the Colosseum.

None of this would have been such a problem if it were not for the nagging sense that his prisoner might actually be who he claimed to be—the Son of God. In a personal interrogation of Jesus, Pilate sought to intimidate and assert his authority—“Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?”—but as the interview progressed, he had all he could do to maintain eye contact and a firm handshake. Despite Jesus' appearance of absolute vulnerability and weakness, Pilate sensed an intrinsic power and authority that made him squirm and left him questioning everything: his senses, his intuition, his beliefs, his life.

Indecision is usually rooted in one of two things: either you're not sure what the right decision is or you *do* know but you lack the moral courage to act on it. In this case, the evidence would argue for the latter. Pilate refused to make a decision about Jesus, and attempted to wash his hands of the responsibility.

But history did not afford Pilate that option. In the end, I'm not sure it will afford any of us that option. There really are moments and issues in life where a failure to act, decide or cast a vote is to, in effect, have voted in the negative. According to the Gospels, our decision about the Messiah is one of them. We will all find ourselves at some point sitting in the seat of Pilate, having to weigh repurcusions and implications, having to decide about Jesus. For Pilate, the demands of the masses, of Rome, of his career and of his reputation ultimately drowned out the whispers of his conscience. He consented to the demands of the people: “Finally Pi-

late handed [Jesus] over to them to be crucified” (John 19:16).

The lack of Jesus’ supporters within the rancorous crowd can be attributed to the smaller public hearing set within the precincts of the military barracks, with a crowd hand-picked by the chief priests. As befitting Pilate’s lack of sincerity and integrity, the entire judicial operation did not take place in the full light of day, but rather before a sleeping Jerusalem was even aware of what had transpired. By 9:00 A.M., Jesus had been tried, condemned and crucified.

Jesus: Good and Dead

Knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. (John 19:28-35)

As unfathomable as this may be, the following is a message from an

actual Web site: “The moon landing was faked. John Glenn, Neil Armstrong and whoever else was involved in the moon mission never actually left earth. They filmed all of the moon footage in a sound studio in Burbank, California.”

The problem with paranoia is not that it's illogical; it's that the circle of logic is obsessively small:

“You work for the CIA.”

“No, I don't.”

“The CIA always deny it.”

One of the beliefs behind revisionist stories such as *The Da Vinci Code*—and Islam, for that matter—is that Jesus didn't really die on the cross. But while we don't possess many writings from first- and second-century historians, what we do have makes Jesus' death a certainty.

- Lucian (A.D. 120–180) referred to Jesus as a crucified sophist (philosopher).⁸
- Josephus (A.D. 37–100) wrote, “At this time there appeared Jesus, a wise man, for he was a doer of amazing deeds. When Pilate condemned him to the cross, the leading men among us, having accused him, those who loved him did not cease to do so.”⁹
- Tacitus (A.D. 56–120) wrote, “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty . . . at the hands of our procurator Pontius Pilate.”¹⁰

This is a bit like finding that the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post* all listed Jesus in their obituaries: “Founder of Christendom dies, leaves behind 11 close friends and one traitor.” While such corroboration is certainly affirming, a story from John's Gospel provides the evidence of an actual autopsy. John observed “blood and water” flowing from Jesus' body after a Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear (John 19:34). John may have thought that this was either mirac-

ulous, religiously symbolic (water and blood typifying baptism and atonement), or—who knows?—maybe just plain creepy. Whatever he thought, it is doubtful that he had in mind the following facts: The “water” was almost certainly pericardium fluid, which is a clear liquid looking exactly like water. The blood was, well, blood. If Jesus’ lung and heart had been pierced by the Roman spear, as most likely they were, this is exactly what you’d expect to find oozing from the side of Jesus: blood and watery pericardium fluid. Thus John gave us an inadvertent autopsy, absolutely reliable because that was not his intent.

John’s forensic skills earned the approval by the American Medical Association, which went on record with the following statement: “Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicated that Jesus was dead; . . . the spear, thrust between His right ribs, probably perforated not only the right lung but also the pericardium and heart and thereby ensured His death.”¹¹ Now, I’m not sure why the Association waited two thousand years to make such a statement but maybe that explains why it took sixty years to get a medical endorsement that smoking causes cancer.

