

The Apologetic of the Old Testament: The Basis of a Biblical and Christian Apologetic

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I have many times searched the New Testament to find in it the basis of a Christian theistic system, or some hint as to the structure of an apologetic system. That there is an apologetic element in the New Testament cannot be denied, as evidenced by such works as Scott, *The Apologetic of the New Testament*, or Heffern, *Apology and Polemic in the New Testament*, or Macgregor, *Studies in the History of Christian Apologetics: New Testament and Post-Apostolic*. It seemed to me, however, that there were certain things unstated in the New Testament which needed statement. The evidential and apologetic element certainly is there in the Person of Christ, in the supernatural propagation of Christianity recorded in the Book of Acts, and in the conversion and career of Paul. After years of reflection on this problem, it suddenly occurred to me that what was assumed in the New Testament and nowhere explicitly stated was the rich theism of the Old Testament. The New Testament presumes the existence of God and certain of his attributes; the doctrine of creation and the associated doctrines of preservation and providence; the existence and supreme worth of the spiritual order; and, the concept of God's purposes at work in human history bringing to pass the will of God, especially in the realms of judgment and salvation. Although it is true that Christianity makes certain significant additions to these doctrines and presumptions, it nevertheless seems obvious to me that the basic theistic scheme here so briefly outlined is carried over from the Old Testament by the writers of the New Testament. After all, this should not be surprising when we realize that the bulk of the New Testament writers were Jewish. From the religious ideas of their Jewish culture, and from their reading or hearing of the Old Testament, they would have learned of the world view of the Old Testament. Further, in that they believed that Christianity was not a denial of the religion of the Old Testament but its fulfilment, they would be sympathetic to all eternally valid truth of the Old Testament.

This leads us to our thesis, namely, *that the fundamental theistic system of the Bible is laid in the Old Testament, and if we wish to formulate a Biblical theism we must start there*. Works that have been of special help in working out this thesis are Young, *My Servants the Prophets*; Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*; Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*; and, Dawson, *The Origin of the World According to Revelation and Science*.

As we examine the Old Testament we find that the entire Old Testament world was a believing world. The Jews and the surrounding nations believed in God, or gods, and a spiritual world. It is difficult to trace the history of atheism as the ancients were not too clear in differentiating between a sceptic, a disbeliever in the customary gods, and a genuine atheist. For example, both Socrates in Greece and the Christians in Rome were called atheists because, while believing in God, they rejected the customary ideas of the gods. Here and there in the Old Testament we catch a glimpse of an atheistic creed, e.g. in Jer. 5:12 where to "believe the Lord" means "seem to acknowledge, but not really to do so" (Gesenius; Brown, Driver, Briggs, Lexicon). In Psalm 10 we have the wicked man who does not have the Lord in his thoughts, and has said in his heart, "God hath forgotten." In Psalm 14: 1 we have the fool who

has said in his heart "there is no God." Added to these references are the numerous instances in the Old Testament of *practical atheism*, that is, men who believe that

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God is, but that he takes no account of human affairs, and their creed is echoed in the words of Malachi 2:17, "Where is the God of judgment?" Atheism, then, represents but a tiny rivulet compared to the positive religious beliefs of the great masses of people of the ancient Old Testament world.

In such a situation the problem of the Old Testament prophet was not to prove the existence of God by metaphysical or epistemological demonstration as this was not necessary. Everybody already believed in some sort of God, and what is accepted by both sides is not made part of argumentation. The problem which faced the Old Testament prophet was to show how the living God could be differentiated from the dead gods. The prophetic language was not so much in terms of true or false, existing or non-existing, being or not-being, but in terms of *living* or *dead*. For the one time we are aware of that God is called in the King James Version the true God (Jer. 10:10), he is repeatedly called the *living God*. Even in Jer. 10:10 he is also called the living God. Or, to put it in Elijah's words, "The God who answers by fire, he is God" (I Kings 18:24). As Wright states it, the monotheism of Israel "was not derived from philosophical speculation concerning the one and the many, but from a knowledge of God's power, expressed in powerful acts."¹ The actually existing God is a God of life, a God of power, a God of spirit. The false god is lifeless, powerless, and spiritless.

