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History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology, by N. T. Wright. Baylor University Press, 2019. Pp. xx + 343. \$34.95 (hardcover).

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N. T. Wright is a luminary of the biblical studies world, having authored numerous large and well-received academic volumes on Christ, Paul, and the early church. He has also written a remarkable number of books for popular audiences, which evidences his pastoral concern as an Anglican bishop. *Eschatology and History: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* places Wright in the world of academic philosophy vis-à-vis the Gifford Lectures (in an otherwise well-documented academic work, the book sadly lacks a general index). These lectures, which commenced in 1888, were established by Adam Lord Gifford (1820–1887). Their purpose is to sponsor lectures to “promote and diffuse the study of Natural Theology in the widest sense of the term—in other words, the knowledge of God.” Since 1888, the lectureship has sponsored eminent thinkers, such as William James and Karl Barth, from diverse disciplines. Some lecturers have advocated natural theology, and some have not. Wright attempts to revise the notion of what natural theology is and what it might accomplish.

But what does a distinguished biblical scholar such as Wright bring to the Gifford Lectures? (He is not the first biblical scholar to give these lectures, having been preceded by Rudolph Bultmann and James Barr.) To answer that, we must first explain what is meant by *natural theology*—a not uncontested matter. Barth famously considered natural theology treasonous against “God’s self-disclosure in Jesus as witnessed to by scripture,” as Wright paraphrases him (x). For Barth, natural theology was a rival source of authority and one easily co-opted by sinister movements like National Socialism in Germany. Wright does not take Barth to be the end of the story for natural theology, but rather a conversation partner—and one he leaves behind fairly quickly.

After surveying several accounts of what natural theology is, Wright gives his own rather vague understanding. “I take it for granted that under all of these various ways of understanding ‘natural theology’ there lies the great theological and philosophical challenge of talking about God and the world and the relation between them” (x). As a biblical scholar, Wright wants to see if “a biblical theology might offer some fresh parameters within which the old questions would appear in a different light” (xi).

Since I am a philosopher and not a biblical scholar, I will focus on Wright’s account of the project of natural theology rather than going into the details of his positive claim that the history of Jesus is part of God’s



revelation to the world. Thus, I will concentrate on sections I and IV of the book, which are more overtly about natural theology. The case that Wright makes in sections II and III—"History, Eschatology, and Apocalyptic" and "Jesus and Easter in the Jewish World"—is formidable and impressive, but will not be my primary concern, since it seems more about biblical studies than natural theology per se (although Wright wants to combine them). Before giving Wright's sense of the biblical scholar's contribution to natural theology, I need to discuss a bit of the history and logic of natural theology as I understand it.

Natural theology—whether practiced by Jews, Christians, or Muslims—has been distinguished from revealed theology in that it appeals to aspects of the natural order (the cosmos as a whole or in part) to find evidence for the existence of a monotheistic God. As such, natural theology traditionally has not directly appealed to the events in history described in the Bible as necessary for its rational cogency. Appealing to the Bible (special revelation) is the domain of revealed theology, it has been claimed. If successful, the arguments of natural theology will provide rational support to the claims that God exists as a creator (cosmological arguments), designer (arguments from design), source of the moral law (moral arguments), perfect being (ontological arguments), universal mind (conceptualist arguments), source of veridical religious experience (religious experience arguments), author of consciousness (arguments from consciousness), ground of logic, and the guarantor that rationality fits the created universe (rational inference and transcendental arguments).

It is a long and complicated story how each argument contributes to the overall case for theism against its rivals. Some take an *a priori* approach (the conceptualist and ontological arguments). Others are *a posteriori* (cosmological, design, and religious experience arguments, etc.). There are not only various kinds of natural theology, but each argument type is a category for a family of related arguments. For example, there is the *kalam* cosmological argument, the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) cosmological argument, the Thomistic cosmological argument, and so on. To my mind, this is an embarrassment of riches. I find no reason to think that our knowledge of God is limited to the deliverances of natural theology, since God reveals himself in history (in mighty acts, through prophets, and the Incarnation) as well. Nor have I found any conclusions drawn from natural theology to be contradictory to anything in the Bible (as Barth and others have feared). Natural theology claims that evidence for God is found in aspects of nature that are universally and perpetually available through observation, intuition, and inference. This common evidence is general revelation, which provides the facts upon which arguments of natural theology work. Natural theologians often appeal to biblical texts such as Psalm 19:1–6 and Romans 1:18–21 to justify the claim that God reveals something about himself in his creation. So, it is God himself who reveals what can be known about God in nature without consulting the Bible as positive evidence for God.