While the 2004 movie *The Passion of the Christ* might make the following description superfluous, and though it personally bothers me to think about it, we should review the particulars of the crucifixion nonetheless. Prior to being nailed to the cross, Jesus was beaten with a Roman cat-o’-nine-tails, a whip with bits of bone and metal that would tear the flesh and expose the muscles and even the bowels of the victim. Jesus was punched repeatedly, kicked and spit upon. Using mallets, the Roman executioners thumped heavy, square, wrought-iron nails through Jesus’ wrists and feet into a wooden cross. Afterward they dropped the cross into a hole. Jesus hung on the cross for approximately six hours, from about 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M., before crying out, “It is finished” and breathing his final breath.¹²

While today the importance of “last words” is to find out who’s getting cut out of the family trust fund, in the ancient world “last words” were more weighty, endowed with profound significance. Matthew tells us that Jesus made two last utterances, and neither is trivial. The first, contained in both Mark and Matthew, is “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In light of all I’ve said about the purpose of Jesus’ death, his asking this question would seem to suggest that I have some serious explaining to do. Here’s my explanation: Psalm 22.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning? . . .

All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:

“He trusts in the LORD;
let the LORD rescue him.

Let him deliver him,
since he delights in him.” . . .

I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.

My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.

Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.

I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.

They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.
But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me. . . .
Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness
to a people yet unborn—
for he has done it. (Psalm 22:1, 7, 8, 14-19, 30, 31)

Though written by Israel's King David a thousand years before the events at Calvary, Psalm 22 sounds like it's describing Jesus' crucifixion doesn't it? It certainly makes sense, then, for Jesus to have quoted it on the cross. But it is also astounding how precisely Jesus' death enacted and fulfilled the words—David's suffering, clearly a prophetic echo of Christ's.

Jesus' final, final words—"It is finished"—may seem a demure end-note: a more mundane string of final words would be difficult to imagine. But in context it probably means something like "I have accomplished the redemption of the entire human race." If this is the case, then we are looking at the most significant three words ever spoken, as well as the greatest example of understatement in human history. And with these words, "he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30). John's account provides us with a statement of certainty, foundational to what is to follow.

The Rise of Jesus

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter

and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) . . .

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. (John 20:1-9, 19, 20)

I spent some years working in advertising—writing commercials, ads and yes (ashamedly) even jingles. (I actually only wrote one jingle, which I had to sing to a boardroom full of clients—talk about feeling like a spanked butt.) The key to advertising, of course, is branding. The right tagline, logo, spokesperson, voice-over—all are essential elements in creating the image of a product. In my mind it is impossible to conceive of a better vehicle, a better symbol or analogy, for redemption and the gospel message than the resurrection. Its meaning is not simply that of “life” or “new life” or “creation,” but it carries with it the nuance of meaning “life out of death”: the power of God to transform death, evil, and corruption into life. And so the resurrection stands as

the hallmark, or tagline, of Jesus' ministry.

The veracity of Jesus' life and ministry stands or falls on the historical authenticity of this event, and so the issue to ponder is not so much the event itself as it is the evidence for the event. Was Jesus resurrected?

Historically, we know that Jesus was crucified to death, and we also know that his tomb was empty. Even the earliest polemics against Christianity accused the disciples of stealing the body, ergo, everyone agreed the tomb was empty. But what proof do we have for the resurrection? We'll follow four different lines of evidence, with the disclaimer that this is courtroom evidence, not scientific evidence. In a laboratory, evidence lies in replicating the event; in a courtroom, evidence proves the likelihood of a conclusion. And while it would be nice if Jesus were to appear as you read this, I'm not making any promises.

The first line of evidence concerns the disciples. Having believed that Jesus was the Messiah, they were as shocked as anyone else to see him splayed on a Roman cross. This is not what anyone had pictured happening to Israel's Redeemer. For the disciples, his death induced fear of persecution, grief, discouragement and mental confusion ("Did we believe in the wrong guy?"). Peter Steinfelds, in an article in the *New York Times*, raised the obvious issue: "Shortly after Jesus was executed, his followers were suddenly galvanized from a baffled and cowering group into people whose message about a living Jesus and a coming kingdom, preached at the risk of their lives, eventually changed an empire. Something happened. . . . But exactly what?"¹³

Eleven uneducated, unarmed fishermen and a rabbled handful of other followers literally conquered the Roman Empire. Such passion, conviction, motivation, and transformation seem to defy any other explanation *except* a resurrection. Seriously, think about it. If they had stolen the body and the whole thing was just a massive lie, could this royal society of nobodies really have changed the entire world?

