

LECTURE 3: BIBLICAL APOLOGETICS— THE OLD TESTAMENT, JOHN THE BAPTIST, AND JESUS

Periods of apologetics

Throughout the history of the church since the time of Christ there have been major periods of time in which the circumstances of the church regarding the outside world have remained basically constant. In each period, apologists have spoken to the world, seeking to convince people that Christianity is true, and that the attacks against it are false. We can detect certain common strains or issues among apologists in each period.

[For a fairly detailed discussion from a critical perspective, see Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (New York: Corpus Instrumentorum, 1971)]

Survey of passages

In these notes only sample passages have been selected, since a full listing and discussion would be beyond the scope of this course.

OT Period

Throughout this period the biblical writers simply assumed the existence of God as self-evident. For example, the Ten Commandments (Exod 20; Deut 5) base God's authority to command all aspects of human life on his existence as the Almighty God and as the Redeemer of Israel.

Several OT passages infer God's existence and attributes from the world he created and which he governs:

- “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.” (Ps 19:1-6)
- “Does he who implanted the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see?” (Ps 94:9)

- “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple. Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. ‘To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?’ says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.” (Isa 40:12-26)

Other OT passages refer to God’s miraculous providence as an evidence of his power and divinity and his superiority to the false gods.

- The plagues in Egypt (Exod 7-12) appear to be particularly designed to show God’s power over the gods worshiped in Egypt (see this theme developed by John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus* (1998))
- The testimony of Rahab: “Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof⁹ and said to the men, “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you.¹⁰ For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction.¹¹ And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.” (Josh 2:8-11)
- The example of the captain of fifty sent to fetch Elijah: “⁹ Then *the king* sent unto him a captain of fifty with his fifty. And he went up to him: and, behold, he was sitting on the top of the hill. And he spake unto him, O man of God, the king hath said, Come down.¹⁰ And Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And there came down fire from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.¹¹ And again he sent unto him another captain of fifty and his fifty. And he answered and said unto him, O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly.¹² And Elijah

answered and said unto them, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.¹³ And again he sent the captain of a third fifty with his fifty. And the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and besought him, and said unto him, O man of God, I pray thee, let my life, and the life of these fifty thy servants, be precious in thy sight.¹⁴ Behold, there came fire down from heaven, and consumed the two former captains of fifty with their fifties; but now let my life be precious in thy sight.” (2 Kgs 1:9-14)

Fulfilled prophecy often accredits God and his prophets.

- ²¹ Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. ²² Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. ²³ Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. ²⁴ Behold, you are nothing, and your work is less than nothing; an abomination is he who chooses you. (Isa 41:21-24)

NT period

This period includes the time of the events recorded in the NT, especially from the ministry of Christ to the end of the book of Acts, ca. A.D. 25-60. It also includes the time during which the NT was written, ca. A.D. 45-95. Basically, therefore, it covers the first century A.D., and is commonly called the Apostolic age.

During the first century the church faced challenges on several sides. *First*, there had to be a defense against the attacks of Judaism, both as to the truthfulness of the gospel claims, and as to the freedom the church had from Jewish regulations. *Second*, incipient Gnosticism was denying the importance of the human, physical nature of Jesus. *Third*, unbelieving Jews and Gentiles had to be convinced that Jesus was the only Son of God, the Messiah, and the Savior of the world. *Fourth*, young Christians had to be confirmed in the truthfulness of their faith, especially when facing persecutions. *Fifth*, while the Roman government helped protect Christianity in its early years, it soon became hostile to the church; and it was important that government officials and others of influence should realize that it was proper to grant freedom and toleration to this “new” religion. Much of what the characters of the NT said, and of what its authors wrote, is directed to meeting these challenges.

Here follow in the notes a sample of the Scripture passages that reveal the method of apologetics employed by the people they speak about, and by the authors of the NT books. Many more passages could be adduced, but these provide the basic patterns.

Testimony of John the Baptist

John’s testimony (John 1:6-9, 15, 19-34):

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming

into the world. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"

Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ."

They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"

He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

Now some Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?"

"I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

Observations from John's testimony

- Appeal to his prophetic office (v. 23; cf. Isa 40:3)
- Appeal to special divine revelation in conjunction with observation (vv. 32-34)

Testimony of Jesus

Jesus' testimony at an unnamed feast in Jerusalem (John 5:31-47):

"If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his testimony about me is valid.

“You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.

“I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

“I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?

“But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If (2nd class condition, contrary to fact) you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?”

Observations on Jesus’ testimony in John 5:

- Appeal to testimony of John (vv. 31-35)
- Appeal to work he is doing (v. 36)
 - Miracles (here called “works” in Greek; cf. John 10:25, 32, 37-38)
 - Preaching of truth (cf. John 8:45-47; 17:7-8)
- Appeal to testimony of the Father (vv. 37-38)
 - At his baptism (see under John the Baptist)
 - (Later) at transfiguration (Synoptics)
 - (Later) before his passion (John 12:27-30)
- Appeal to the OT Scripture (vv. 39-40, 45-47)
 - (Cf. Luke 24:27, 44; and cf. Abraham’s remarks in Luke 16:29-31)

Jesus’ testimony at the Feast of Tabernacles (John 8:46):

“Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me?”

Observations on Jesus’ testimony in John 8:

- Appeal to his own godly life (implies he tells the truth)
 - Cf. his teaching in Matt 5:15-16 (light before men)
 - “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man

and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*)

Jesus’ preaching in Perea (Luke 16):

¹⁹ [rich man in Hades calling to Abraham]:²⁴ And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' ²⁷ And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house- ²⁸ for I have five brothers- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19-31)

Observation on Jesus in preaching in Perea:

- Appeal to Scripture as necessary
- Appeal to evidence apart from Scripture of no converting power
- Implies need of regeneration for saving faith to occur