The Old Testament proof for a theistic system is then in terms of the criteria used by its writers to differentiate the true and living God of Israel from the dead and powerless gods of the pagans. These differentiae then compose the apologetic of the Old Testament, which we in turn must translate into our modern apologetic language. I think what I have just said is the principal burden of the following statement of Robinson:

"God in Himself must for ever be beyond the reach of human comprehension, or He would not be God: 'God is great and we know Him not' (Job. 36:26). The only way in which we can know Him is by His willing entrance into our human experience, *i.e.*, by some form of activity or manifestation which we can know. This is one of the cardinal truths of revelation as asserted in the Old Testament, *i.e.* that the initiative is with God. He creates that which can be a revelation of His unseen glory and so a sacramental bond between man and Himself. We have kept before us three great realms in which this is brought about, *viz.* Nature, Man, and History. Revelation always means an appeal to something drawn from one of these three, something which is both natural and supernatural, natural as a product or event, supernatural in its interpretation."²

I. THE *DIFFERENTIA* OF NATURE

Very contrary to the notions of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and the more extreme Barthians, the Old Testament has a very frank and positive view about the relationship of Nature and God. Nature is one of the outstanding *differentia* to the Old Testament writers in proving that the God of Israel is the living and true God.

¹ G. F. Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 39.

² H.W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*, p. 189.

(1) First, *God is the Creator of the heavens and earth*. This is a theme constantly mentioned throughout the Old Testament. Conservatively

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speaking there are in the Old Testament more than a hundred references to creation. You can gather a first hand and preliminary idea of the emphasis on creation by scanning what Hitchcock has collected in his *Analysis of the Holy Bible*. Why this emphasis on creation? Because the God of Israel is the God of power, the God of might, and a God of spirit. Pagan gods are powerless and lifeless, and usually are idols carved by the hand of man from the products of Nature. In Psalm 96:5 we read: "For all the gods of the peoples are idols; but the Lord made the heavens" (RSV). Obviously creation is here maintained as a true *differentia* of the true God from idols. Jeremiah 10:9-16 is a very pertinent passage at this point of the argument. In v. 9 Jeremiah mentions that the pagan gods are made by craftsmen from silver, gold, and expensive cloth. In v. 10 he says that God is the true and living God. In v. 11 Jeremiah is told to say unto the idolaters: "The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens" (RSV). Then in the following verses is a vivid, graphic picture of the God of Israel as the Creator and Ruler of Nature. But as for the idols "there is no breath in them" (v. 14, RSV). It cannot be doubted in this passage either that creation is made a prime *differentia* of the true and living God. I feel a distinct loss in any Christian apologetic which retreats from the strong creationism of the Old Testament.

If one has to choose between a carved piece of wood or gold for his god, or that God which made the wood and the craftsman, and the entire heavens and earth as well and if one is holding himself responsible to some sort of logic at all, he must choose- the God who is Creator.

(2) God is not only the Creator of the heavens and the earth, *but He sustains them*. Here again a great number of Scriptures could be cited proving the preservation of Creation by God. The Old Testament theism avoids the pitfalls of dualism, for God is Creator of matter; and the bog of pantheism, for God is transcendent to Nature and separate from it; and the bareness of deism, for God is very active in Nature, immanently and transcendently. The true God is the God who can keep the proud ocean in its place; who can guide the stars in their courses; who can supply food for the young lions, and the bountiful harvests for man. The living God sends seed-time and harvest, summer and winter. False gods, to the contrary, need food and gifts and bribes and drink, *i.e.*, rather than sustaining, *they need sustenance*: Here again only the demented or the bigoted or the hopelessly ignorant could ever prefer a God needing food and drink, to a God who gives life and sustenance to everything.

(3) *God controls Nature*. This control of creation is manifest through the *miraculous*. Repeatedly the Psalms make mention of the miracle of the Red Sea, of the manifestations at Mt. Sinai, and attendant miracles of providence in the wilderness wanderings. The false god is powerless in Nature. The hills do not leap and skip at his presence, and the sea does not flee when he approaches. But the God who holds the powers of Nature in his hands and proves it by the miraculous is the true and living God.

This manifestation of the miraculous also pertains to the servants of God. The true prophets have power given to them to control Nature. Miraculous powers were given to such prophets

as Moses, Elijah, and Elisha. The true prophet is the prophet with divine power, for divine power is an attribute of the living God, and therefore the true God.