The second line of proof looks at the same fact but from different angle. Eventually, nearly every one of the disciples was brutally martyred. Unzipping the body bags, we find the following: Andrew was martyred by crucifixion; Bartholomew was beaten and then crucified; James and Judas (not Iscariot) were stoned to death; Matthew was speared to death; Peter was crucified upside down; Phillip and Simon were both crucified; James was beheaded; Thomas was speared to death; and Mathias was stoned.¹⁴

What, then, did the disciples have to gain by lying about Jesus' resurrection? Every lie has a motive, right? Yet the disciples proclaimed his resurrection in full possession of the knowledge that it would cost them their lives. But it's actually more puzzling than that, for if the disciples knew that Jesus hadn't been resurrected, then they also knew he wasn't the true Messiah. They were, then, propagating a false messiah. In doing so, according to their own Jewish belief system, they were ensuring damnation.¹⁵ So, imagine being sawed in half with something like, say, a tree stump, causing the procedure to take hours. At any time you can save your life, not to mention your bowels, and avoid hell if you simply recant. "Did I say he rose from the dead? I meant, 'He sure looked red.'" But the disciples didn't, and if they were lying, then we are desperately lacking a motive for it.

The third line of proof comes from Jesus. He once said, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:39-40). Jesus authenticated his whole mission and ministry with the claim that he would rise from the dead. This is not the guy running the graveyard shift at the Seven-Eleven but the person whose moral teachings have altered humanity more than those of anyone who has ever existed,

ever. Even his enemies admitted that he had performed miracles, and his life fulfilled every messianic prophecy contained in the Old Testament. Though the claim that he would rise from the dead was admittedly amazing, you have to look long and hard at the life of Jesus before as-signing improbability to it.

The extraordinary post-resurrection encounters and appearances of Jesus provide the final line of proof. The New Testament states that nearly five hundred people saw Jesus alive and resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:6). This includes individuals such as the apostle Paul, who prior to his encounter with Christ had been the chief persecutor of Christians. Paul had absolutely no motivation to lay eyes on Jesus, so his experience cannot be reduced to hallucinatory wishful thinking. Furthermore, if anyone could have produced a body or a plausible reason why it was missing, or could have explained why so many people had seen Jesus, Christianity would have simply gone away. But no one could.

Christianity initially flourished in Jerusalem before seeping out to neighboring territories, and it is estimated that by the end of the first century nearly a million Jews had become followers of Christ. Many of these people had actually witnessed Jesus' life and ministry. They were zealously bound to their faith and culture, and yet broke from traditional Judaism to become followers of Christ. Clearly the amount of evidence for Jesus' resurrection, and the number of his post-resurrection appearances, must have been staggering to explain this.

The only alternative theory posed by Christianity's early opponents was that the disciples stole the body. So it might be worth considering the probability of this alternative. Obviously, if they had stolen the body, the disciple's actions, motivation and martyrdoms seem inexplicable—we've just covered that. As this was a Roman execution, a Roman guard of four to sixteen soldiers would have been placed at the tomb, and customarily a two-ton boulder would be rolled downhill to the mouth of the

tomb. The Gospels mention that Jesus was laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, Israel's presidential cabinet, making Joseph a national celebrity. So there's no mistaking the facticity and location of his tomb. And in the wake of Jesus' sudden persecution, the disciples were all terrified, scattered and in hiding. So the disciples making off with the body remains highly problematic to say the least.¹⁶

So, from a historical perspective, we are looking at a cataclysmic effect on the world: an enormous dent in history. The question that most of these evidences pose is, does anything less than Jesus' resurrection suffice to explain the enormous wrinkle in time? Within the culture of Israel, all other possible reconstructions leave us with a Jesus who, historically speaking, is going nowhere. In a different place and time, this might not be the case, but within first-century, monotheistic Judaism, nothing short of a resurrected Messiah would have generated the observable aftershocks.¹⁷

The evidence seems to suggest that the resurrection is not only reasonable but probable. All evidence, that is, except for this: experience tells us that normal people do not rise from the dead. And that is really the question: was Jesus just a normal person? Once you've decided that, the question of the resurrection answers itself.

