

LECTURE 5: BIBLICAL APOLOGETICS— PAUL IN ACTS

The Apostle Paul was a foremost, if not the foremost, apologist for Christianity in the apostolic period. His ministry constantly brought him in contact with those who opposed Christianity—Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah, pagan Gentiles who feared apostasy from their traditional gods, worldly skeptics who loved their life of sin, and false supposed Christian teachers who brought in heresies and slandered him and his message.

Through his preaching and teaching ministry and his personal witness, recorded in the Book of Acts, Paul confronted all these opponents of the gospel. While adapting his message to the audience effectively, he consistently presented his apologetic witness. In this lecture we will be examining his apologetic content and method as it is recorded in Acts, as he confronted people from all these positions.

Acts 13:16-41 (sermon in synagogue in Antioch-Pisidia)

“Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years.

“After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’

“From this man’s descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: ‘Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’

“Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

“We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

“‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father’ (Ps 2:7).

“The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words:

“‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David’ (Isa 55:3).

“So it is stated elsewhere:

“‘You will not let your Holy One see decay’ (Ps 16:10).

“For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

“Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

“‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you’” (Hab 1:5).

Observations on Paul’s sermon in the Synagogue in Antioch-Pisidia

- A Jewish audience, well schooled in the OT
- Appeal to fulfilled Scriptures in Jesus (vv. 22-23, 27, 29, 32-35)
- Appeal to John’s testimony (v. 25)
- Appeal to Jesus’ innocence (v. 28)
- Appeal to resurrection and witnesses (vv. 30-31)
- Appeal to requirement of prophecy in the light of observation (vv. 35-37)

Acts 14:14-17 (testimony to pagans in Lystra)

“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: “Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

Observations on Paul’s testimony to pagans in Lystra

- They were about to worship Barnabas and him as Zeus and Hermes (Jupiter and Mercury)

- First a simple declaration of the truth (vv. 14-15)
- Note that all creation made by God
- Appeal to God's graciousness to all people (vv. 16-17)
- Gracious in longsuffering
- Gracious in good providences

Acts 17:2-3 (in the synagogue in Thessalonica)

"As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,' he said."

Observations on Paul's sermon in the synagogue in Thessalonica

- Sermon to Jewish audience, knowledgeable in the OT, similar to synagogue in Antioch-Pisidia
- Requirements of OT prophecy concerning the Messiah
- These fulfilled in Jesus
- Reliance on witnesses to Jesus

Acts 17:22-31 (speech before the Areopagus in Athens)

"Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Observations on Paul's speech to the Areopagus

- Since this speech was made before a pagan audience (note the Epicureans and the Stoics in v. 18), it should be compared with his short speech in Acts 14.
- Finds a place to start, an "unknown god" (vv. 22-23)
- Paul does not start by identifying the true God with one of the gods they have named; he had no tolerance for the false gods of the Greeks; cf. v. 16; Christian apologetics must be radical.
- Appeal to the creation as evidence of the power and immensity of God (vv. 24-25)
- Appeal from providence in history (vv. 26-28)
- Note quotation from Greek Stoic poet Aratus, by Paul's time a widely used text: "For we are his [Zeus'] offspring"; Paul adapts the quotation to the Christian God; it appears that the earlier statement, "In him we live and move and have our being" is a Christian statement, not a quotation from Epimenides (cf. Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* [1988], p. 27)
- Appeal to nature of man as creature (v. 29); cf. Ps 115:4-8
- Appeal to resurrection of Jesus (vv. 30-31)

Acts 20:33-35 (message to Ephesian elders)

"I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Observations on Paul's message to the Ephesian elders

- Attacks coming from his theological opponents attack his personal character and motives
- Appeal to Paul's own life-style as an evidence of his sincerity and the truth of his message
- (This theme is repeated frequently in Paul's epistles)

Acts 22:1-21 (speech from the steps of Antonia fortress)

"'Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.' When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

"Then Paul said: 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

“About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’

“‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

“‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.

“‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

“A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

“Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’

“When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. ‘Quick!’ he said to me. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’

“‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Observations on Paul’s speech from the fortress’s stairs

- Speech to fanatical Jewish audience, emphasized his sympathy and connections to them
- Appeal to his own former life and the circumstances of his conversion (vv. 1-11)
- Appeal to the testimony of Ananias, received by divine revelation (vv. 12-16)
- Appeal to divine revelation in Jerusalem (vv. 17-21)

Acts 24:10-21 (Paul’s defense at his trial before Felix)

“When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: ‘I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in

the city. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.

“After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin—unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: “It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.””

Observations on Paul’s defense before Felix

- Felix well acquainted with Judaism and the controversies regarding Jesus, but concerned with Roman legality, also corrupt
- Appeal to his sincerity and belief in and obedience to the OT law, the law of Rome, and “the Way” of Christ
- (Note: basically the same appeal made in his trial before Festus, [Acts 25:8](#))

Acts 26:1-29 (Paul’s testimony before King Herod Agrippa II)

“Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You have permission to speak for yourself.’

“So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ‘King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.

“The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

“I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

“On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

“Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’

“‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied. ‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But I have had God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.”

“At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. ‘You are out of your mind, Paul!’ he shouted. ‘Your great learning is driving you insane.’

“‘I am not insane, most excellent Festus,’ Paul replied. ‘What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.’

“Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?’

“Paul replied, ‘Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.’”

Observations on Paul’s testimony to Herod Agrippa II

- King Agrippa from family of Herod, very well acquainted with Judaism
- Agrippa had official acceptance of Jewish faith, but still (more) loyal to Rome
- Appeal to his earlier life (vv. 1-7)
- Appeal to possibility that God can raise the dead (v. 8)
- (A good verse for those who deny the possibility of miracles)
- Appeal to the circumstances of his own conversion (vv. 9-18)
- Appeal to his present ministry and to its agreement with prophetic scriptures (vv. 19-23, 27)
- Appeal to truth and reasonableness of what he says (vv. 25-26)

Acts 28:17-20 (speech to Jews in Rome)

“Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: ‘My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.’”

Observations on Paul’s speech to the Jews in Rome

- Appeal to his own innocence
- Statements against him attributed to opposition of the Jews (accounted for opposing stories)