(4) *God manifests himself through Nature.* The wisdom of the animal is indirectly attributed to God (Jer. 8:7). The aesthetic splendor of the heavens is attributed to God directly in Psalm 19:1. The regularity and uniformity of Nature—or in more Biblical language, the seasons with rain-

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fall and sunshine, the orderliness of the heavenly bodies, *etc.*, are manifestations of the providence of God. Further, we have nature-theophanies. God speaks to Moses by the burning bush; to Job out of the whirlwind; to the Israelites out of the thunder and lightning and darkness of Mt. Sinai. Nature, rather than being a mute and incoherent witness, was to the Israelites full of the manifestations of the divine Person.

By relating a given deity to Nature we can tell if that Deity is the true Deity or not. The true Deity is the Deity with Nature on His side. A false Deity has no power, no life, no spirit, no mind, no control over Nature. The Deity that can create, sustain, control, and manifest himself through Nature is the true Deity. The God of Israel is such a God, and therefore He is the true and living God because He created Nature, He preserves Nature, He controls Nature, and He manifests Himself through Nature.

II. THE *DIFFERENTIA* OF HISTORY

History is the second great *differentia* of the Old Testament appeals. In the competition among the gods, that god is the true God who controls the affairs of men. The Israelites would never have recognized the god of deism as the God of Israel. They would speak of Him as Elijah spoke of Baal: "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." (I Kings 18:27, RSV). A god that cannot take hold in human affairs is no god at all. Nor would the Israelites have recognized Plato's god (the Form of forms) or Aristotle's god (the Eternal Thinker). A God of life, of spirit, of power is a God of human affairs, and therefore *history* is a *differentia* to reveal the living God.

(1) The prophets of Israel insist that God *controls history*. This is strong in all the prophets. We see it especially in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Daniel. King Nebuchadnezzar had to live like an animal till he recognized that "the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will" (Dan. 4:25, RSV). Human history goes its way independent of the pagan gods. Kingdoms rise and fall. False gods are spiritless and powerless, but the Living God has spirit and power and he can manifest himself in the affairs of men. The God of the Old Testament is a God of History, the Lord of the Destinies of Nations: That is the true God who guides the course of history like rock-formations guide the course of a river.

(2) Further, God can predict the course of history. Isaiah taunts the idol-worshippers, and asks them to have their gods predict the future (Isa. 41:22). Certainly the living God knows the future. If your god is alive, let him speak and anticipate the future of fickle human history: But the gods of the pagans and of the idolaters are mute. Eventually the wise men of Egypt must turn to Joseph, and the wise men of Babylon to Daniel, men in whom is the Spirit of

God. The God of Israel alone knows the future: His prophets tell of kings before they are born; of the fall of nations before the army of their enemies has even been formed. When the harbor is filled with an impenetrable fog the pagan prophets and their gods see nothing; but the eye of the prophet of the Lord sees all as if the harbor were bathed in sunlight. The prophets can count the stars at night whereas the pagan prophets and the lying prophets can only see clouds. The God that knows the future is the true and living God and such a God is the God of Israel. Consider the evidence of Ezekiel alone. In referring to the predicted course of Israel or of the nations Ezekiel uses the expression (or equivalent) "then shall ye know that the Lord hath said it" over 57 times. In some chapters the expression occurs three and four times.

Jeremiah points out the helplessness of the idol. The idolater points to a tree and says "You are my father," or to a stone and says "You gave me

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birth." But what happens in a time of trouble? They will cry to their gods "Arise and save us:" Then Jeremiah taunts them, and tells them that their gods will not arise and will not save them. (Jer. 2:27-28). The false god is impotent in the affairs of men.

(3) The third way in which God uses history as a *differentia* is through *providence*. This is the great theme of Moses in the early chapters of Genesis. No other nation has had the care, the help, the miracles, the providences, the goodness of God in their midst as Israel. This is also a great theme of Zechariah, for through the providence of God the city and, the temple shall be rebuilt, the commonwealth established, and Messiah and his salvation shall come.

Returning to Deuteronomy we note that Moses makes much of the fact of the *uniqueness* of Israel's history. The history of Israel is unique because God has worked through Israel as through no other nation. The providential experiences of Israel are testimonies to the electing love and grace of God, and therefore to the reality of his existence and being. The gods of other nations have not guided the destinies of these nations as Israel's history has been guided. This is the special thesis of Wright's work, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment* and he claims the great authority of Eichrodt to be on his side.