The Commissioning of the Disciples

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you

always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

The last scene in a movie is pivotal because it brings closure to the story and provides an important bridge to any planned sequel. In the closing of *Spider-Man 2*, for example, Peter Parker’s nemesis (a word always to be used when discussing superheroes), Harry Osborn, discovers his father’s hidden Green Goblin paraphernalia: mask, tights, pantyhose, that kind of thing. As a result we expect the future to hold a “Curse of the Green Goblin” sort of sequel. The closing scene in the Gospels is Jesus’ post-resurrection discourse. It’s exceedingly crucial because, while it does bring closure to the ministry of Jesus, a sequel of sorts is indeed planned: the growth and mission of the apostolic church, which will occupy the rest of the New Testament. This discourse is the bridge to that sequel.

I can better explain the discourse if we start with the definition of the word *plot*: “a series of causally related events, involving some sort of conflict or tension, leading to a climax and a resolution.” Think of the TV show *Lost*, for example. What was the plot? Getting off the island. The tension, conflict and movement of the story revolved around this objective.

The Old Testament, as a book, has a plot, and that plot is the expansion of God’s reign on the earth, with the conflict being skirmishes against the powers of evil. Israel was the manifestation of God’s reign and presence in the world, and from Israel, the kingdom of God was to expand to the nations, as the book of Genesis adumbrates: “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Genesis 26:4).

But here’s the tension in the drama, indeed the tension of the Old Testament: as history unfolded, Israel vacillated in its role as ambassa-

dor of the kingdom. Will Israel be obedient to the covenant or fall into godless idolatry and immorality? Tune in next week to find out. Week after week, year after year, Israel lives out this recurring soap opera. But then, in a shocking turn of events, the nation of Israel rejected its Messiah and, at least for now, has been written out of the show. “Wait a second. Give me that script—this can’t be true.” But tragically, it is true.

And so we are left to wonder what will happen to the plot now that the star has left the set. Well, the end of the Gospels contain the new script. The plot is going to remain the same: the expansion of God’s kingdom on earth, but with new actors (the church) and some interesting nuances in upcoming episodes.

In the new season, the geography of Israel loses its relevance; rather, the gospel message will be dispatched to all nations, with the new kingdom being comprised of people from every language and nation. It will not be a physical, geopolitical kingdom with castle, moat and border guards, but a spiritual kingdom, with Christ reigning in the hearts of individual followers. The temple in Jerusalem, as the dwelling place of God, becomes a billion living temples, as God’s Spirit will personally indwell every believer. And in light of all this kingdom expansion, Christ’s followers are told to “go,” to take his message to everyone outside the kingdom, or anyone who has never heard, and proclaim it to them.

This passage, then, is the introduction and movie trailer for the rest of the New Testament, which follows the new script in its opening episodes. (I have grown so fond of this TV metaphor, I find myself unable to stop wielding it.) The disciples disperse, spreading the message of Christ in ever-widening circles, encompassing Judea, Samaria, Macedonia, Athens, Rome . . . The letters of the New Testament are simply that: letters written to groups of Christians (churches) in locations to which the disciples had traveled and preached, making disciples.

This is the plot of the present age, the trajectory of history, and this discourse also elucidates how long this present age will last: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

Where we are in this plot depends on whom you ask. There has been a concerted effort and cooperation among all churches toward this end in the last century, and a reasonable estimate is that nearly 5 billion people on the planet have been exposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, leaving roughly 2 billion still out of earshot. With communication what it is, it’s hard for me to imagine anyone on the planet, by the end of the twenty-first century, not having their own cell phone, blog and liter of Coke. So it’s probably not a stretch to presume that the next century will witness the conclusion of this exceedingly more sacred marketing task. I’ve written this book so you can’t say I haven’t done my part.

The Ascension of the Christ

He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. . . .