Traditionally, arguments for Christianity based on particular historical events have not been considered the province of natural theology, although they contribute to the larger case for Christianity. In the school of classical apologetics (a prominent apologetic method), the metaphysical foundation for monotheism is established through natural theology before investigating particular historical claims, such as Jesus's deity, miracles, death, and resurrection. The latter are called "Christian evidences" and are distinguished from the results of natural theology. Thus, if we have good reason to believe in God, then we have reason to investigate the claim that God may have incarnated in Jesus. Then, it is to history that we go for more evidence for Christianity. For example, C. Stephan Evans argues this way in his *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God* (Oxford University Press, 2010). But, in most cases, the question of Jesus's existence and nature has not historically been addressed directly by natural theology. Why has this been so?

Natural theology has appealed to what all rationally functioning people can know about God through the orderly, repeated, perpetual, and universal facts of nature, whether this be about the universe as a whole (its beauty or order) or about some aspect of it such as one's conscience (its apprehension of an objective moral law). To cite another example, the fine-tuning design argument appeals to features of the universe—its laws, constants, and proportions—that are better explained by a designing intelligence than by chance or by natural law. History, on the other hand, takes place on the theater of nature, but is made up of particular, unique, and unrepeatable events that are not universally assessable, such as the virgin birth and the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our knowledge of history comes from witnessing it ourselves or from oral or written testimony. Thus, there are two sources of knowledge with two different methodologies.

Enter Wright's proposal: Natural theology should not be limited to its traditional domain but should incorporate historical evidence as well. He wants to "change the rules of the game" because the game has been "artificially shrunk; rather as though a cricket match were to be played on a baseball diamond, thus ruling out two-thirds of the cricketer's field of play and allowing both sides to contest any 'results'" (xiii). He goes on: "History, in other words, matters, and thus Jesus and the New Testament ought by rights to be included as possible sources for the task of 'natural theology.'" (xiii). Jesus, after all, lived his life in the natural world, so why shouldn't the historical record of his life contribute to natural theology?

Wright's burden is to open up the field of history for natural theology, particularly the achievements of Jesus. His arguments for God's revelation in the history described in the New Testament are strong and continue a case he has been making for at least three decades. However, the inclusion of the historical evidence into the project of natural theology is unconvincing to me for several reasons.

First, Wright thinks that the agenda of traditional natural theology was wounded beyond healing through the catastrophe of the Lisbon earthquake. Somehow the magnitude of this evil hamstrung natural theology since it could not speak directly to the problem of evil. This account, however, appears to misconstrue the purposes and limits of natural theology. Arguments for God from nature—whether cosmological or design—were never meant to comprise the whole apologetic for Christian theism. Deists may end there, but not Christians (or Jews or Muslims). These arguments can, if successful, make theism more credible than other metaphysical schemes, since the existence and configuration of nature (and human nature) calls out for a creator, designer, and lawgiver. It is odd that Wright downplays the significance of traditional natural theology without even mentioning the more recent work of the likes of Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig, C. Stephen Evans, or J. P. Moreland, and other analytic philosophers of religion, who have all advanced natural theology and brought it to a higher level than what it was at the time of the Lisbon earthquake (1775). Moreover, that was a small disaster compared to the 2004 tsunami originating in Sumatra, Indonesia, which killed approximately 230,000 people. Yet natural theology goes from strength to strength nonetheless, even as the earth shakes, the massive waves fall, and misery is multiplied for humanity.

The possible defeater that evil poses to the rationality of theism can then be met *after the work of natural theology is done*. This is accomplished through the strategy of a defense or a theodicy. The historical particularities of Christian theism provide resources here through the Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus because they show that God is not far off and unconcerned with our plight. God entered history in order to redeem it (John 1:1–18; Philippians 2:5–11). Wright wants to make this endeavor part of his “fresh” version of natural theology, but at the expense of traditional natural theology.

