



Biblical Foundations and Models for Contemporary Apologetics

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Despite its prominence historically, apologetics is seen as controversial in many Christian circles. Where practiced, contemporary apologetics is often characterised by a neglect of biblical foundations and models. This workshop seeks to identify, explore and apply such key biblical material. The focus will be on Acts 17:16-34 as a relevant case study.

1. Introduction

1.1 Defining apologetics

Every belief/worldview has its apologists. Christian apologetics may be described as the rational justification of Christian truth claims over against specific questions, objections and alternatives, in order to establish 'the epistemic permission' and 'the epistemic obligation' of the Christian faith for both Christians and non-Christians.

1.2 The need for biblical foundations and models

There is a widespread unease with apologetics in contemporary theology, despite its prominence historically as a theological discipline. Wherever practised, however, contemporary apologetics seems largely to be characterised by a neglect of biblical foundations and models.

2. Identifying biblical apologetic models

The definition presented above is an helpful tool for the identification of apologetic material in the Bible.

2.1 ... over against specific questions

The ministry of Jesus provides the key model, e.g. as expressed in the Gospel of John.

2.2 ... over against specific objections

Both the ministry of Jesus and the ministry of the apostles dealt with objections to the beliefs in one God and one Lord (1 Cor. 8:5-6). An informative example is Acts 26:24-29.

2.3 ... over against specific alternatives

The OT prophets, Jesus and the apostles lived in pluralistic contexts of competing truth claims. The Book of Acts provides a number of examples of how the early church had to deal with significant alternative worldviews:

"Of three main types of Christian apologetic in the second century Luke provides first-century prototypes: apologetic in relation to pagan religion (Christianity is true; paganism is false); apologetic in relation to Judaism (Christianity represents the fulfillment of true Judaism); apologetic in relation to the political authorities (Christianity is innocent of any offence against Roman law)." (F. F Bruce)

2.4 The Book of Acts as apologetics – with Acts 17:16-34 as a key model

The Book of Acts should be understood as apologetics, written for Christians with the dual intention to provide them both with confirmation of the truth of their Christian faith and with apologetic tools and models for reaching outsiders. This is a credible literary context for Acts 17:16-34 as an apologetic model.

3. Exploring biblical apologetic models. Case: Acts 17:16-34.

3.1 The principles

When exploring a biblical passage which is related to apologetics at least three questions need to be asked:

1. What kind of text?

Is it an Old Testament or a New Testament

passage? Is it a narrative, didactic or poetic text?

2. What kind of context?

Which questions, objections and/or alternatives do we find in the text? Are there any comparable contexts (i.e. from then to now)?

3. What kind of content?

Is the Christian response to be considered in terms of : a) normative worldview content? b) a recommendable approach? c) a positive, repeatable pattern? – or d) possibly a negative model?

3.2 Acts 17:16-34 as a case

This Lucan passage has a number of significant apologetic features:

1. Luke describes Paul as an apologist steeped in a genuinely Judeo-Christian worldview in the midst of the challenging pluralistic and pagan context of Athens.

2. Luke probably describes Paul as an apologist who gradually sees the need for a proactive approach in agora contexts.

3. Luke implicitly describes Paul as a Christian apologist with a contextual understanding of relevant questions, objections and alternatives in Athens to his claims about 'Jesus and the Resurrection'.

4. Luke describes Paul as an apologist with an awareness of and an ability to apply appropriate justification procedures in various contexts, relative to whether people have any knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and/or belief in the Old Testament Scriptures as authoritative.

5. Luke describes Paul before the Areopagus as a 'proactive' Christian apologist who starts with the beliefs of the Athenians and 'positively deconstructs' these beliefs.

6. Luke describes Paul as a Christian apologist with an overall argument before the Areopagus, where he moves from arguments about the credibility of a Judeo-Christian natural theology through the plausibility and implications of God's

ultimate authority to the significance and evidence of the Resurrection.

7. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with the argument that, whereas natural theologies such as Stoicism and Epicureanism contain elements of truth, a Judeo-Christian natural theology provides the most adequate view of God, the universe and humanity.

8. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with the argument that the claim that the Judeo-Christian God has ultimate authority – as expressed in the claims about his final judgment –a) is plausible, since he is the Creator and Sustainer, and b) constitutes an appropriate basis for claims about 'the epistemic obligation' of the Christian faith.

9. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with an argument about the historical Resurrection of Jesus – as resonating with ultimate human concerns, as indicating the uniqueness and authority of Jesus, and as being based on sufficient, available evidence.

10. Luke presents Paul as an apologist with a threefold apologetic aim: to interest, to persuade and to confront.

4. Applying biblical apologetic models. Case: Acts 17:16-34.

A number of Christian theologians and apologists claim that philosophical and popular *postmodernism* – with scepticism, relativism and hedonism as key components – constitutes a major contemporary 'worldview challenge' to Christian truth claims. If so, the relevance of the Acts 17 model need to be assessed in the light of this influential challenge. Such an assessment would lead to the following conclusions.

The truth claims in the Acts 17 model remain valid and relevant also in the contemporary context as the defining *content* of a Christian worldview. The *general emphases* in Acts 17 regarding contextual understanding, application of appropriate justification procedures and 'positive deconstruction' of alternative worldviews seem valid and relevant in any context. The common contextual features of biblical illiteracy and pluralism point to the relevance of Paul's specific apologetic *approach* to the contemporary

postmodern challenge. Paul's *arguments* may be seen as potentially relevant, but need to be further developed contextually, if they are to be seen as properly valid over against philosophical and popular postmodernism. Paul's *aims* seem relevant and valid in a postmodern context, if properly applied and when seen as complementary.

These conclusions indicate that the content, the approach, the arguments, and the aims of the apologetic model in Acts 17:16-34 may justifiably be seen as valid and relevant for contemporary apologetics in comparable 'agora contexts', at least in relation to the postmodern challenge.

Some definitions:

Positive deconstruction:

Positive deconstruction is the critical analysis of a given worldview on the basis of three criteria of truth: 1) consistency and coherence, 2) correspondence with reality (or the known facts), and 3) pragmatic relevance or adequacy. This deconstruction has the positive aim of helping people to discover truth and error in their underlying beliefs and thus prepare the way for a proclamation and defence of the truth of the Gospel. (Nick Pollard)

Natural theology:

"General revelation is the traits of the author reflected in his product, the fingerprint of the potter in the clay, so to speak, whereas the arguments of natural theology are the human products of men's rational reflection upon general revelation." (William Lane Craig)

Popular postmodernism:

"Postmodernism moves beyond the 'modern', scientifically based view of the world by blending a *scepticism* about technology, objectivity, absolutes, and total explanations with a *stress* on image and appearance, personal interpretation, pleasure and the exploration of every spiritual and material perspective." (E. David Cook)

Philosophical postmodernism:

"1. The first question postmodernism addresses, is

not what is there or how we know what is there but how language functions to construct meaning itself. In other words, there has been a shift in 'first things' from being to knowing to constructing meaning... 2. The truth about the reality itself is forever hidden from us. All we can do is tell stories... 3. All narratives mask a play for power. Any one narrative used as a metanarrative is oppressive... 4. Human beings make themselves who they are by the languages they construct about themselves... 5. Ethics, like knowledge, is a linguistic construct. Social good is whatever society takes it to be... 6. The cutting edge of culture is literary theory..." (James W. Sire)

Suggestions for further reading:

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