When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God. (Luke 24:44-53)

There is a standard formula to action film trailers. Starting slow, scenes blink in and out. The momentum builds as the music gets louder and the action faster, and as camera fades give way to jump-cuts. With your heart and adrenalin racing the emotional roller coaster peaks at the top of the highest incline and pauses: no words, no scene cuts, no music, no anything. Then into that stillness is uttered the memorable line of the movie—“We traced the call. It’s coming from inside the house.” You know what’s coming next. Your eyes will be force-fed a thousand frames of film a second, the music will shrill to a siren and the ride will crash into a black wall—“Coming this June.”

For the disciples the pause has already come. Before Jesus ascends and “Coming Soon” fades onto the screen, they are going to have to digest every messianic scene of the Old Testament in a single sitting. And that is a considerable amount of footage. Spiritually speaking, everything that was Israel—the Law, the festivals, the sacrificial system, the Temple, the prophets, the sabbath—everything that was subsumed in the Old Testament found its fulfillment in the Christ. As the architect of the nation, God had designed it precisely this way. Israel was the keyhole to the kingdom, made to fit a very specific key.

For example, the Passover, like the Fourth of July, commemorated the birth of a nation. You may have a basic idea of the Passover plot: Israel is delivered from the land of Egypt. Judgment in the form of plagues roll through Egypt like hurricanes through Florida, and as the last and final plague—the plague of the firstborns—“passes through” Egypt, it miraculously “passes over” the Israelites. Specifically, it passes over only those houses whose doorposts have been marked with the blood of a spotless lamb (Exodus 12). We can almost hear Jesus asking the disciples rhetorically: “And why do you suppose God did that?” It’s a picture or symbol: God’s judgment is averted, and we are delivered, only through the sacrifice of a spotless (read *sinless*) lamb, God’s own “first-

born.” John the Baptist had pieced this much together the first time he laid eyes on Jesus: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)

Or consider the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Once a year the Jewish High Priest would put his hands on a spotless goat to symbolically transfer the sins of the people to the animal, and then slay it. The transference of guilt and judgment to an innocent sacrifice (or scapegoat) was the principle behind the entire Jewish sacrificial system. Did God delight in the death of innocent animals? No! The point of the sacrificial system was to prepare Israel for its coming Messiah, the ultimate sin-bearer.

The Temple, which was the center of Israel's worship and the place to which every Jew flocked for high holy days, was the symbol of the nation—the Capitol building, so to speak. Like any monument, its significance was not *that* it stood but *what* it stood *for*: God's unique dwelling place among people—God with us. The prophet Isaiah, however, clarifies that the Jerusalem Temple was nothing more than a Lego model of the real thing: the coming Messiah: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Why would the Messiah be called Immanuel, as opposed to, say, Seth or Kennedy? Because the name Immanuel means “God with us”; the name Kennedy means “misshapen head.” Israel's deliverer would be the ultimate temple, the ultimate manifestation of God with us and among us.

And so the Temple, the Holy Days, festivals and sacrificial system all foreshadowed the Christ. The words of the prophets, too, find their translation only through the Messiah. At the heart of their preaching and predictions was a composite sketch of the coming Redeemer: a man born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), from the province of Galilee (Isaiah 9:1), conceived of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), pierced for our transgressions (Psalm 22), and one who was not just a man but “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14).

These and dozens of other predictions provided a have-you-seen-this-man? description for all Israel to be on the lookout. The future-telling of the prophets find their fulfillment in Jesus and are, frankly, unintelligible apart from him.

And then there is the sabbath, the day of rest. “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work” (Hebrews 4:9-10). In another words, the sabbath foretells of grace: a rest from the labor of earned righteousness and a reprieve from a 168-hour workweek demanded by an exacting taskmaster such as the Mosaic Law: “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4).

We could go on, and I’m guessing that Jesus did—for hours—showing how the “Law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms” were completely and totally about him. And then, having fulfilled the mission for which he came, Jesus left. Gone, as mysteriously and miraculously as he had arrived. The Gospels tell us that he was taken up into heaven, and there he remains until he comes again—returning not as humanity’s convicted felon but as “judge [of] the living and the dead” (2 Timothy 4:1).