

ACTS 17:16–34 AN APOLOGETIC MODEL THEN AND NOW?¹

Lars Dahle

Apologetics has traditionally been described as the rational justification of Christian truth claims over against relevant questions, objections and alternatives. Presupposing such an understanding of apologetics and the need to investigate biblical apologetic foundations, this thesis explores the hypothesis that Acts 17:16–34 is to be seen as an apologetic model ‘then’ and ‘now’. This New Testament passage has not previously been fully developed as a biblical paradigm for apologetics, neither exegetically nor in terms of contemporary apologetics.

Two preliminary and two major research questions are identified in the introductory chapter, which sets the scene for an interdisciplinary approach to the exploration of Acts 17 as a potential apologetic model, with an integration of New Testament exegesis, philosophical apologetics, and cultural analysis.

Preliminary Questions

The first preliminary research question addresses whether Luke (the narrator) intended to provide his readers (the narratees) with an apologetic model in Acts 17:16–34 by recording what Paul supposedly did in Athens. The analysis in chapter 2 indicates that Acts 17:16–34 contains explicit apologetic material, that this material seems to fit a wider, positive Lucan description in Acts of apologetic convictions, approaches and arguments, and that this positive pattern can be related to a plausible dual Lucan apologetic intention with Acts (as written for Christians *both* in order to confirm the truth-value of their Christian faith *and* to provide them with apologetic tools and models for reaching outsiders). This preliminary analysis is confirmed in subsequent chapters and gives a plausible literary context for seeing Acts 17:16–34 as an intended apologetic model.

¹ L. Dahle, *Acts 17:16–34: An Apologetic Model Then and Now?* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Open University, 2001); supervisors: Dr. E. David Cook, Professor Hans Kvalbein and Rev. Jens Olav Mæland.

The second preliminary research question addresses whether Acts 17:16–34 provides valid insights into the apologetic thinking and practice of the apostle Paul (as the supposed orator). The basic historical purpose of Acts (as shown in chapter 2) and Luke’s general credibility as a historian (as indicated in chapter 3) make it highly probable that this specific passage should be seen as claiming to be historically authentic. It is argued in chapter 3 that this claim should be seen as valid, since the account in Acts 17:16–34 can be shown to be appropriate both for Athens as the alleged situation (on the basis of an exploration of Athenian motifs in the text) and for Paul as the alleged speaker (on the basis of a comparison with relevant passages in Paul’s letters). The subsequent exegetical study in chapter 4 confirms the legitimacy of taking this passage as Luke’s credible, but highly condensed, account of the apostle Paul as apologist in Athens.

An Apologetic Model ‘Then’?

The answers to these two preliminary questions constitute the basis (together with the in-depth exegetical discussion in chapters 3 and 4) for the analysis and assessment in chapter 5 of Acts 17:16–34 as an apologetic model ‘then’. This leads to an answer to the first major research question, i.e. whether key elements of the Acts 17 model can be identified, and if so, whether they are intended as normative, recommended or repeatable:

1. Luke’s account describes the defining, normative content of Paul’s truth claims as consisting of key Judaeo-Christian convictions about who God is and how he has revealed himself.

2. Luke’s account describes Paul’s proactive approach in Athens as a recommended apologetic in biblically illiterate and pluralistic *agora* contexts. The Lucan emphasis is on the apologist’s contextual understanding, his application of appropriate justification procedures and his ‘positive deconstruction’ of alternative worldviews.

3. Luke’s account describes Paul’s overall argument in the Athenian *agora* as a move *from* the credibility of a Judaeo-Christian natural theology (over against competing natural theologies) *through* the plausibility and implications of God’s ultimate authority (over against competing claims to ultimate authority) *to* the significance and evidence of the Resurrection (over against competing ‘stories’ and ideas). These three interlocking arguments are recommended to the narratees.

4. Luke's account implicitly describes Paul's threefold aim ('to interest', 'to persuade', and 'to confront') as recommended, thus encouraging his Christian readers—in their apologetic—to be aware of and interact with people's presuppositions.

An Apologetic Model 'Now'?

Chapter 6 takes the discussion from 'then' to 'now'. Postmodernism is selected as a key contemporary challenge. This leads to the selection of Alister E. McGrath and Donald A. Carson as two contemporary apologists who have applied Acts 17 to this specific challenge. This chapter presents an analysis and critique of these two authors' views on apologetics, Acts 17:16–34, and the postmodern challenge. Significant contributions to contemporary apologetics are identified, primarily on the uses of *either* points of contact (McGrath) *or* 'the biblical plot-line' (Carson). These contributions demonstrate the legitimacy of the focus in this thesis on Acts 17 as an apologetic model. This critical dialogue with McGrath and Carson establishes, however, that neither author has fully developed this model exegetically nor in terms of application to the postmodern challenge.

This leads to an answer to the second major research question, i.e. to what extent the content of the Acts 17 model may be applied with validity and relevance in contemporary apologetics:

1. McGrath and Carson appropriately presuppose that the worldview content of the Acts 17 model—about who God is and how he has revealed himself—remain valid and relevant as defining elements of a Christian worldview also in the contemporary context.

2. The Lucan emphases in the Acts 17 model on contextual understanding, application of appropriate justification procedures and 'positive deconstruction' of alternative worldviews may justifiably be seen as valid and relevant in any context. Despite a number of significant differences between the Acts 17 and the postmodern contexts, the common features of biblical illiteracy and pluralism (as identified by McGrath and Carson) indicate that Paul's approach in the Athenian *agora* could be seen as relevant to the contemporary challenge of postmodernism.

3. McGrath and Carson's partial applications of Paul's arguments illustrate the potential relevance of the arguments in a postmodern context, but also that these arguments need to be further developed in view of key postmodern challenges:

- (a) If 'the natural theology argument' should be seen as showing the adequacy of Christian views about humanity, the universe, and God, it

must be justified over against postmodern deconstruction and reconstruction of identities, explorations of various perspectives, and naturalistic presuppositions.

(b) If ‘the ultimate authority argument’ should be seen as showing the legitimacy of God’s authority and the obligation of humanity, it must be justified over against postmodern suspicions and consumerism.

(c) If ‘the Resurrection argument’ should be seen as resonating with ultimate human concerns, indicating the uniqueness and authority of Jesus, and being based on sufficient, available evidence, it must be justified over against postmodern ambiguous attitudes, explorations of any ‘stories’, and indifference to and uncertainty about history.

4. McGrath and Carson’s applications of Paul’s aims show the validity and relevance of ‘to interest’ and ‘to confront’ in a postmodern context. However, the aim ‘to persuade’ also needs to be explicitly applied in such *agora* contexts, if Acts 17 is to be properly utilised as an apologetic model.

‘Then’ and ‘Now’

This thesis claims that Luke in Acts 17:16–34 presents an apologetic model from apostolic practice with significant implications for apologetics in comparable *agora* contexts. Thus, this dissertation implicitly demonstrates the biblical legitimacy of apologetics and explicitly shows the significance of such New Testament resources for the contemporary science and art of apologetics.