

Apologetics & The Old Testament

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When people think of apologetics, they generally think of modern apologetic arguments for the existence of God or perhaps for the historical resurrection of Jesus. But apologetics are nothing new, nor are they a human invention. God has been providing an apologetic of himself—of his existence, of his creative power, of his holy character, and of his care for his people—since the beginning of time. Certainly, God revealed himself through such global, space-time events as creation and the flood, but he has also done so in very specific Old Testament dealings with individuals and nations. Let's take a look at a few examples.

Apologetics and the Exodus

After completing his education in the household of Pharaoh¹ such that he attained "all the wisdom of the Egyptians," Moses spent forty years as a desert dweller. As far as he knew, he was permanently sidelined from any significant work for God following a botched and murderous attempt to rescue his own people from Pharaoh's brutal slavery. But God was not finished with Moses and called him to return to Egypt to free his people. As a pragmatist, he wondered what would make anyone believe he had heard from God about setting the Israelites free. Specifically, Moses asked: "What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The LORD did not appear to you'?"² At this juncture, God could have simply instructed Moses to tell the people to have faith, but instead he provides a powerful apologetic to convince the people of the authority he had given to Moses. He tells Moses when his staff is thrown to the ground, it will turn into a snake; when his hand is put in his pocket, it will become leprous; and when water is taken from the Nile and poured on the ground, it will turn to blood.³ The authority given by God to Moses was an unseen transaction, but to substantiate the reality of that delegated authority God provided Moses with visible evidence of divine authority. This visible evidence would allow people to come to a reasoned conclusion.

The initial miraculous signs given to Moses were not all God would grant as an apologetic to his people and the Egyptians among which they lived. They were sufficient to give Moses a hearing, but they were not significant enough to convince the Egyptians of Jehovah's authority to emancipate his people. Thus, God sent a series of supernatural disasters to beset the Egyptian people while the Israelites remained unharmed by the plagues. He did so for the expressed purpose of helping people "know that I am the Lord."⁴ The plagues eventually moved Pharaoh to release the Hebrews if for no other reason than for the

purpose of self-preservation, and the plagues apparently had the intended "apologetic effect" on many in Egypt. The account of the Exodus tells us that in addition to the 600,000 Israelite men and their families, many others from other nations joined them in leaving Egypt.⁵ Undoubtedly these many others had seen the hand of God and found joining with the Hebrew cause a very reasonable choice. This, of course, was not by accident; God intended for the miraculous events surrounding the Exodus to act as a convincing apologetic wherein the reliability and authority of God would be experientially verified and tested.

Apologetics in the Period of the Judges

As was customary in the days of the judges, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and came under the oppression of the surrounding peoples. Such oppression would give rise to cries of mercy, and God would subsequently intervene with acts of deliverance. Each deliverance acted as an apologetic of the merciful nature of God. On one particular occasion, God chose to deliver his people through a man named Gideon, but when God gave Gideon his marching orders, Gideon doubted if he had rightly heard from God. At this point of uncertainty, God could have told Gideon to exercise faith, but instead he conceded to Gideon's two requests to confirm the promised victory through visible acts that could only be explained by God.⁶ The result is that when examining the book of Judges God is seen not only as providing an apologetic by his delivering hand, but even in the pre-disclosure of his saving plans.

In the latter period of the judges a particularly poignant story of God's apologetic activity is found. The Philistines were the Israelite's chief oppressors. After defeating the Israelites in battle, they captured the Ark of the Covenant and took it as the spoils of victory. They placed it in their temple beside the idol of Dagon, likely as a symbol of Dagon's supremacy in battle. But rather than concede defeat, God chose to use the incident as an opportunity to verify his own supremacy. Upon returning to Dagon's temple the day after the ark's arrival, the people of Ashdod found Dagon on the ground before the ark. Apparently they considered this a coincidence and quickly returned Dagon to his exalted position, only to find Dagon once more on the ground the next morning. To make matters worse, the people of Ashdod were afflicted by tumors until they returned the ark to its rightful owners. Undoubtedly, the Philistines had heard stories of the Hebrew God, and God could have let those stories be an adequate revelation of himself to the Philistines. Instead

he chose to provide a very tangible apologetic which brought about the intended and reasoned response—the return of the ark.