III. THE *DIFFERENTIA* OF SELF-MANIFESTATION

The supreme proof for the existence of God according to the Old Testament is the self-manifestation of God. Typical philosophical proofs yield to the certainty, clarity, and attested disclosure of God. In fact, all three of the *differentiae* we appeal to are but varieties of this one supreme proof for the existence of God.

(1) We notice the divine manifestation through *prophetic communication*—dreams, visions, theophanies, inspirations. God, in speaking to and through the prophets, manifested *Himself* in addition to the message. These communications either indicate that the prophet is speaking God's word or that God is. All who are somewhat familiar with the contents of the Bible can easily run through the hall-ways of memory and locate the great outstanding examples of what we are here discussing.

(2) We now need to ask ourselves. Upon what grounds could these supra-normal experiences be taken as supernatural?

(a) Two such proofs are already before us. God's perfect and absolute control of Nature and History prove that God has manifested Himself to Israel. The God of Nature and the God of History is a God of power, of spirit, and therefore is the Living God, the existing God.

(b) A third proof is the very quality of these disclosures. The prophets admit that these experiences are thrust upon them. Moses and Jeremiah both wish to escape from their prophetic call, offering a variety of excuses, but God does not let them go. Amos affirms that his father was not a prophet so that he could not have learned the business from his father; nor did Amos go to the prophets' school and learn the job professionally. By vocation he was a shepherd and a gardener. He was a prophet because "the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:15, RSV). On the contrary the foolish prophet has followed his own spirit and has seen nothing. He prophesies out of his own heart (Eze. 13:3, 17).

Further, these manifestations were remarkable in themselves. They were awe inspiring, fearful, unusual. They transcend anything the prophet has

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known or experienced. The prophet is completely gripped by them and overcome by them. These manifestations have every hallmark as having come from God and not imagination.

(c) A fourth proof is the moral and doctrinal idea of God they contain. Negatively speaking, there is nothing fantastic, absurd, polytheistic, immoral or demonic in these manifestations. In Jeremiah 23, the great chapter against the false prophets, we are informed that one of the characteristics of these false prophets was their immoral sinful lives. This is an unusually important chapter with some very strong language in it. Positively, the prophetic communication is universally admitted to be the highest morally, ethically, and religiously. All agree, liberal and conservative alike, that in the prophets we have a universal, ethical, spiritual monotheism.

Here we see the intersection of truth which is such a powerful witness to the possession of truth. The moral and theological character of the self-manifestations, and, the supernatural character of these self-manifestations, are congruous. We would be extremely suspicious of supernormal experiences with immoral content and polytheistic ideas. But in the Old Testament revelation the supernatural character of the self-manifestation is underwritten by the moral and theological ideas conveyed.

IV. THE DIFFERENTIA OF THE FUTILITY OF THE OPPOSITE

There is a constant theme throughout the Old Testament, which while not of first order of logical weight, does have a value. This is the prophetic theme that any other god or any other religion than the God and religion of Israel is futile. Pagan gods are idols. They have no heart, nor mind, nor ears. They are dead, empty cisterns, broken wheels. Whoever turns from the God of Israel to these other gods is then turning from hope to futility.

The destruction of the view of your opponent does not prove your own view unless it has been established that there are only two possible views on the matter. But if you can destroy the position of your opponent you have at least narrowed the competition. Further, if your own case has survived onslaught it at least remains as a possibility. Therefore the prophets appeal to the futility of pagan religions as part of the proof that only in John 6:68, "Master, replied Simon Peter, To whom shall we go? Your teachings tell us of eternal life" (Weymouth).

CONCLUSION

Our thesis has been that the New Testament apologetic is essentially an apologetic of the truthfulness of the Christian religion, and consequently presumes the theistic system of the Old Testament. Therefore, for the establishment of a Biblical, theistic system, we must return to the Old Testament. Here we find a rich theism. God is Creator, Preserver, Provider. He is the World-ground of morality, ethics, righteousness and redemption. He is the Personal God of religious experience.

The prophets appeal to various *differentiae* to prove that their God is the living and true God. Through the media of Nature, History, and divine disclosure, God proves that He has power, life, knowledge, and spirit. This, then, involves his existence. This we take to be the basis and point of departure of both a Biblical and a Christian theism.

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