Second, Wright repeatedly disparages traditional versions of natural theology in unconvincing ways, thus making room for his “fresh” version. But these criticisms are based on confusions. For example, he criticizes the teleological argument (without ever giving it) for looking “back to a ‘Designer,’ but without recognizing the biblical insight that the ultimate design looks forward to a still future world” (252). This is like criticizing the eggs for not providing the cheese needed for a good omelet. The “ultimate design” is provided not by, say, the fine-tuning argument, but by biblical revelation and the Christ event. This overall apologetic project is a both/and (cosmology *and* history), not an either/or (cosmology *or* history).

In his final chapter, “The Waiting Chalice,” Wright writes of his refashioned natural theology as opening up “reality in fresh ways.” This “reality in question turns out to be not the God of ‘perfect being,’ nor the prime mover, nor yet the ultimate architect, but the self-giving God we see revealed on the cross” (274). This commits the fallacy of the false

dichotomy. The God described in the Bible, the One who writes the story of history leading to the cross, is a Perfect Being (as the ontological argument claims). If not, as St. Anselm insisted, it would be wrong to worship him. God is the Prime Mover (cosmological argument) in the sense of being the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, as Thomas claimed. God is also the architect (design argument) who is the builder of all things, as Hebrews 3:4 affirms. The arguments of classical and current natural theology are not terminal points in apologetics (as Wright fears), but entry ways into the hall of theism. From there various evidential doors open—to steal a metaphor from C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*.

Third, Wright rejects an idea he claims is intrinsic to traditional views of natural theology—the radical distinction between God and the universe. Rather, God’s goal is to unite heaven and earth. He believes the heaven and earth dichotomy comes more from Epicureanism than from the Bible. Thus, for Wright, to argue from the natural to the supernatural—as does natural theology—is somehow wrongheaded. If Wright means to reject the Deist’s view of God as essentially unrelated to the world except as its designer and creator, then he is correct, since God is both immanent and transcendent (see Isaiah 57:15). However, none of the arguments from natural theology limit God to being transcendent, but not immanent, even if they don’t speak directly to divine immanence. The ontological argument, however, which Wright does not address, concludes that God exists as a maximal being, which could include immanence or omnipresence.

Further, the claim that there is an eternal ontological difference between deity and the cosmos is intrinsic to biblical religion. We must worship God, not created things (idols). God is self-existent and eternal. The universe is not. God is perfect and unlimited. The universe is not. Men and women are made in God’s image and likeness, but they are not divine, since they came into existence and are contingent. Even in the Incarnation, deity and humanity do not mingle or fuse. Christ is rather a hypostatic union of the divine and the human: one person in two natures. The Council of Chalcedon (451) makes this abundantly and elaborately clear.

Wright offers a kind of anthropologically-focused natural theology in chapter seven, “Broken Signposts,” in which he identifies seven common and troubled features of human life and how Christianity responds to them by giving life and hope. This kind of natural theology, he says, refers to the Second Person of the Trinity more than the First Person of the Trinity, which has been the task of traditional natural theology. The broken signposts are “Justice, Beauty, Freedom, Truth and Power, Spirituality and Relationships” (234). Wright avers that these domains of human meaning “point” toward Christ’s cross, where God himself was “broken” for humanity. Relating the work of Christ to human brokenness in seven dimensions may be psychologically appealing and evangelistically fruitful to an unbeliever, since it puts their struggles into a theological context which gives hope and meaning. However, I did not find in Wright’s treatment any specific *argument form* for this endeavor that would render it

a kind of natural theology or apologetic strategy. Although Wright does not mention it, his approach is similar to that of Peter Berger's invocation of several "signals of transcendence"—common aspects of everyday life, such as absolute moral condemnation and play—that point beyond the natural world to something transcendent (see *A Rumor of Angels* (Anchor, 1970)). However, Wright's presentation is theologically richer and is specific about how *Christ* intersects the human condition.

My review has not done justice to much of what this book offers. Its many merits as biblical research could and should be noted and debated. But as a philosopher who is intensely interested in natural theology, I am not convinced by Wright's reconstruction of this ancient and august discipline. I am further concerned that he has downplayed or even denied the significance of natural theology traditionally conceived and currently practiced, which, if successful, builds a strong theistic foundation for the kinds of biblical and historical arguments that Wright offers.