Apologetics in the Times of the Kings

Before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they were told that if they obeyed God and kept his commands, they would receive tangible blessings from the Lord in terms of wealth, territorial victory, peace, health, and fertility.⁷ If, however, they did not obey the Lord's commands, they would be subject to tangible curses: their wealth would be taken or destroyed, they would be defeated by their neighbors and by far-away nations, they would become subject to terrible diseases, and their cities would be placed under siege.⁸ In other words, God was willing to verify his revelatory covenant with Israel regardless of their course. If Israel obeyed, God would show himself to be real by the blessings he poured out; if they disobeyed, he would show himself to be real by the curses he would pour out. The history of the kings plays this out. When kings, like Hezekiah or Josiah, rely upon God and obey his commands, victory and prosperity are given. Conversely, when wicked kings like Ahab and Hoshea do evil in the eyes of the Lord and worship other gods, defeat and destruction soon follow. God did not hide his pleasure or displeasure; he continually gave the kings physical and historical evidence for the worthiness of following him.

Among the kings, Solomon provides an excellent example of God's willingness to live up to his covenant and thereby provide an apologetic of himself. Upon receiving the throne, Solomon sought to honor and worship the Lord. When granted a request, rather than ask for wealth, Solomon asks God for wisdom and understanding.⁹ God is well pleased with the request and gives Solomon not only wisdom but wealth and power as well. At the beginning of his reign, Solomon understood what these gracious gifts of God would mean, namely, that he would grow in splendor and that the name of the Lord would become famous. At the temple dedication, he offers these words:

Foreigners, who do not belong to your people Israel, will come from a distant land because of your reputation. When they hear about your great reputation and your ability to accomplish mighty deeds, they will come and direct their prayers toward this temple. Then listen from your heavenly dwelling place and answer all the prayers of the foreigners. Then all the nations of the earth will acknowledge your reputation, obey you like your people Israel do, and recognize that this temple I built belongs to you.¹⁰

What Solomon understood early in his reign is that the blessings of God were given as an apologetic to the

surrounding nations, and, because of them, nations would come and worship the Lord. This was played out when the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon to verify all she had heard of his wealth and wisdom. To her surprise the reports she had received of the splendor of Solomon's kingdom were understated, and ultimately she declares, "Praise be to the Lord your God."¹¹ Unfortunately, Solomon lost his way, began to worship other gods, and soon the positive apologetic influence of the throne of Israel diminished.

Apologetics and the Prophets

In the Old Testament, God primarily chose to speak to his people through prophets. The words of the prophets were subject to verification. God understood that there would be those who for the sake of personal gain would declare their words to be from God even though they were not. As such, he provided two simple tests to verify the God-originated nature of any prophecy and thereby the real nature of the prophet. The first test was whether the prophet's prediction was actually fulfilled. If a prophet said such and such would happen and it did not, then that person did not speak on behalf of the Lord.¹² Secondly, if the prediction came to pass or if the prophet performed some miraculous sign, but the prophet's teaching contradicted what had already been established in the Mosaic Law, his words were to be dismissed.¹³ These tests were put in place specifically to answer the inevitable and reasonable question, "How can we tell that a message is not from the LORD?"¹⁴ In other words, while God would use the prophets as a tool to provide an apologetic of his authority, he also provided an apologetic so that the prophets themselves could be tested as bearers of reliable knowledge.

One role of the biblical prophet was to mediate a divine commentary on contemporary events and reveal the consequences associated with present or anticipated behavior on the part of the prophet's audience.¹⁵ Those who did not heed the instructions and warnings would endure the wrath of God. While this wrath certainly had a punitive purpose, it is also had a definitive apologetic aim. This is best recognized in the record of Ezekiel. Throughout his tenure, Ezekiel told the nation of Judah that certain destructive acts were soon to come upon her because of a refusal to follow God's decrees. The revelatory purpose of this discipline, however, is not left unclear. Some sixty times in the book, God declares that the purpose of his future action against Judah was to help them see that he is the Lord.¹⁶ In fact, the most common phrase in the book is: "Then they will know that I am the LORD" or something similar. In other words, God did not bring judgment because he found pleasure in doing so (he indicates precisely the opposite in Ezekiel 18:22), but because the fulfillment of prophesied discipline was the

necessary apologetic to help people recognize him as Lord.

In addition to their prophetic utterances, the prophets were also employed to display the power of God visibly. Perhaps the most vivid instance of this is Elijah's confrontation with the prophets of Baal.¹⁷ Sickened by the people's worship of this false god and their allegiance to false prophets, Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to verify the existence and power of their god. In the process, he sets up a *modus ponens* argument of sorts for the reality and authority of Jehovah and the non-existence of Baal. The argument is as follows:

1. If Baal is real he will answer your prayers and consume your sacrifice, and if Jehovah is real he will answer my prayers and consume my sacrifice.
2. Baal did not answer your prayer and consume your sacrifice, and Jehovah answered my prayer and consumed my sacrifice.
3. Therefore, Baal is not real, and God is.

Upon seeing this argument played out in a live-action demonstration, the people recognize its soundness and captured and slaughtered the prophets of Baal. The evidential apologetic of God as mediated by Elijah simply had too much force to deny, even if only a fraction of the population was predisposed to following Jehovah.¹⁸

The prophets largely speak to the nations of Israel and Judah, but they were not averse to speaking to other nations as well. The book of Amos, for example, records prophetic words to six different nations before Israel and Judah are addressed, and books like Obadiah and Nahum are wholly directed at non-Hebrew peoples. Furthermore, God uses miraculous events among these peoples just as he did among the Jews. Examples include the interpretation of dreams that led to the physical sustenance of Egypt and many surrounding nations;¹⁹ the exodus events described earlier; the preservation of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace;²⁰ Daniel in the lion's den;²¹ the healing of the Aramean commander, Namaan,²² and the calming of the storm

when Jonah is thrown into the sea.²³ The use of this apologetic method meant that there were those among the non-Hebrew nations who would declare as Namaan did, "For surely I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel!"²⁴

It can be argued then that through the activity of the Old Testament prophets, God verifies the value of apologetics not only for his own people who have a God-centered heritage, but for those who previously were "outside the camp" and who possessed little previous knowledge of Jehovah. Indeed, through his prophets he provides a rational basis for obedient trust in God. Along these lines, J. P. Moreland notes:

Regularly, the prophets appealed to evidence to justify belief in the biblical God or in the divine authority of their inspired message: fulfilled prophecy, the historical fact of miracles, the inadequacy of finite pagan deities to be a cause of such a large, well-ordered universe compared to the God of the Bible, and so forth. They did not say, "God said it, that settles it, you should believe it!" They provided a rational defense for their claims.²⁵

What Moreland suggests regarding the activity of the prophets can be expanded to summarize the activity of God throughout the Old Testament. God did not just say, "I said it, that settles it, you should believe it!" Instead he provided a rational defense of his claims often in the most visible and accessible of forms.

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¹ Acts 7:22

² Exod. 4:1; *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983).

³ Exod. 4:2-9

⁴ Exod. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:22; 10:2; 14:4, 8

⁵ Exod. 12:38

⁶ Judg. 6:36-40

⁷ Deut. 28:1-14

⁸ Deut. 28:15-68

⁹ 1 Kings 3:9

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- ¹⁰ 1 Kings 8:41-43
¹¹ 1 Kings 10:9
¹² Deut. 18:21-22
¹³ Deut. 13:1-3
¹⁴ Deut. 18:22
¹⁵ See, for example, 1 Sam. 12:7-12; Dan. 4; Obad.; Hag. 1:7-11; Jon. 3:4; Nah. 1-3
¹⁶ See, for example, Ezek. 6:7, 11:10, 13:14, 20:20, 26:6 30:8, 39:6
¹⁷ 1 Kings 18:18-46
¹⁸ 1 Kings 19:18
¹⁹ Gen. 41
²⁰ Dan. 3
²¹ Dan. 6
²² 2 Kings 5:1-5
²³ Jon. 1:15-16
²⁴ 2 Kings 2:15
²⁵ J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997), 132.